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Virtuous commuting: Families who agreed to keep one car idle find they get around fine

By **Kery Murakami**
Seattle Union Record

One shivering night last week, Bobbie Martin got off the bus at the Safeway on her way home, and a few minutes later returned to the bus stop at 15th Avenue West and Market Street lugging two plastic bags of lemons, apples, oranges, walnuts and cookie dough.



Dan DeLong /Seattle Union Record

Instead of doing one big shopping trip a week with a car, Bobbie Martin of Ballard now does her shopping frequently and takes the bus.

After about five minutes a bus arrived but was fully loaded, so she had to wait another five minutes for the next one. The second bus dropped her within seven blocks of her home, a long walk on that cold night.

Her family's 1994 minivan and 1986 Toyota Camry, meanwhile, sat idly in the driveway.

But the Martins and 21 other families have been busing and biking it these days as an experiment to find out if they can navigate their lives without driving as much. In the demonstration project, which wraps up this week, Seattle has been paying the families \$85 a week to give up at least one car.

The city wants to spark new thinking about how individuals can make a difference and reduce the number of cars on the road.

The experiment seems to have promise. Even without the city's inducement, some say, the bus is looking surprisingly attractive.

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surprisingly attractive.

"We haven't decided for sure yet," Martin said. "But I think we're going to get rid of our second car."

Mayor Paul Schell doesn't expect everyone in the city to get rid of their cars, said Jemae Pope, who is running the \$50,000 city program.

But just as recycling has changed the way people think about garbage, Pope said "Way to Go Seattle" might lead to new ideas about how to get around.

" 'Could I make this trip on the bus?' 'Do I really have to make this trip at all?' It's changing the mindset, just like, 'Do I throw this away? Or can I recycle this?' Or being more aware of turning the water off as opposed to letting it run for an hour," she said.

And she said the experiences of the families demonstrate that it is possible, without too much hardship, to drive less.

Though Pope has not finished analyzing the results, she said that in the first two weeks of the program, seven families who started earlier than the others reported they'd found other ways to make 124 trips. That meant 124 fewer cars on the road, and about 784 fewer pounds of carbon dioxide released into the air. The city will now use the families as part of a public education campaign next year.

"We're not surprised at the results," said Schell spokesman Dick Lilly. "We did the experiment because we expected people would find it's fairly easy to give up that extra car and get around town conveniently. What we hope now is to use this data to convince thousands of other citizens to do the same thing."

Bringing about such a cultural change is a pivotal part of Schell's transportation strategy, and the \$50,000 program comes as he prepares to unveil the next step in the evolution. Early next month, he plans to recommend a number of ideas to improve public transportation and make it easier still to go without cars.

Schell's aides last week wouldn't divulge what Schell will announce. But his transportation advisers have been studying ideas such as building trolley lines or bus-only lanes along seven heavily congested corridors in the city. Among them: along Aurora Avenue; the stretch between Ballard, Wallingford and the University District; between West Seattle and downtown; and between Capitol Hill and downtown.

Lilly said the mayor would likely make specific recommendations for each of the corridors. But he will

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also lay out a number of alternatives, and leave it to communities next year to decide what kinds of improvements they want.

The announcement, which was to come this Wednesday, is considered politically crucial for Schell. He has said that voters will ultimately care more about how he handles basic issues such as transportation than about what happened during the World Trade Organization meeting last November.

Schell postponed the announcement, in part, his office said, because of the city's newspaper strike. It would be harder for the announcement to get a high level of attention during a strike, according to the mayor's office. But to some at the Ballard Safeway, the idea of trying to get people to drive less seemed like tilting at windmills.

"I've gone without a car and it's difficult to get where I need to go, like to the discount stores. I'd have a hard time getting to the library or the pharmacy," Karen Schen said. She said the bus lines near her home don't go to the places she needs to go, "And you miss a connection and you could be out there for 40 minutes," she said.

"I think if we worked in Issaquah, it would be a lot more difficult. As a parent, you don't want to be 45 minutes from home if you get a call from the school and God forbid your kid's broken his arm or something," David Martin said.

But as she waited for the bus, Bobbie Martin recalled seeing the Cascades in a brown haze when she was 7. "I asked my dad, 'What's that?' And he said, 'That's pollution.' That's not the legacy I want to leave behind for my children."

Still, with 7-year-old twins, she wondered about the details: How would she and her husband get to work? Do their shopping? Take the kids out for the day?

It has certainly meant some changes, the Martins said. The family was allowed to use their minivan, and they still drive to the store once a week to pick up the groceries that are too heavy to lug home on the bus. But vegetables spoil, and instead of jumping in their car to pick up groceries during the week, Bobbie finds herself jumping off the bus, then getting back on and then making the walk home with the groceries.

The morning commute used to be less than a 10-minute drive — Bobbie, to a travel agency in Queen Anne, where she is a manager, and David to a software company in Fremont, where he is a Web designer. Now one or the other drives, but only if the twins need to be taken to soccer practice or the doctor. Most days, the commute for both of them is a 25-minute bus ride. A couple of times a

week, David, 43, rides his bike the four miles to work.

For the most part the change has been no big deal, they said.

The commute means leaving earlier in the morning. "It just takes a little bit of organization," David said, "which is not part of my genetic makeup. But it can be done.

"So what if I have to make the kids' lunches the night before, or if I have to get up a little early to give myself time to get to work? It hasn't been that big of a deal," he said.

"It's easier. You wouldn't think a four-mile drive would be that stressful, but just look at this," Bobbie, 34, said at the bus stop, pointing to cars inching bumper to bumper up 15th Avenue West in Ballard.

Having to take the bus to go grocery shopping just means "you just have to be very aware. Make lists," Martin said. "You don't want to have to take the bus back because you forgot something."

When they went to the Pacific Science Center, they took the bus. "The kids love it," Bobbie Martin said. "They liked looking out the window and pulling that string with the bell."

There have been times when having a car would have been nice, they said.

The other day, David said, he overslept for breakfast with a friend and had to cancel. And they've had to ask friends for rides to get to places they can't reach by bus.

But she said the experiment made her think about the costs of convenience. Aside from her concern for the environment, she figured selling the Camry would probably save about \$2,000 a year between insurance and gas. Last year, she had to spend another \$2,500 to get the car fixed.

"Is it really worth having that extra car around for those rare occasions?" she said. "There's other ways I'd rather spend the money."

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