

Electric vehicle comes to RI

By Alma Gaul | Friday, May 30, 2008

As Dennis Osborne Sr.'s new vehicle rolled off a delivery trailer Thursday afternoon, it made the "beep-beep-beep" sound that slow-moving construction vehicles emit when they back up.

That's because Osborne's new vehicle is slow-moving, maxing out at 25 mph.

Osborne, of Rock Island, is the first person in the Quad-Cities to buy a battery-powered NEV — short for Neighborhood Electric Vehicle — manufactured by the ZENN Motor Co. of Toronto, Canada, and distributed by ePower Synergies in Port Byron, Ill.

The vehicle can't be called a "car" because it is built under a different, federally regulated classification that allows it to go without airbags or crash bumpers.

But it can travel up to 50 miles on a single charge, meaning it costs about a penny per mile to operate.

And that's what appeals to Osborne, who is 61 and single. Although the NEV cost about \$17,000 upon delivery, he figures it is the last in-town vehicle he'll ever buy, and he is looking forward to saving the \$100 per month or more that he otherwise would spend on gasoline at current prices.

"I became interested in the car because of gas prices," he said. "They were reaching dollar amounts I'd never seen before."

The NEV has its limitations, however.

It can be driven only on streets with a maximum speed limit of 35 mph. And because of state legislation, a NEV cannot be driven legally in Illinois at all unless the city in which one is driving has passed an ordinance specifically allowing it.

The [state of Iowa](#) has no such restriction. A NEV can be driven in Davenport and Bettendorf and across the Centennial and Government bridges.

The Illinois limitation has been frustrating for Bruce Wood, the president of ePower, who has spent the past year working with city councils in the Illinois Quad-Cities to pass ordinances legalizing the NEV.

Rock Island has given its approval — paving the way for Osborne to use his vehicle to run errands — and Wood hopes Moline, East Moline and Silvis, Ill., will follow suit soon.

Although currently limited, Osborne expects his NEV will serve him just fine when it comes to buying groceries, picking up medical prescriptions and purchasing "a little red wine now and then" at the new 18th Avenue Hy-Vee Food Store as well as for getting haircuts or making trips to City Hall or the county courthouse.

Osborne also plans to switch doctors so he will be able to travel to medical appointments by NEV.

"There's very little I can't do in Rock Island," he said.

He will continue to use his Chevy S-10 pickup for longer trips and on roads with faster speed limits.

If and when Moline passes the legalizing ordinance, thoroughfares such as [John Deere](#) Road, the Interstate 74 bridge and portions of the Avenue of the Cities still will be off-limits because of their higher speed limits.

But that doesn't bother Osborne, who is happy to make a "clean break" from oil and gasoline. He'll just plug his car into a 110-volt outlet and, in four to eight hours, be ready to go. His car is zero-emission, no-noise — which is the acronym of the manufacturer, ZENN Motor Co.

Although he doesn't consider himself an environmental "nut," Osborne recycles everything he can, uses four rain barrels to catch stormwater runoff, has built a 93-foot rain garden to capture and put stormwater runoff into the

ground and has installed a tankless water heater, high R-value insulation and double-pane windows in his home.

Osborne retired in January 2007 as a buyer for the [John Deere](#) Parts Distribution Warehouse in Milan, Ill., and has a part-time gig as a dance host on the American Queen riverboat. In that job, he goes on cruises and dances with women who have no dance partners.

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About the Company-

The Neighborhood Electric Vehicle, or NEV, is distributed in the Quad-Cities by ePower Synergies, a Port Byron, Ill., company founded by Bruce Wood in December 2004 that engineers, develops, manages and sells vehicles and transportation systems that use alternative energy sources.

Wood previously was director of [John Deere](#) ePower Technologies, a division of Deere & Co. that focused on researching and developing fuel cells, electric drives and other alternative energy and fuel sources.

When Deere executives decided it was premature to invest heavily in the project, Wood asked whether he could start his own business.

Wood once hoped there might be enough demand for NEVs to build a vehicle assembly facility in the Quad-Cities, but that has not happened, largely because of the legal limitations on driving NEVs in Illinois, he said.

"The [State of Illinois](#) has made it so difficult, I just can't justify building it," he said of a possible assembly plant. "There would be too much investment for too little possibility of profit."

Consumer interest is growing, though, along with the price of gasoline. "Three years ago, when gas was \$2 a gallon or less, there wasn't much interest," he said. "Now that it's \$4, there's an awful lot of interest."

Still, a lot of people feel uncomfortable with the low driving speed of 25 mph. "They feel they might become the victim of road rage," he said.

Safety isn't necessarily an issue, though, he explained.

Because NEVs are so light and will be driven on low-speed streets, they simply "bounce out of the way" if hit, he said.

"It's just physics. When a big object hits a small object, the small will move out of the way" rather than stand its ground and get crushed.

He pointed to an example from Santa Cruz, Calif., in which a NEV was hit broadside by a sport utility vehicle and the two people inside the NEV "were just fine."

Wood said his company has managed to make a profit in other areas, including Department of Defense contracts to build hydrogen fuel cell-powered hybrid electric technology demonstrator vehicles.

In other words, ePower took conventional vehicles — such as forklift trucks or multipurpose utility vehicles — and changed them so they can be powered by hydrogen fuel cells.

And Wood sees his company's immediate future in sales of "The Ride," a three-wheeled scooter ePower has designed that rivals the Segway personal transporter.

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ON THE WEB

- For more information about the ZENN Motor Co., go to

zenncars.com

- For more information about ePower Synergies, go to epowersynergies.com, call (309) 523-2090 or send an e-mail to info@ePowerSynergies.com