

Zenn and the art of really cutting back on gasoline

By **NEAL ST. ANTHONY**, Star Tribune

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Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, who drives a plug-in electric-gas hybrid Toyota, isn't the only one driving a future car around town.

Over at Cushman Motor Co. on E. Franklin Avenue, President Tim Commers uses the company "Zenn" car for short-haul trips around the Twin Cities instead of the pickup truck.

"It's not a vehicle to replace a car that you take out on the highway," Commers said, "but a second vehicle to do the trips around town. You get up to 35 miles per charge."

Cushman, a longtime distributor of electric- and gas-powered golf carts, industrial vehicles and scooters, is the local dealer for Zenn and e-ride Industries of Princeton, Minn., one of several North American companies selling so-called "Neighborhood Electric Vehicles." These limited-range vehicles are gaining traction in this era of \$4-per-gallon gasoline.

"Our Zenn is a sturdy, standard car and not some three-wheeled thing," said John Harkness, an Augsburg College professor who bought a Zenn from Cushman in April. "It's small, super-cute and I knew my wife would love it. My wife works at the College of St. Catherine and she drives it every day. It has front-wheel drive, a heater and it works well in the winter. I think it has more ground clearance than our [1996 Mitsubishi]."

"We did it for environmental reasons, but it also will pay off compared with buying another new or used car."

Canada-based Zenn started production two years ago of its latest-model vehicles, several dozen of which are humming around the Twin Cities.

Microcar of France produces the body from aluminum-alloy and plastic. Instead of installing the super-efficient clean-diesel engine used in Europe, Zenn of Montreal buys the vehicles without engines and installs a pair of 72-volt batteries, electric motor, drive and gears.

Zenn stands for "zero emission no noise."

"I drive 5 miles to work and I'll 'top off' the battery there," said Matt Simunovich of St. Paul. "It's been wonderful. We got it in December and drive about 700 miles a month. We spend about \$20 a month on electricity."

The fully loaded Zenn weighs about 1,700 pounds and costs about \$17,500. The manufacturer estimates that the electric vehicle gets the energy equivalent of about 245 miles per gallon of gasoline. The batteries need to be replaced about every three years with another set for about \$1,500. Limited-range cars like the Zenn also cost about half as much to insure as a regular car.

Commers said most buyers are looking for a small vehicle that is safe and won't pollute.

Minnesota law permits small electric vehicles with limited speed and range to operate on roads where the speed limit is no more than 35 miles per hour.

Zenn cars have made a splash in Seattle, the Southwest and parts of the Southeast.

"They work here in the winter," Commers said. "The car always goes, regardless of the cold. They just don't go as far on a charge. But the front-wheel drive is excellent and the traction is good."

Commers expects to sell several dozen Zenn cars in the first full year of sales.

The major selling point is fuel economy and no pollution, other than tapping into the electric grid.

Take notice, Detroit

A decade ago Detroit shunned promising electric cars, preferring instead to concentrate on higher-margin SUVs. The now-struggling big auto companies suddenly see gas-electric hybrid vehicles that can get 50 to 60 miles per gallon as a huge growth market.

"This Zenn fits 80 percent of the trips of most urban dwellers who drive less than 30 miles per day," said Harkness, who usually bikes or walks to Augsburg from his Seward neighborhood home.

"When you think about it, having a huge machine around that can take you 300 or 400 miles is kind of like carrying around a painter's ladder that will take you up three stories when all you really need is a little stepladder for most jobs around the house," he said. "We've known for years that oil was trouble. This is just a little part of the solution."

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