

Posted Online: Posted online: April 20, 2008 12:07 AM
Print publication date: 04/20/2008

Beware slow-moving vehicles: R.I. approves use of battery-powered cars

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By Jonathan Turner, grouped jturner@qconline.com

Rock Island recently became the second Illinois Quad-Cities community to allow small neighborhood electric vehicles (NEVs) on public streets.

A state law approved earlier this month in the Illinois House and now being considered by the Senate would permit and regulate the use of the environmentally friendly cars statewide.

Currently, Illinois prohibits NEVs on public roads unless the city has passed an ordinance that makes it OK.

Short of the change in state law, Bruce Wood of Port Byron-based ePower Synergies is asking Illinois Q-C municipalities to adopt local ordinances.

Last August, his town approved use of NEVs -- mainly for test-driving at ePower, an authorized dealer of the ZENN (Zero Emissions No Noise), made in Canada.

Last week, Rock Island aldermen approved an ordinance allowing them throughout the city.

"If people lived downtown, they could use these vehicles to get to and from work," said Mayor Mark Schwiebert, who admires the "green" aspect of cutting down on vehicle emissions.

The battery-powered ZENN can travel up to 25 miles an hour, and any NEV can only be operated by someone with a valid driver's license, the city ordinance says. Drivers could not use a NEV on a street with a posted speed limit of 35 miles an hour or greater.

Plus, no NEV can be operated on Rock Island streets unless it has -- among other features -- a rearview mirror, red reflectorized warning devices in the front and rear, a "slow moving" emblem on the rear, white headlights, brake lights and turn signals.

While electric cars will be legal in Rock Island, no Illinois NEV driver can legally cross the Centennial Bridge into Davenport, since Iowa licenses the NEVs, but Illinois doesn't, Mr. Wood said.

"We're trying to encourage all the Quad-Cities communities to pass an ordinance similar to what Rock Island has," he said. "We're pleased Mayor Schwiebert led the way and has shown



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Photo: Paul Colletti

Amy Nielsen and Bruce Wood own ePower Synergies, Inc. in Port Byron.

how to make a city cool."

The Illinois House bill, introduced by Rep. Mike Boland, D-East Moline, permits NEVs on streets if the posted speed limit is 35 mph or less and allows local government to impose any additional restrictions it deems appropriate for public safety.

Mr. Wood hasn't seen much local interest in the ZENN, in part because of the state law. The enclosed two-seater retails for a base price of \$12,750. It has a 120-volt plug-in battery, which can be fully recharged in eight hours.

The ZENN typically goes for 35 miles on a full charge. It includes windshield wipers, power windows, power locks, remote keyless entry and a sunroof.

"A lot of people, with gas prices over \$3 a gallon, are thinking maybe there is a different way," Mr. Wood said. ePower has sold a handful of NEVs in the past year, including one to the mayor of Gibson City, near Champaign -- both communities that have passed the NEV ordinance.

Last May, Augustana College got its first NEV -- a \$10,000 GEM car, made by Chrysler. Unlike small trucks and other utility vehicles, the GEM more easily maneuvers narrow paths and doesn't damage grass on campus.

Mr. Wood hopes eventually to make NEVs. "It depends how the market develops. Now the market doesn't justify it. We need laws, and they're talking about increasing speed of the vehicles. Many people are uncomfortable driving 25, just going up and down River Drive (in Moline)."

Most states require that NEVs not exceed 25 mph, although Washington state allows them at 35 mph, and a "majority" of ZENN sales are in Seattle, Mr. Wood said.

NEVs typically are designed to be used in areas such as airports, parks, gated communities and college campuses.

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Electric car featured at Port Byron Earth Day

Today, ePower Synergies will offer test drives of the ZENN electric car during the Port Byron Earth Day celebration.

The car will take part in an "eco-friendly" parade at 1 p.m. on Main Street, and visitors can test the ZENN and Blue-RIDE Personal Transporter (a motorized battery electric tricycle).

Other Earth Day events in Port Byron are:

- 11 a.m.: Opening ceremonies with the mayor planting a tree
- Noon to 5 p.m.: Educational booths and vendors
- Noon: Hug-a-Tree fundraiser starts for Riverdale Elementary playground
- 2 p.m.: Outdoor music with local musicians

Library presentations:

- 2 p.m.: "Living Lands" by Captain Mike Hanlin

- 2:30 p.m.: "Bald Eagle Night Roosting" by Kelly McKay
- 3 p.m.: "Harvesting Sustainable Energy" by Lewis Demetri
- 3:30 p.m.: "Happy Gardener" by Rich Landis

Other activities:

- Learn about water conservation, rain barrels, rain gardens, and composting, and buy a recycling bin and recycle old batteries and cell phones at the village hall
- Buy CFL bulbs from Cub Scout Pack 308 at the fire station
- Limited supply of free smoke/CO2 detectors at the fire station