

Two Weeks of Car-Free Living Can Change Habits for Good

By Rebecca Grossberg, Madison, WI USA

Madison Environmental Group, a creative consulting company in Madison, Wisconsin, is organizing the third annual two-week Car-Free Challenge in Fall 2005. We would like to bring this concept to other communities around the world! For information about how to coordinate a Car-Free Challenge in your community, please contact Rebecca Grossberg at rebecca@madisonenvironmental.com, or by phone at 001 608 280 0800. You may also contact our program associate in Prague, Renata Vailova, at renata@madisonenvironmental.com or +420 274 816 727. Also visit our website, www.madisonenvironmental.com.

I am starting to love the fall for more than the brilliant crimson leaves and crisp blue skies. After coordinating the second annual Madison Car-Free Challenge, fall has become a time when I feel fit, strong, and capable of almost anything. My friends also know this as a time when I become slightly eccentric, such as refusing rides from my housemate in favor of bicycling, even on chilly evenings when we are going to the exact same destination. Above all, it's the time of year when I think about my habits. Which habits are serving me well and which ones can I live without?

Last fall, 301 Madison area residents and I scrutinized our transportation habits by participating in the two-week Car-Free Challenge from September 22 – October 5, 2004. Together we reduced more than 16,228 car miles – the equivalent of *not driving* five and a half times across the continental United States. This resulted in the elimination of about 13,000 pounds of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. On average, we each drove 82 miles less than we usually do (based on 200 participants who reported their results). Seventeen participants were 100% car-free and 20 people reduced more than 200 vehicle miles. In two weeks we saved more than \$1,300 on gas, and if we keep it up for a year we will each save about \$170, plus additional savings on car maintenance, parking and insurance.

Madison Environmental Group developed the Car-Free Challenge as a positive way to foster behavior change by encouraging people to try car-free or “car-lite” living for two weeks. Anyone who commits to eliminating *at least one car trip* per week is welcome to participate. To reduce car miles, participants can:

- *Replace* car trips by taking the bus, bicycling or walking
- *Reduce* the length of car trips by choosing destinations closer to home
- *Remove* car trips by carpooling, combining trips or just staying home

As the organizer of the Car-Free Challenge, I enlisted sponsors (City of Madison, Dane County, Madison Gas and Electric, Physicians Plus, The University of Wisconsin Transportation Services, Williamson Bikes & Fitness and Community Car), created a web page, and distributed emails to promote the event. Then I watched the participant list grow daily, marveling at the number of people who appeared to *want* to reduce their driving. From the many positive comments and thanks I received I concluded that people welcomed the Car-Free Challenge as an opportunity to take positive action to confirm their values.

All participants who completed the challenge were entered in a prize drawing, and those who reduced more than 300 miles or who were 100% car-free were eligible to win the grand prize – a free bike from Williamson Bicycle Works. Additional prizes were donated by: Budget Bicycle Center, Foxman Nutrition, Madison Children's Museum, Planet Bike, Revolution Cycles, Rutabaga, Scram! Couriers and Yellow Jersey.

For some participants, the challenge was motivation to rediscover a healthier, simpler, less autocentric lifestyle. For example, Judy Skog rode her bike for transportation when her children were small, but lately she has only ridden once or twice a year. In the first six days of the challenge, she biked to restaurants, to the gym, to a rally at the Capitol, to church and to the grocery store. Alderman Steve Holtzman also rediscovered his

bicycle that he had not relied on for over a decade. He described how much more energetic he felt when he arrived at meetings “pumped up with endorphins” from the exercise.

The challenge presented an opportunity to slow down and enjoy time with family and friends. Darren Bush described a peaceful Sunday morning walk to church with his wife and two children, and Jeanette Froehle told how she has made friends simply by walking past her neighbors every day. Katrina Forest described spending “a cozy rainy Friday afternoon... baking cookies and chocolate cake” with the kids instead of going out, and Steve Bazan shared a wonderful story about bicycling with his daughter in the rain.

However, for people juggling family and work responsibilities, the Car-Free Challenge also required some planning. Anne Aley observed that taking the challenge “wasn’t just my decision – it meant polling my kids and husband and asking them to help me make it work too... We can’t possibly handle two weeks completely without a vehicle but we’re aiming for car-lite... I was relieved at how that concept was communicated as an acceptable possibility by the group’s organizers.” Kathyne McGowan’s family used the Challenge as an opportunity to downsize from two cars to one. They reduced 430 miles by combining trips that they used to make in two separate cars. Judy and Ken Skog also sold one of their two cars and purchased monthly bus passes to minimize their use of the shared car. Joy Stieglitz and her family started walking to neighborhood grocery stores with the kids in strollers more than they ever had before.

Some participants challenged themselves to stay constantly vigilant of their own habits and unconscious “needs.” Using the potential of winning the bike as a motivator, Suzanne Way overcame several weekend shopping temptations. After calculating all the car miles it would take to fulfill those temptations, she decided to stay home instead. She concluded that her decisions were not only good for the environment, but they saved her a lot of money on unneeded purchases as well.

The challenge was also a source of creative inspiration. Jon Edwards expanded our view of potential transportation methods by commuting 20 miles round-trip to his job at the Madison Children’s Museum on an old-fashioned penny farthing (high-wheeled bicycle). Karen Bassler inspired us all with a theme song for the Car-Free Challenge. She made some key modifications to the Beatle’s lyrics:

Baby don’t you drive that car,
A bike will take you just as far,
Baby don’t you drive that car
‘Cause it’ll be wasteful.

Finally, there are those who approach the challenge as a chance to expand their personal limits on what is possible without a car. For example, John Rider attached a trailer to his bicycle and rode to Home Depot where he bought a 4-foot by 8-foot sheet of plywood and a 5-foot section of electrical conduit. Dave Minden slowly rolled to the hardware store with a 60-pound bag of cement strapped to back of his bike.

We start to feel like we can do anything. We may find that going car-free for two weeks is easier than we thought it would be. After doing it once, we *know* we can do it in the future with less conscious effort. However, as long as a car is sitting in the driveway, choosing not to drive almost always takes some effort. It can be tempting to jump in the car for short errands, especially when we’re hurried or when it’s cold or rainy out.

I sold my car last fall. It was a 1993 Volvo wagon that served me well for four years but was always more car than I needed. On my first bike trip as a 100% car-free woman, from the East side to downtown in a cool fall rain, I felt physically lighter. My life has become simpler due to the elimination of this massive material possession. I no longer have to decide whether or not to drive when I go somewhere that challenges my definition of “bikeable” or “busable.” The decision is already made for me. Some trips may require a little more time and organization (extra layers of clothes, cloth grocery bags, gloves, helmet and bike lights), but this is all becoming habitual. Once behaviors become second nature, the hardest part of the challenge is over. We are all creatures of habit.