

# SmartTrips Ithaca: Encouraging Sustainable Transportation Options Through a Personalized Educational Campaign

Final Report



# **SmartTrips Ithaca: Encouraging Sustainable Transportation Options Through a Personalized Educational Campaign**

*Final Report*

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## **Abstract**

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SmartTrips Ithaca is a neighborhood-based personalized educational campaign that encouraged residents of downtown Ithaca to try out sustainable modes of transportation such as walking, biking, transit, and carsharing through incentives and communication customized to each program participant as a stepping stone towards living a car-free or car-lite lifestyle. The report offers a case study in how the SmartTrips model was adjusted to the unique context of a small college town, and summarizes the positive results in trip reduction and mode shift that occurred in a before-and-after survey of program participants. Information contained in this document, such as web page addresses, are current at the time of publication.

## **Keywords**

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Ithaca, Tompkins County, New York, Community-Based Social Marketing, Transportation Demand Management, SmartTrips, Way2Go Transportation Education, Ithaca Carshare, Individualized Marketing

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## **Program Development Guidance Team**

Gary Ferguson, Executive Director, Downtown Ithaca Alliance

Jennifer Dotson, Executive Director, Ithaca Carshare

Jonathan Maddison, Way2Go Program Manager, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County

Sharon Anderson, Environment Team Leader, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County

## **Marketing Guidance Team**

Representatives from Tompkins County Library, Tompkins County Tourism, and Hangar Theatre.

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Fred Schoeps, Board Member, Downtown Ithaca Alliance

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Fernando De Aragón, Executive Director, Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Council

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## **Downtown Residents & SmartTrips Ithaca Participants**

We would finally like to thank the over 100 residents that engaged with us during our Downtown Ithaca Transportation Survey in the fall of 2015, as well as the 79 residents that participated in the SmartTrips Ithaca 2016 program.

# Executive Summary

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Ithaca Carshare, with the Downtown Ithaca Alliance (DIA) and the Way2Go transportation education program of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County (CCETC), undertook an individualized educational campaign with the overall goal of shifting downtown Ithaca residents toward more economically and environmentally friendly modes of travel, ideally to reduce road and parking demand in the downtown area.

The project began with an inventory of existing transportation resources, recognizing that the wealth and variety of transportation options in downtown Ithaca make a car-free or car-lite lifestyle possible and advantageous. However, navigating the shift to this lifestyle is not always simple or quick. The SmartTrips Ithaca project provided personal guidance through this shift, specifically helping residents to get acquainted with and try out new transportation options. This was done through a subcontract with CCETC's Way2Go program for a highly targeted, individualized educational campaign reinforced by incentives and supportive activities, following the concepts of community based social marketing (CBSM). This campaign was modeled closely on other SmartTrips projects done previously in North America.

Specific goals of the project were to:

- Engage eight percent of target audience to participate.
- Engage each member of the target audience three times, participants seven times.
- Increase awareness and use of environmentally friendly modes.
- Reduce drive-alone trips.
- Reduce vehicle miles traveled.
- Demonstrate a shift in primary commute and neighborhood mode choice.

Two outreach campaigns were conducted, the first to support market segmentation and the second to promote the mode-shift encouragement campaign. The initial data analysis showed an eclectic mix of graduate students, young and middle-aged professionals, and some retirees. Very few families with children live in the area and most households were single person rentals with high population turnover. Walking and transit use were very high to start. After the data analysis, the project focused on non-commute trips because far more households used their vehicles for trips other than driving to work. Outreach was done in person, by paper mail, and by electronic means, covering both habits and barriers for using sustainable transportation more often. Branding and messaging was designed to be clear, and

welcome kits included physical items as incentives (visibility & utility gear for bicycling and walking, as well as maps and transit schedules). Other activities were promoted later in the project period. Participants committed to shifting a certain number of weekly trips to bike, bus, or walking (“SmartTrips”), and project staff followed up with prompts and one-on-one support. Participants were also automatically registered into an online trip tracker so they could record their travel habits, compare their efforts with other participants, and virtually measure their impact.

At the start of the program, project partners focused on bringing two new services to the area to support project goals: a remote parking program and an emergency ride home service. Project research supported the importance of the emergency ride home for the wider community, but did not suggest the remote parking would have as much of an impact as initially expected. Both projects were explored further and by the end of the project period, the emergency ride home service was very close to implementation by Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit.

Overall project engagement and individual outreach methods varied in effectiveness. In fact, the first project goal of engaging eight percent of the target audience was not met, most likely because many target area residents were students who were away during the summertime project period. However, there was also significant participation from residents in neighborhoods next to the downtown target area, within “The Flats” area of Ithaca where transportation is also readily available. The second project goal to engage target audience members at least three times and participants at least seven times was successfully exceeded.

Looking at the third goal of transportation option awareness and utility, the project most strongly increased awareness of options, and somewhat increased ease of use and motivation to try new modes. Participants noted that the physical Start-Up Kits, SmartTrips pledges, and email reminders were the most helpful aspects of the project.

Perhaps the most important success of the program, actual mode shift, was reported by program participants in comparative before/after surveys, specifically increases in biking (22 percent more days using this mode) and carpooling (54 percent) and decreases in driving alone (24 percent fewer days). From this, we estimate that the SmartTrips Ithaca program reduced a cumulative 791 single-occupant vehicle (SOV) trips through the 10-week public outreach period, a reduction of 3,058 vehicle miles traveled (VMT). Most of the mode shift occurred in participants’ grocery store trips, which was the neighborhood trip singled out by SmartTrips Ithaca for the most opportunity for improvement.

Challenges included a fixed project period, which prevented the program from being implemented when downtown apartments are fully occupied, and the need for more time and staffing than originally planned for given the demands of the initial project development phase. Additionally, the lack of a control sample means that not all of the reported mode shift can be attributed to SmartTrips.

A number of other specific recommendations are outlined to support future projects. The program should be implemented right after the usual move-in time based on Cornell's academic calendar to attract the largest number of participants with activities planned and scheduled before launch. SmartTrips teams starting in new regions should allocate more time and staff to plan their first or pilot program, though more limited outreach staffing may be able to implement pre-existing plans later on. While it may be helpful to redo SmartTrips Ithaca in downtown during the fall, moving the SmartTrips target area to a well-defined neighborhood more dependent on SOV may be more effective. Simplifying the registration and onboarding process is highly recommended if the program will be expanded to a wider population. If resources allow it, an additional survey should be sent out one year after the start of the program to participants to see if the impact of SmartTrips lingers on well after the program's end. If the program were implemented again in downtown Ithaca, an increased focus in addressing the barriers specific to two segments of the population – potential bike riders and potential TCAT riders – may enable more people to make a shift, especially if the program was paired with improvements in the bike network or bus system. SmartTrips should be part of an organization with a stated focus on transportation demand management, so that a SmartTrips campaign can work in harmony with the aforementioned suggested changes.

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