



Living a Car-free Life in Montpelier

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Many Montpelier residents are choosing to become “car-liberated.”

According to the 2016 American Community Survey, 530 households, or about 15 percent of Montpelier, are car free. They live side by side with those who rely on one, if not two, single-occupancy vehicles. As many seek to become more green and more carbon-neutral, we are learning that sustainable cities are walkable cities.

How walkable is Montpelier? What is it like to be car-liberated? Since walking is the primary mode of transportation, I turned to the app Walk Score to determine the ease and convenience of walking from home, with a score of a 100 indicating the easiest and most optimal walk. Each person interviewed has a car-liberated (CL) and a Walk Score (WS) number after their name.

Interestingly, the two retired elders interviewed had the lowest Walk Scores. Maxine (CL 6 years/WS 40) and Harris (CL 3 years/WS 1) live at opposite ends of town. Maxine, at 89 years old, lives on Terrace Street and walks to town on average two times a week and takes the bus a few times more. She enjoys that she has quality conversations with more people as a walker. Harris walks into town most days and sometimes twice a day, making the athletic climb to the top of Main Street. He always walked a lot before he became car-liberated. Now he appreciates the exercise as a benefit of his choice to walk.

Most of the people interviewed are working professionals. The census reports that 16 percent of Montpelier residents walk to work.

Glen (CL always/WS 74) is rather unique in that he has never owned a car. A former New York City resident, Glen says his quality of life has improved since he moved to Montpelier. He has learned, like so many other walkers, to allow extra time, because “you just don’t know who you will talk to on your walk into work.”

Melissa (CL 13 years/WS 74) contributed the phrase “car-liberated.” She works, works out, shops, and plays in Montpelier. Melissa is interested in keeping her carbon footprint at a minimum. Her favorite line is, “It is easier to get to Toronto than it is to get to Plainfield.” She believes that our local public transportation infrastructure has deteriorated since the 1950s.

Glennie (CL 18 years/WS 90) teaches at Norwich University and travels to Europe often, all of which he manages without a car. Glennie refers to himself as a visual person and finds his walks around Montpelier visually interesting. He believes that he has recovered from two

illnesses quicker because he relies on walking to shop and get to work. He has to keep moving.

During the day, our city's population soars with professional commuters, many of whom take a break at lunch to walk the bike path or saunter through historic downtown up to the roundabout.

What are the disadvantages of not having a car? Getting to a doctor and walking in winter are common themes.

Glennie has a specialist in Williston. If he relied on public transportation, it would take him all day to get to his specialist. Melissa has a doctor who moved to Waterbury. The Green Mountain Transit bus only goes into Waterbury in the morning and evening. So each must find a friend who can drive them to appointments. For Maxine, Harris, and Glennie, advanced planning is key and getting to appointments takes approximately an hour or more extra time. Also, Harris is grateful for the offer of a ride home from a nighttime event on a snowy night.

For everyone interviewed the advantages of being car-liberated outweigh the disadvantages. Central Vermont AAA estimates that the average cost of operating a car is \$8,469 a year. So there is a significant economic advantage to not having a car. However, for everyone interviewed, their quality of life as walkers is the greatest advantage. The act of walking, viewing the city, and interacting with people in our community enriches their lives.

Montpelier celebrates We Walk Week in October with river and historic walks. During the year, Harris hosts weekly "Walks with Harris" through the senior center. He has also organized two pedestrian "scrambles," where family teams are given clues and then navigate their way through neighborhoods earning points, having fun, and seeing more of Montpelier.

The school year has started, which means elementary-aged children with their parents, and gaggles of middle and high schoolers are making the trek to class, bringing additional vitality to the sidewalks.

Will these be Montpelier's "car-liberated" residents of the future? What can the city do to ensure that they have the opportunity to walk in a sustainable city when they come of age?