

Zipcar may soon arrive in Salem

Urban service allows members to rent a car by the hour

By Chris Cassidy STAFF WRITER

SALEM — Marsha Finkelstein figures she could probably get another six months out of her 1995 Mercury Sable, if she's lucky — which, so far, she hasn't been.

She admits to being afflicted with what she calls "bad car karma," having gone through three in a relatively brief stint. Her current car is so old that the manufacturer has stopped producing the model.

Soon, however, she vows her days behind the wheel of the declining Sable will disappear, along with car insurance payments and anxious trips to the mechanic.

"When Zipcar comes here, it's gone," she said.

The Cambridge-based car-sharing service was before the city's Parking Board earlier this month, briefing members on a plan to place a total of six cars in three downtown parking lots.

Zipcar allows members to reserve cars for as little as one hour at a time and pay only for the time they actually use the vehicle. The service generally appeals to those who need access to a car for travel or errands, but not every day.

With rates starting at \$7 an hour, Zipcar aims to be cheaper than cab fares and traditional car rental agencies, which often require reservations for a span of a day or more.

Salem Mayor Kim Driscoll said she sees potential for Zipcar in the Witch City, hoping that more residents will think like Finkelstein and ditch their cars, or at least consolidate from two-car families to one.

"We think it will be a good matchup for the lifestyle people will need to use in Salem," Driscoll said.

Zipcar would operate under a pilot program at first. Six cars would be placed in three downtown parking areas, two each in the Church Street, Sewall Street and Riley Plaza lots.

There's no plan for Zipcar to compensate the city for the spots. Instead, the city hopes the cars will help reduce pollution and ease congested streets, as fewer people decide to own

cars. Driscoll said Zipcar would complement the city's public transportation alternatives, like the commuter rail and the Salem ferry.

"It's about creating options," Driscoll said. "We'd obviously love it if people felt it would be a viable option either not to have a car or reduce their number of cars."

Zipcar claims that each of its cars takes between 15 and 20 personally owned vehicles off the road.

Still, the proposal faces hurdles. Some Parking Board members are hesitant about giving up public parking spaces to a private entity, Chairman Sam Spatafore said.

The Parking Board's approval is required; it's not certain yet whether City Council approval would be needed.

Zipcar already operates in Boston, Cambridge, Somerville and other Bay State cities.

About 169 members are from Salem, even though the only North Shore location with a Zipcar is Endicott College in Beverly. Finkelstein — a member who first joined when she was living in Somerville — noted it's actually easier to travel to Malden to reserve a Zipcar than to Endicott because of the layout of public transportation routes.

In fact, Finkelstein said she's been lobbying Zipcar to come to Salem for the last year, and even spoke to city councilors about the company.

If they do come, Finkelstein said it would seriously change her habits.

"Using Zipcar would get me more focused on how I use my time," she said. "I would take public transportation more. I'm perfectly happy with that."

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HOW ZIPCAR WORKS

Drivers 21 or older with a relatively clean driving record can join Zipcar, typically paying a one-time fee. Within three days, the new member receives a membership card. From there, the person can either call or go online to reserve the car of their choice at any Zipcar location, agreeing to pay a rate ranging between \$7 and \$14 an hour.

To use the car, the driver holds the membership card to the window and the doors unlock. The keys are inside.