

Globe editorial

Low-speed advances

FROM FRIDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
JULY 18, 2008 AT 8:02 AM EDT

The streets of Canadian cities are crowded with bicycles, scooters, mopeds and even bicycle-powered taxis, as well as the streams of traditionally powered cars. What we seldom see are small, low-speed, electrically powered vehicles.

That should change, as more provinces encourage these environmentally friendly vehicles to operate on city streets. Just yesterday, Quebec began a three-year pilot project that will permit two models of slow-speed electric vehicles to travel on roads that have speed limits under 50 kilometres per hour. British Columbia recently changed its laws to let electric cars operate on any road in the province with speed limits of 40 kilometres an hour or less. Manitoba will soon introduce legislation to encourage low-speed electric cars, and other provinces are expected to follow suit.

No one is suggesting that these small vehicles be allowed on highways. They don't have the range or the protective gear for that. But for short, urban travel, plug-in cars make perfect sense, and the provinces are right to encourage their use, at least in pilot programs where safety and potential traffic disruptions can be monitored. In the United States, small electric cars are far more common, and there have been few reports of accidents or injuries.

While plug-in electric cars can contribute to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and help cut urban smog, there is another reason to promote them. Canada is an important centre of low-speed electric-vehicle technology and we have several innovative firms at the forefront of the business. Toronto-based Zenn Motor Co., which has a manufacturing plant in Saint-Jérôme, Que., is one of the firms poised to take advantage of more open regulations. Until recently, the company was forced to sell almost all of its vehicles south of the border, as restrictions on their use in Canada have made marketing them here impossible.

What is missing now is some enthusiasm from the federal government. In fact, Ottawa has been a wet blanket on the subject. In December, Transport Canada issued draft recommendations that say low-speed vehicles should operate only in controlled environments, such as military bases, gated communities and university campuses. Fortunately, these are only suggestions, and provinces have the jurisdiction to make more forward-looking decisions about the kinds of vehicles that operate on their roads.

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