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Meet the NEVs: Compact, quiet Neighborhood Electric Vehicles are moving in



You may have spotted one on the road: a micro-sized, slow-moving, nearly silent car, about as tall as a Mini Cooper, but shorter. It's an NEV -- a relatively new class of transportation that stands for Neighborhood Electric Vehicle.

"This is my favorite feature," says Deb Seymour, a Ballard Web designer who has owned a Zenn NEV for about six months. Its license plate reads: "OHM GIRL." She flips open a cap on the side of the car to reveal an electrical outlet, to which she plugs in a standard extension cord to recharge the lead-acid batteries. An eight-hour charge, she says, gives the car enough juice for 30 to 40 miles of driving.

NEVs are surprisingly zippy, thanks to the characteristic instant power of electric motors. And because of the car's small size, you feel like you're going faster than you are.

Where to buy

Washington state law mandates that NEVs not exceed 35 mph, which is adequate for most in-city driving. The vehicles could easily go faster, says Steven Lough, spokesman for the Seattle Electric Vehicle Association. But because NEVs are not crash-tested and don't have airbags, state and federal governments require that governors be placed on the motors to limit their output.

"The car weighs 1,200 pounds, so it's more vulnerable if somebody in a 6,000-pound Escalade runs into you," says George Robertson, a Beacon Hill architect and Zenn NEV owner. He says the 80 percent reduction in his carbon footprint over using a gasoline-powered car is worth the reduced safety. The 50 cents' worth of electricity that it costs to recharge his batteries comes mostly from hydroelectric power, a relatively clean source of energy.

When Robertson bought his car last year for about \$18,000 (other models can be had for as low as \$10,000), he knew it was a good way to conserve energy, but he wasn't sure how much he would use it day to day. His initial expectation was that maybe a third of his trips could be made with the Zenn. Instead, he was surprised that the car fulfills roughly 90 percent of his and his wife's driving needs.

Driving an NEV requires a shift in thinking, according to owners. Becky Beemer, of Bainbridge Island, says the 20-mile range and other limitations of her Miles NEV force her to plan out her day a little more carefully. For instance, she says, she has "specific pull-out points on the way to work to let cars pass on the hills."

Robertson says he has "learned all the back ways, the non-freeway ways, to get to places."

Scott MacGowan, who owns a landscaping company in Seattle, uses a Miles NEV truck to haul gravel, dirt and plants around the city. He's impressed with the size of the payload, but says that carrying extra weight reduces the vehicle's range. Once, running low on electricity, he had to pull over and knock on a stranger's door to ask for a charge.

Despite the drawbacks, NEVs seem to fill a useful transportation niche in their owners' lives. They're ideal for people who want to "go green" on short jaunts around town. "It's shockingly good at meeting most of our transportation needs," Robertson says.