

The Hitchhiker's Guide to Austin

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Although the sun had barely cleared the horizon in its daily rise over the deep end of Barton Springs swimming pool, the cashier in the office was all jacked up. So I asked him how come he was so bright eyed and bushy tailed that morning. Cheyenne Chester replied. "I'm always like this when I get to work, for I just bicycled seven and a half miles to get here from northeast Austin."

I was duly impressed and let him know. I had just dragged my sleepy and sluggish self out for morning swim by driving my gas-guzzling Subaru the mile and a half to the pool from my condo. I asked how long it took Cheyenne to get to work. "If I really push it, I can get here in just over an hour. Going home takes an hour and a half."

When I asked: "Can't you get a ride with anyone else who drives here?," he replied, "Well, there is a guard who lives a couple of blocks from me, but she does not have a car either. Sometimes we bike together."

I thought of the tremendous energy expended by these two youngsters just to show up for their \$8.75/hr jobs and asked him if there was a bus he could take. There was, but it involved a transfer, took longer than riding a bike, and the earliest bus, would have delivered Cheyenne late by fifteen minutes for his morning shift.

Having moved here in 1993, I was aware of how limited the mass transit in Austin was compared to what I was used to. Having been born and raised in Manhattan, I took mass transit for granted. I now often take the #30 bus when I'm going downtown, but it runs so infrequently (about once every 35 minutes) and stops running after ten at night, so it's not very practical and nothing like the bus and subways which run often and throughout the night in New York.

As Cheyenne and I chatted, I was aware that the north-south arteries of Austin were clogged with rush-hour traffic. Why couldn't the lifeguards hitch a ride to work?

Almost two years earlier, I had been brought in to help manage the website of TripVerde Inc., a startup whose lofty mission was to profitably reduce daily vehicle miles traveled by 10% (800 million miles) within 10 years by using the Internet to coordinate ride sharing between strangers. The key to TripVerde's plan was a "RideJockey," a real human who uses technology to match riders with drivers. Drivers were to get paid for transporting riders.

Riders were to pay a portion of the cost. All financial transactions were to be handled automatically by TripVerde and no cash was exchanged.

As a publicity ploy for the launch of the service, TripVerde coordinated a national program to match a small number of riders with drivers heading to the inauguration of President Barack Obama. After that, however, energy and enthusiasm for the startup fizzled, as with so many other well-intentioned green businesses. Perhaps it was a lack of good management or a failure to pay the team as promised, but I think the real reason for TripVerde's failure was that Texans just were not yet willing to give up the autonomy of driving in their own cars and trucks. Perhaps someone else will figure out a way to harness social media so that anyone in this high tech town could use their smart phones to locate and befriend like-minded travelers heading in the direction they wanted to go. But despite the popularity of Twitter, Facebook and Meetup, it's not happening now.

Each year, since 1993, I have attended the SXSW Interactive Festival. In 2008, Twitter was introduced at SXSW and it took wing there, quickly becoming a global meme. Last year at SXSW, we were introduced to location-based social networks Gowalla and Foursquare. Austinites started checking in with their mounting numbers of friends and followers from specific destinations as varied as the Continental Club in South Austin to the J.J. Pickle Center in North Austin. Perhaps by next year, we'll see the location-based networks evolve so that people will tweet out messages that indicate not only, "I'm [here] now," but also, "I'm planning on driving from [here] to [there] this afternoon. Anyone need a ride?"

There have been a few innovative attempts to car share. I asked Cheyenne if he knew about Car2Go. He had noticed the tiny two-passenger blue and white vehicles that began showing up around town last fall, but he was unaware that anyone with a driver's license and a credit card could become a Car2Go member and rent them for \$12.99 an hour. We talked about if he and the other guard might share the expense of commuting via Car2Go. The vehicles are available in our city as part of Daimler's Business Innovation Department's first pilot project in this country. The cute little cars are the most fuel-efficient non-hybrid vehicles in the United States and the third most fuel-efficient vehicles in the

United States. He thought it was cool that with Car2Go you could determine where you want to go and for how long you want to use your Car2Go – all without a reservation or specifying a destination. As of January 1st, 2010—based on data provided by Susan Shaheen, University of California, Berkeley—27 U.S. car-sharing programs claimed 388,089 members sharing 7,588 vehicles; and 61,944 members shared 2,143 vehicles among 19 car-sharing organizations in Canada.

There's truth in the cliché that necessity is the mother of invention, I remember how, during the transit strikes in NYC that occurred during my childhood, one could easily hitchhike from the Bronx

to Brooklyn. There are good reasons to carpool: Gas is expensive, driving is stressful and ride sharing provides social contact. As the price of fuel continues to rise, Austin is likely to see growth and improvements in mass transit and ride sharing. But under normal circumstances, in Austin it still isn't like Cheyenne—or you or I—could stick out a thumb and safely hitch a ride to work and back. Perhaps that day will come.

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Welfare Reform We Can Believe in

IEA stunner: global subsidies to dirty energy top \$550 billion a year

by [David Roberts](#)

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File this one under “news that ought to be the top headline across the world but will likely be ignored.”

An early draft of a comprehensive new study from the International Energy Agency reveals that **total global subsidies to dirty fossil-fuel energy amount to \$550 billion a year** — about 75 percent more than previously thought.

The *Financial Times* got a peak at the draft and [covers it today](#), soliciting this absolutely fabulous quote from chief IEA economist Faith Birol: “I see fossil fuel subsidies as the appendicitis of the global energy system, which needs to be removed for a healthy, sustainable development future.” I’m stealing that one.

Not only would removing these subsidies move us closer to the “free market” conservatives are fond of pretending we already have, it would immediately reduce energy use and carbon pollution:

The IEA estimates that energy consumption could be reduced by 850m tonnes equivalent of oil — or the combined current consumption of Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand — if the subsidies are phased out between now and 2020. The consumption cut would save the equivalent of the current carbon dioxide emissions of Germany, France, the U.K., Italy, and Spain.

Given the dim prospects of a serious cap on carbon, it seems to me that in the wake of the oil spill greens ought to be putting way more emphasis on removing these subsidies. Obama [signed the statement at the G20](#) pledging to reduce them and [reiterated that sentiment in his speech last week](#). It would be a crucial first step in unwinding the century-plus worth of advantages the fossil-fuel industry has accrued over its clean competitors.

Oil companies battle the removal of these subsidies by calling them “new taxes.” But oil companies aren't very popular right now. When will there ever be a better time?

Source: <http://www.grist.org/article/2010-06-07-iea-stunner-global-subsidies-dirty-energy-top-550-billion-year/#comments>