



Driving into the Future

The Rise of Green Transportation in Oberlin

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While climate change and air pollution are often attributed to big corporations and industrial facilities, individuals are still responsible for significant contributions to air pollution. Cars fueled by gasoline and trucks by diesel emit greenhouse gasses from their tailpipes, accounting for more than one-fifth of total global-warming pollution in the United States, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists. The most common type of pollution in urban areas are tailpipe emissions, which pour out at ground level and cause people to breathe in pollutants as they casually stroll down the street.

Unfortunately, in Ohio, many people must drive to essential places, such as work, school, and grocery stores. According to a 2019 report from the Ohio Department of Health, 27 of the 88 counties in Ohio have no public transit. Many other counties have unreliable public transit. A survey conducted by the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission in collaboration with the Columbus Dispatch and the Ohio State University's Center for Human Resource Research (CHRR) revealed how citizens of Columbus felt about their alternative transportation options: bike routes are unsafe and buses take too long. Public transit users in Ohio spend 76 percent more of their time on commutes to work compared to those who do not take public transit, according to the Ohio Chamber of Commerce. Without access to reliable public transportation in Ohio, people are forced to drive and therefore must contribute to tailpipe emissions.

Car users have two options to minimize their carbon footprint: to drive less or to drive a less polluting vehicle. In Lorain County, the City of Oberlin and Oberlin College are committed to strengthening alternative transportation options to become climate-neutral by 2025. The City of Oberlin Climate Action Plan, last updated in 2019, includes goals to promote sustainable transportation systems through "reduction of the amount of fuel consumed" and "reduction of the carbon content of fuel consumed." Oberlin's Climate Action Plan includes a complete streets resolution, which emphasizes street design for all users, including bicyclists and pedestrians of various ages and abilities.

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Driving Less

As a part of providing driving alternatives to the community, the City of Oberlin has made streets safer and more accessible for pedestrians and bikers, as well as implementing public transportation options. Oberlin's Climate Action Plan includes a complete street resolution, emphasizing street design for all users, including bicyclists and pedestrians of various ages and abilities.

From 2011–2017, the city built 1,580 feet of new sidewalks, added 188 accessible ramps, constructed three pedestrian bump-outs, and set up 103 crosswalk markings. These additions improved sidewalks in Oberlin to be safer and more accessible, encouraging people to walk instead of driving.

The City has also implemented features to make biking more attractive. From 2011–2017, they added 8,140 feet of on-street bike lanes and 21,350 feet of sharrows — arrows on the road indicating that cars must share the road with bikes. There are also bike racks in front of most major buildings, reliably providing the community a place to lock up their bikes when they get to their destination.

Making Oberlin more walkable and bike-friendly provides residents with a way to move around town without producing emissions and increases the population's health by increasing exercise opportunities and helping the community save money that would otherwise be spent on gas.

Oberlin College also offers various shuttle options to college students and community members. The Oberlin College Shopping Shuttle runs on Saturday afternoons, traveling to grocery stores, and the ObieExpress shuttle runs between Oberlin and the greater Cleveland area from Thursdays through Sundays. These are both alternatives to using personal cars to run errands or visit the surrounding areas.

Driving a Less Polluting Vehicle

The most well-known way to reduce car emissions is to switch to an electric vehicle (EV). EVs are powered by electricity rather than by the combustion of fossil fuels. According to National Geographic, 80–90 percent of a car's environmental impact is due to fuel consumption, so switching to EVs greatly reduces the environmental impacts of driving. Since electric cars are not burning fossil fuels, their tailpipe emissions are eliminated.

Unfortunately, this novel EV technology can be quite expensive. Not only does the car itself cost customers a pretty penny, they also must ensure their parking space can accommodate a charger. In September 2020, the City of Oberlin released a Sustainable Transportation Survey Report. One survey question asked why people do not drive EVs. The responses revealed that the main barrier to EVs is their expense. To address this problem, the City of Oberlin and Oberlin College created an EV CarShare program for the community in partnership with Sway Mobility. Four EVs are available to students and community members at just \$8/hr. This minimizes the need for gas cars by providing the community with access to EVs at an affordable rate.

There are many lessons to learn from Oberlin, a city that designs streets to be safer for pedestrians and bikers and provides sustainable transportation options to its community. This requires both providing an alternative to driving and an option for cleaner driving. Reducing reliance on personal, gas-powered cars is essential in transitioning to a more sustainable world. ● ● ●