



# Car Sharing in Canada: Making More Sustainable Personal Travel Choices

## Organizations

Communauto  
(Québec City, Montréal, Gatineau, Sherbrooke)

Cooperative Auto Network (Vancouver)

## Status

1994 Communauto, 1997 Cooperative Auto Network

## Overview

Car sharing is an alternative system of car ownership and access where vehicles are shared amongst a group of individuals. With car sharing, the costs and troubles of vehicle purchase, ownership and maintenance, insurance and gas are transferred to a central organization whose members are provided access to the vehicles which are parked in central locations throughout a city for hourly or daily use. Members pay for the time and kilometres they drive in addition to an annual access fee.

Several car sharing organizations exist in Canada. Communauto in Québec and the Co-operative Auto Network (CAN) in Greater Vancouver are the largest car sharing organizations in the country. Both organizations foster car sharing as an alternative to the privately-owned automobile by providing shared vehicles for occasional trips on a fee-for-service basis.

Currently, Communauto provides nearly 7000 members with access to 334 vehicles at 135 locations in Québec City, Montréal, Longueuil, Sherbrooke and Gatineau. CAN provides almost 2,000 members with access to 92 vehicles located in Vancouver, Burnaby, North Vancouver, New Westminster, Whistler, Nanaimo, Courtenay, Tofino and Cortes Island.

## Contacts

Communauto  
Benoît Robert, President  
Email: [brobert@communauto.ca](mailto:brobert@communauto.ca)  
Telephone: (514) 842-4545

CAN – Cooperative Auto Network  
Tracy Axelsson, Executive Director  
Email: [tracy@cooperativeauto.net](mailto:tracy@cooperativeauto.net)  
Telephone: (604) 685-1393

## Resources

- Communauto ([www.communauto.com](http://www.communauto.com))
- CAN ([www.cooperativeauto.net](http://www.cooperativeauto.net))

## Community context

The traffic situations in Greater Vancouver, Montréal and Québec City are worsening, just as they are in cities across Canada. Numerous studies by provincial, regional and municipal agencies in these areas indicate that not only is traffic congestion getting worse, but so too are the health and environmental problems associated with automobile emissions, including declining air quality and increasing rates of respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses.

## Policy context

Nationally, Canada is committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 6 percent below 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012. Although corresponding actions and policies have yet to be worked out, personal transportation is emerging as a logical focus given the fact that private cars and light trucks are responsible for 15% of Canada's total GHG emissions.

Provincially, both the Québec and British Columbia governments have committed themselves to reducing greenhouse gas emissions from both public and private sources. Neither province, however, has any policies in place that directly support car sharing.

On a local and regional level, many municipalities and regional planning and transportation authorities have provided both financial and policy support to car sharing programs.

Montréal, Québec City, Sherbrooke, Gatineau and Longueuil all allow Communauto (pronounced 'comme une auto') vehicles to park in 'permit only' areas (Communauto purchases parking permits for its vehicles). In Outremont, a special on-street stall has been

provided, the first of its kind in Quebec. Also in Québec City, the RTC (Réseau de Transport de la capitale) has formed a partnership with Communauto to provide members with a 10% discount on all transit passes.

TransLink, Greater Vancouver's regional transportation authority has supported the Cooperative Auto Network (CAN) through the provision of designated parking stalls at select stations along Greater Vancouver's rapid transit line, the SkyTrain. The City of Vancouver also allows CAN cars to park in any 'permit only' areas and has begun to provide special CAN-car only parking stalls on streets in Vancouver's more densely populated neighbourhoods in Downtown Vancouver. Like Communauto, CAN pays for parking permits for all of its vehicles. Also in Vancouver, a single CAN vehicle stall is also located at City Hall free of charge.

## Rationale and objectives

The environmental and social challenges posed by Canadian's growing dependence on the private automobile is well known. The private automobile is one of the leading sources of greenhouse gases in the country and is responsible for 15% of Canada's GHG emissions. Auto emissions are also directly linked to a number of other serious human health issues, including cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses. This is to say nothing of the private automobile's relationship to urban sprawl, traffic congestion and general environmental degradation.

Car sharing permits occasional drivers to 'share' a vehicle with other occasional drivers in their community on a fee-for-use basis. It represents an environmentally responsible and economically sound choice for many people's travel needs, particularly for those occasional errands that demand the use of a vehicle, leisure trips and some work-related trips. Through car sharing, or 'self-service' cars as Communauto refers to them, many positive environmental benefits can be achieved including:

- Reducing the number of private automobiles on the road;
- Improving the local air quality and reducing greenhouse gas emissions;
- Promoting a less car dependent community; and
- Reducing parking needs in urban areas and in new developments where shared cars are provided.

## Actions

The idea of car sharing was developed primarily in Europe where over 200,000 people in 350 cities across

the continent are part of car sharing organizations. Globally, car sharing is currently available in over 600 cities around the world.

Launched in 1994, Communauto is North America's first and largest car sharing organization. As both a transportation provider and an environmental organization, Communauto actively promotes car sharing as an environmentally responsible and economically sound choice for many people's travel needs. Currently, they provide nearly 7,000 members with access to 334 vehicles at 135 locations throughout Quebec City, Montreal, Longueuil, Sherbrooke and Gatineau.

"In the beginning, my objective was to contribute to the reduction of the use of the automobile and that's always worthwhile," says Benoit Robert, president of Communauto. "I am a pragmatic environmentalist. I simply want to provide an alternative to those who don't own or don't want to own a car. I see myself as someone who provides members with a service as much for usefulness as idealism."

The Cooperative Auto Network (CAN) was founded in 1997 and is the second oldest car sharing organization in North America. They currently provide almost 2,000 members with access to over 92 vehicles located in neighbourhoods throughout Vancouver, Burnaby, North Vancouver, New Westminster, Courtenay, Whistler, Nanaimo, Tofino and Cortes Island. "What do you need a car for?" asks Tanya Paz, Operations Manager of CAN. "Car sharing provides people with access to a car, truck or van when you need one – without the costs of ownership and the hassles of maintenance and parking."



*Car sharing is an increasingly popular economic and environmental choice for young families (both CAN and Communauto provide vehicles with child seat anchors).  
Photo: Mathieu Lamarre*

Both Communauto and CAN operate along similar lines, with members purchasing a one-time refundable share of \$500 to join the organization. In addition, they pay a small monthly fee and low hourly and per kilometre usage fees set up in a variety of plans designed to meet the needs of members. Typically, plans are built around low usage (around 120 km a month), medium use (up to 300 km a month) and more active users (300 km and above). Between Communauto and CAN, the average monthly payments are around \$125 a month, as compared to a Canadian average of \$400 a month for privately operated vehicles.

Members do not pay for vehicle maintenance or gas. Amounts paid by members to fill up cars are credited on their monthly bills.

Both Communauto and CAN cars are insured for both work and pleasure use. As with privately owned vehicles, car costs can be claimed as business expenses when the vehicle is used for work purposes.

Car reservations can either be made on-line or over the phone. Once the vehicle is booked, members pick up the designated car and drop it off at the same location at the agreed time. Members fill out a vehicle log recording the distance traveled during their trip and the time they used the vehicle. At the end of the month, an itemized bill is mailed to them. Communauto has begun installing on-board computers which will maintain a vehicle log automatically.

Communauto and CAN cars may be booked by the hour – even by the half-hour – or for longer periods, as needed. Vehicles are conveniently located near members, in their neighbourhoods and in Montréal are located close to most Métro stations.

The ratio of members to cars is about 20 for both Communauto and CAN. Although access to vehicles is not guaranteed, particularly during busier weekends and peak summer months, with advance booking members are virtually assured of having a vehicle when they require one. CAN members are able to book a variety of vehicles depending upon their needs, including compact cars, trucks, minivans, station wagons and hybrid vehicles. Communauto members are also able to access different vehicle types through agreements the organization has with Discount, Budget and Via Route rental agencies.

## Results

Both Communauto and CAN have successfully met many of their operating objectives, including:

- **Helping members save on personal transportation costs.** For both organizations, members pay an average of only \$125 per month for all their driving needs which is less than the cost of insurance alone for most private car owners.
- **Reducing greenhouse gas emissions.** As car share members drive less, they pollute less. Based on usage patterns, CAN estimates that its members emit an average of 0.32 metric tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents, or about 10 times less than the average driver.
- **Reducing total vehicle kilometres traveled.** CAN members drive an average of 1,400 km per year, or about 10 times less than the average driver.
- **Reducing the number of vehicles on the road.** A 2004 survey of Communauto members indicated that 48% of members got rid of a vehicle after joining the organization, while an additional 21% were able to put off purchasing a vehicle. The survey also indicated that only 11% of members or their partners owned a vehicle. The most recent survey of CAN members (2000) indicated that 14% of CAN members or their partners owned a vehicle.



*CAN and Communauto vehicles (pictured) are parked in convenient locations around the communities in which they are located. Photo: Raymond Masson*

## Participants

During its start-up years, CAN received financial support and assistance from VanCity Savings Credit Union, Cooperators' Insurance and Environment Canada.

Communauto received provincial funding through several programs areas to help launch their services in Québec City and Montréal. Funding included \$50,000 in loan guarantees provided through by the province.

## Resources

With offices in Québec City, Montréal, Sherbrooke and Gatineau, Communauto has a full-time staff of 16 and an annual budget of \$3.5 million.

CAN operates a central office in Downtown Vancouver with 6 full-time equivalent staff members and an annual operating budget of close to \$1 million.

## Lessons learned

Some of the lessons learned in developing and implementing car sharing programs include:

- **Start small.** Rather than seeking to capture the largest possible market to reach the break-even point (generally 600 members), the first goal in launching a car sharing in a new city is to *create* - rather than take hold of - the market. Car sharing is too new in North America to omit this crucial step. Moreover, data analysis from Communauto and three of Europe's largest car sharing organizations (Mobility in Switzerland, StattAuto in Berlin and StadtAuto in Bremen) showed that it takes three or four years to attract the first 300 to 400 members, after which growth accelerates with increased public awareness and word-of-mouth advertising. Consequently, without substantial start-up capital, jumping into a large-scale operation right from the beginning is very risky.
- **Target market.** Given the impossibility of servicing all possible customer needs with a limited number of vehicles and a limited number of parking stations, it is critical to market strategically. Communauto's first target market was "individuals who seldom drive and need a car only a few times a month". Their next target was "freelance workers who sometime need a car every day for a few consecutive weeks." To attract the latter customers, Communauto provided a "work-week" rate which it launched when they had a sufficient vehicle fleet size to efficiently provide the group without diminishing the quality of service for other members.
- **Keep operations simple.** To ensure financial health it is important to provide consistent basic services before offering more administratively and logistically challenging programs for members (e.g., being able to pick up a car at one station and dropping it off at another). It is equally important to avoid using systems where service must adapt to technology instead of the other way around.
- **Secure both senior and lower level staff support.** Senior level staff support often does not guarantee support and awareness of car sharing at lower staff levels. It is important to educate and secure the

support of lower level staff, particularly in the areas of parking enforcement and management.

- **Work with the development community to provide shared cars in new developments.** There is a great opportunity to work with the development community in providing shared cars for new, inner city condo developments. The shared cars can help save the developers money through reduced project parking ratios and are seen by potential buyers as an additional financial incentive (i.e., they will not need to own a car). In Toronto, there are currently five new condo developments that include shared cars.
- **Car sharing works best with flexible work schedules.** Car sharing works best for individuals with flexible work schedules, or who do not require a vehicle for work everyday.
- **Car sharing is more equitable than private ownership, but can still exclude lower income levels.** Although both Communauto and CAN have developed or are in the process of developing member support and subsidy programs to assist lower income individuals become members, car sharing is still a more expensive option than public transit for many individuals.
- **Car sharing is more difficult in low density, suburban areas.** Car sharing is particularly suited to densely populated urban centres where limited space only makes problems associated with the proliferation of the automobile worse. In lower density areas it is difficult to operate shared cars in an economically sustainable fashion.



*A Communauto parking stall sign.*

*Photo: Raymond Masson*

## Next steps

Both Communauto and CAN are pursuing aggressive growth strategies as more and more individuals realize the economic and environmental benefits of car sharing.

After surveying members in April 2004, Communauto is looking to carry out the following activities:

- Establishing a member loyalty program that will provide Communauto subscribers with discounts to various activities, including movies and the theatre;
- Adding 100 new vehicles to their fleet by the end of 2005;
- Adding 50 new hybrid vehicles by the spring of 2006 through a multi-partner Urban Transportation Showcase demonstration project administered by the Montreal's metropolitan transportation agency, the Agence métropolitaine de transport (AMT);
- Developing a lending program with Desjardins credit union for new members who are unable to afford the initial \$500 share purchase;
- Implementing a transit pass discount program for Communauto members with transit providers in Gatineau (Société de Transport de l'Outaouais -STO) and Montréal (Société de transport de Montréal -STM);
- Working with the City of Montréal to create and adopt a special Action Plan for the development of on-street parking stalls for Communauto vehicles; and
- Finishing equipping all vehicles with on-board computers to allow for automated vehicle tracking and member billing (based on kilometres driven and time used), improve vehicle anti-theft features, and to allow for GPS-assisted vehicle location.

Some of the CAN's next steps include:

- Developing a fleet management service for corporate and government partners that would see CAN cars used exclusively these partners for work hours and allow general member use for non-work hours;
- Fully implementing a new corporate subsidiary, CorpCAN, that will permit corporate members (e.g., Architecture firms) to join CAN and provide CAN cars for staff work use;
- Developing a lending circle with existing members to create a special fund and lending program for those unable to afford the initial \$500 share purchase;
- Expanding their current fleet of three hybrid vehicles;
- Improving marketing to help build better name recognition and awareness of the car sharing concept; and

- Carrying out a new membership survey.