

Electric cars drawing Houston fans

The latest models are small and not too fast, but they can pass you at the pump

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Rick Ehrlich has high hopes for his new car dealership but it's not likely to strike much fear into competitors with lots full of gleaming vehicles from Detroit, Asia or Europe.

From a small warehouse near Minute Maid Park, Ehrlich has launched Houston's first electric car dealership, selling the Zenn — "zero emissions no noise."

Under state law, the cars are classified as "neighborhood electric vehicles," limited to 25 mph and banned from roads with speed limits over 35 mph. But the Canadian-built hatchbacks are hardly golf carts. The same car is sold in Europe with a diesel engine and can take to the highways.

"I don't have any illusions that we'll sell in high volumes, but it's a real car in every way," Ehrlich said. "It can carry two people nearly anyplace in the city for less than two cents per mile, while creating no air pollution."

The Zenn isn't the only all-electric option for Houston-area residents weary of paying dearly at the pump or looking to cut their contributions to the city's poor air quality.

California-based Miles Electric Vehicles has a local sales rep who hooked up the University of Houston with a trio of trucks that officials hope will replace some small pickups used by campus workers.

ZAP Electric, also out of California, offers a range of cars and scooters though local dealer Apollo Scooter, although the local shop doesn't have the electric cars in its showroom.

And a unit of Chrysler, Global Electric Motorcars, or GEM, sells two- to six-person cars through two Houston-area dealers. A downtown taxi service recently started using two of the vehicles.

Electric cars aren't for everyone, said Dale Brooks, an electrical engineer, president of the Houston Electric Auto Association and owner of three electric cars.

Depending on the model, the cars can travel from 25 to 70 miles on a charge. Only a few come with that critical Texas option, air conditioning. And some are subject to the speed maximums.

But the operating cost is well below that of a gasoline vehicle, with a full charge coming in at less than 50 cents and taking three to eight hours, depending upon the vehicle. Maintenance tends to be cheaper for electric cars, too, with just one-tenth the number of parts as vehicles with internal combustion engines. Most battery

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systems will last for years.

As a second car for most commutes or errands, Brooks said, an electric car is ideal.

"Detroit has defined what a car should be: a big piece of steel with cool lines that can travel at 120 mph and carry five people halfway across the continent in a day," Brooks said. "But it doesn't have to be that. Many of us live within 10 miles of our jobs and don't need a truck or a large vehicle for our work."

Electric car sales growing

Nationally, electric car sales are small compared to standard vehicles, but they're growing. ZAP said August saw record sales of \$737,000, an 88 percent increase from last year. Zenn sold about 240 cars in the U.S. in the past year.

An estimated 100,000 neighborhood electric vehicles and 10,000 highway-approved electric vehicles are on U.S. roads, according to industry estimates. Zenn is planning a highway-ready car for late 2009, while privately held Tesla Motors so far has delivered about 60 of its roadsters, which are priced at around \$100,000.

Even before the arrival of the local electric car dealership, Houston had been home to a community of electric vehicle enthusiasts, many of them members of the Houston Electric Auto Association.

Many are engineers who love to take things apart, compare notes on wiring design and shoot

the breeze about the future of battery technology.

But others got into electric cars without the tinkering instinct. Steve Kobb, a computer programmer, was inspired to convert a 2002 Chevy S-10 pickup into an electric vehicle by the documentaries *An Inconvenient Truth*, former Vice President Al Gore's look at global warming, and *Who Killed the Electric Car?*, about the development and demise of General Motors' EV1.

"Before I started the project I owned two tools — a screwdriver and a pair of pliers — and I wasn't so sure about how the pliers worked," said Kobb, who was an English major in college.

But with help from fellow club member Bill Swann, he got the truck running late this summer — although it's presently in the garage for repairs. The project cost about \$21,000, or a bit less than the hybrid-electric Toyota Prius.

"I'm just obsessed with the idea of what do you do with the existing inventory of gasoline vehicles when battery technology makes electric cars more widely desirable," Kobb said.

The most common question he gets?

"'Can you get to Dallas in it?' No, my range is about 40 miles," Kobb said, recalling what his mother first said when the microwave oven came out. "She asked, 'Can you bake a cake or brown a turkey in it?' No, but now it's one of many tools in her kitchen."

Carbon footprint a factor

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Some cities and schools are considering electric vehicles for specific tasks, such as meter reading, campus security or maintenance.

Neal Smith, auto shop supervisor at UH, is testing three Miles EV trucks to replace small pickups the school uses to transport landscaping crews, elevator technicians and their equipment.

"We're looking for some way to improve the university's carbon footprint and eliminate some of our gasoline use," Smith said. "I think these trucks could help change the attitude that 'if it's not gas-powered it doesn't work.' "

Brooks has owned several electric cars over the years, and for nearly a decade he has driven a two-person Jet Electrica — essentially a 1981 Plymouth Horizon with batteries and an electric motor replacing the gasoline engine. Made in Austin in the 1980s under a Department of Energy program, it can hit 70 mph and go more than 70 miles on a charge, but it lacks air conditioning.

Brooks became the first customer at Ehrlich's dealership this summer, buying a Zenn for about \$17,000.

"I originally stopped by thinking I'd just laugh derisively at them, but I just fell in love with it," Brooks said, particularly when he saw the new Zenn included air conditioning.

About the same time he paid \$12,000 for a ZAP Xebra Truck, which has a solar panel on its roof that helps charge the battery.

"I don't think Detroit has built a car with an oil well built in yet," he said.

On top of the fuel savings, each vehicle is eligible for a \$5,000 federal tax credit, Brooks said, but those tax benefits will change somewhat beginning in 2009.

The recent drop in gasoline prices may temper some drivers' enthusiasm for an electric car, but Brooks thinks this is the calm before the storm.

Chronicle reporter David Kaplan contributed to this story.

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