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Price of gas makes no difference to this buggy

David Bly, Desert Valley Times

Bob and Walt Meibaum can giggle a little when the price of gasoline goes up — they're still driving around town for about a cent a mile.

The brothers, both retired with engineering backgrounds, recently bought an electric car that serves as their in-town transportation. The two-seater ZENN (Zero Emission, No Noise) has a top speed of 25 mph and a range of 45 miles between charges. That's not Nascar stuff, but it's good enough for the Meibaums.

"We can run our errands, go out to eat," said Walt, who recently moved from Texas to join his brother in Mesquite.

Walt didn't want to be saddled with the cost and hassle of owning a full-size car after he moved here, but he still wanted to preserve his independence.

"I sold my nice car," he said. "With the price of gas and all that, I didn't want to get another one. This is ideal."

The little car comes with a radio and a CD player, but it doesn't have a lot of other frills and it certainly doesn't have a cushy ride like a Cadillac or a Chrysler.

But here's what else it doesn't have: no gas tank to fill, no tuneups, no oil to check, and — as its name attests — no emissions and no noise.

And no standing in line at the DMV to pay hundreds of dollars to get the vehicle licensed by the state. All it needs is a NEV (Neighborhood Electric Vehicle) permit, obtainable from the Mesquite Police Department for \$50.

No speeding tickets either — push the pedal to the floor and all you get is 25 mph.

"It could go faster, but there's a governor that keeps it at 25," said Bob.

He said two states — Montana and Washington — have regulations that allow NEVs to go up to 35 mph.

"But this is ideal for Mesquite where the overall speed limit is 25 mph," said Bob. "We're allowed to drive on roads where the limit is 35, but we try to stick to the secondary streets."

The car plugs into a regular household outlet which charges the six 12-volt batteries in about four hours.

"It really makes good sense," said Bob. "They claim it takes a penny a mile to operate."

The Meibaums imported the Canadian-built car through a California dealer for a sticker price of \$11,889, plus \$350 for shipping.

While it's only a two-passenger car, it has room enough behind the seats for at least a week's worth of groceries.

It's almost eerie to drive the ZENN — turn on the key, step on the pedal, and it moves silently. It makes no noise sitting at a traffic light, because the motor doesn't run until it needs to move the car. Acceleration from a standing stop is not much different than a normal car.

Bob is hoping to bring the operating costs close to zero.

"I'm getting a bid now for putting photo-voltaic panels on my roof," he said. "I'd like to do away with my whole power bill, but if that might not be cost-effective. If nothing else, we'll get a small panel to charge the car."

And Mesquite's abundant sunshine will do the rest.

"It's the right way to go, especially for a place like Mesquite," Bob said. "It just makes sense."

The ZENN attracts attention wherever it goes, but the Meibaums don't mind talking about it.

"We think the way gas prices are going, people should know about this," said Bob. "If half the people in Mesquite had cars like this, it would be a different place. And as you get more cars, they should be able to reduce the cost."
