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Local News

Saturday, February 18, 2023

A choice to be car-free leads to a community tree initiative



Maggie Redfern crosses the intersection of Montauk Avenue and Plant Street in New London as she bikes to work Tuesday, December 20, 2022. The New London resident doesn't own a car and bikes to work almost every day. Redfern is also involved in New London Trees which worked to save an old tree on Plant Street when others were cut down by the city to make room for a sidewalk. (Sarah Gordon/The Day)

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December 28, 2022 3:50 pm

By **Bridget Shirvell**, Special to The Day

Unless it's raining, snowing or below 20 degrees, Maggie Redfern rides her bike to work. The New London resident and assistant director of Connecticut College Arboretum doesn't own a car.

"Living near downtown it's pretty easy to get by without a car," Redfern said. "I can take the bus up the hill to work, if needed, or borrow one from a friend, but normally I ride my bike."

For many, cars are an essential part of everyday life. They're wedded into the current fabric of our society. A symbol of status and wealth. And Redfern admits that if she wasn't able to ride a bike, she would consider getting a car.

"One of the most challenging parts of not having a car is the general expectation that everyone has or needs a car," Redfern said. "It is built into our society in so many ways including the amount of land dedicated to cars and parking to the lack of good public transportation and even the way that we consume goods."

It wasn't always like that. Our dependence on private cars isn't even a century old. Beginning in the 1920s, the auto industry, in response to growing sentiment that cars were undemocratic, disruptive to communities and dangerous, began working to shift public opinion. Cars weren't the problem but rather it was the pedestrians who jaywalked, a term coined by the auto industry, combined with the lack of ordinances and space for cars that were the real issues. At least that's what they wanted Americans to believe and they were able to mostly change public sentiment.

By the 1960s, American cities and towns were rebuilt to make room for cars, often razing Black neighborhoods in the process

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building entire new communities where it was impossible to get around without a vehicle.

Today, more than 90 percent of American households own at least one car, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Globally, Take the Jump, a grassroots environmental movement, says car ownership levels are expected to double by 2040.

It's no secret that all those cars are killing us and the planet. Transportation is responsible for about a quarter of overall greenhouse gas emissions, and while air travel is an easy climate target, more than two-thirds of transportation emissions comes from vehicles on the road. Their use also contributes to air pollution. And while electric vehicles are slowly making inroads - and they do release significantly less emissions than fossil-fueled vehicles - they still contribute to pollution.

While Redfern doesn't own a car she has at times used car sharing and uses friends' cars when she needs to travel somewhere not accessible by public transportation or when she needs to pick up something big and bulky.

On an individual level, giving up a fossil-fuel powered vehicle is one of the most significant actions someone can take to mitigate the climate crisis. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, ditching one car prevents roughly 4.6 metric tons of carbon dioxide from escaping into the environment each year. The average carbon footprint for a person in the U.S. is 16 tons per year.

Organization and planning

The choice to not have a car wasn't really a decision for Redfern, but rather a natural extension of how she lived. She never really got used to the convenience of owning one, having moved to New London in the fall of 2014 from Boston, where as a college student she lived without a car.

For Redfern, not having a car requires organization and advanced planning. When she shops, she makes thorough lists of what she needs, only purchasing the essentials. Yet, that decision has led to other positive outcomes in her life and the larger community.

"When I first moved to New London I lived downtown and I walked everywhere," Redfern said. "I was amazed by the diversity of the trees, some were in historic properties, parks, and estates and some were planted along the streets. I thought it would be fun to do a tree walk to share my findings with others."

Redfern started putting together a list of trees and doing tree walks from the Public Library of New London.

"Trees are a part of our history, part of our community," Redfern said. "People remember trees from their childhood, they connect us to a time before we were here."

As the tree walks grew in popularity, Redfern connected with more people in the community, including with a city employee that was interested in seeing how New London could improve the tree canopy. In the summer of 2018, with the help of grants, they did a tree inventory. At around the time they were finishing up the inventory, the city was putting in new sidewalks on Plant Street and as part of that plan there was a proposal to cut down all the trees and eventually put in new trees.

"There was so much community support to not cut down the trees to build a sidewalk that we ended up forming a group that started meeting on a regular basis to see what we could do to advocate for existing trees and plant more trees in the city," she said.

It was the start of New London Trees, which since 2019 has planted new trees in the city, some of which Redfern has propagated herself, growing trees in her backyard.

All of it started in part from her decision to go without a vehicle.

"I think of this as a bit of an experiment and being car-free certainly has strengthened my relations with friends and neighbors because they have become mutually supportive," Redfern said. "We also happen to run into lots of people we know along the streets of New London making the ride all the more enjoyable."

"If I'm the only one riding a bike to work or recycling it's just a drop in the bucket, especially with the climate challenges, but if I'm working with a group of people the sum is greater than the parts," Redfern said. "When we can partner with each other, partner with the city we live in, I think that's really important for making change happen."

5 ways to reduce your car dependence

1. If your trip is 2 miles or less, consider walking or biking.
2. Use public transportation
3. Ride share, even informal ridesharing with a friend helps.
4. Keep your car for as long as possible; the faster you replace, the greater the emissions you're emitting.
5. Replace a car with an electric or at least a hybrid.

What changes - big or small - have you made to reduce your carbon footprint? Post in the comments of this article on theday.com or send an email to t.cotter@theday.com.

READER COMMENTS

Linda Theodoru December 29, 2022 at 20:22

[Report](#)

Karen Krohn, I have never had a problem with people trying to take it. I lock it right in front of the store in a very visible area. If I allowed fear to rule my life, I would never have done all the interesting things I have done or had all the adventures I have had. Life is for living.

TESSA CASTLEBERRY December 29, 2022 at 12:36

[Report](#)

This area is terrible for road biking!!!. There are no paved bike trails or bike lanes. The shoulders along most of the main roads are so narrow you can't safely bike on them. There have been proposals to put a paved bike trail around the Groton reservoir but our dysfunctional town council refuses to do it.

—

I was very disappointed when I moved here after growing up in an area (Albany/Schenectady/Troy) with many tens of miles of paved bike trails.

—

Dave Castleberry

TESSA CASTLEBERRY December 29, 2022 at 12:21

[Report](#)

Tim O'Byrne,

Why are you spreading this blatantly false information? I can't believe The Day hasn't removed your comment!!!

—

A fossil fuel is a hydrocarbon-containing material formed naturally in the Earth's crust from the remains of dead plants and animals that is extracted and burned as a fuel. The main fossil fuels are coal, oil, and natural gas.

—

Dave Castleberry

Karen Krohn December 29, 2022 at 11:15

[Report](#)

Shopping is tough when you have to check every two minutes to make sure your bike is still locked outside the store.

THOMAS COUSER December 29, 2022 at 08:56

[Report](#)

You go, Maggie!

DANIEL STORMS December 29, 2022 at 08:49

[Report](#)

Whether carbon fuels are biotic or abiotic in origin (and none of the theories or the oil fields, like Vietnam's White Tiger, cited to prove abiogenesis are clear and dispositive) is really not very important in the global-warming argument. Whatever its origins, the burning of carbon fuels and the generation of methanes almost incontrovertibly increases heat trapping in the atmosphere. The global increase in catastrophic weather events, from stronger hurricanes to prolonged droughts to record blizzards, is a predicted outcome of global warming. Any steps we can take, such as driving less and weaning ourselves from carbon fuels, is to be applauded. It's also good to know that New London Trees seeks to maintain diversity in the trees that provide shade and remove carbon. Too often, municipalities have preferred a cheap monoculture susceptible to disease and insect destruction. For instance, cities that had their elm population decimated by Dutch Elm disease often replaced them with ash, only to fall prey to the emerald ash borer.

Planting a diverse and naturalized (e.g., don't plant thirsty trees in Phoenix) tree population is key.

Tym O'Byrne December 29, 2022 at 05:46

Report

Oil isn't a fossil fuel, prove me wrong. There wasn't enough dead dinosaurs and plant matter to make all the coal deposits and all the oil you have already used to this date. Oil is a renewable resource that's a product of inner earth. Just here to help.

mark mathew braunstein December 29, 2022 at 00:08

Report

Indeed, eliminating or at least limiting our personal use of combustion engine automobiles is the second most important step we can take to conserve the planet. (A small sidestep is to read only e-newspapers rather than dead tree editions on newsprint.) But the foremost effective measure we can pursue for planetary preservation is to give birth to only one child. Or in order to compensate for couples who beget three or more children, to beget none. Because a No Child consumes far fewer resources and drives far fewer miles than any One Child.

Cars are for cripples. (As a card-carrying cripple, mine is the voice of authority.) The road to Hell is paved.

John Russell December 28, 2022 at 20:33

Report

What a joke. We do these small things and elite Liberals fly around in private jets. The hypocrisy is astounding

Linda Theodoru December 28, 2022 at 20:17

Report

I purchased an e-bike last spring and now use it as my primary form of transportation. I have lost weight and only drive my car about once a week. With the use of pannier bags and bungee cords to strap packages onto back, I do most of my shopping with my bike. Anything within 7 miles is an easy trip for me, even in Norwich which is not nearly as bike-friendly as New London is.

STORIES THAT MAY INTEREST YOU



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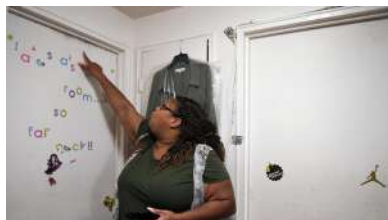
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