

Zenn and the art of neighborhood navigation



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I turned the car key and heard nothing. Under normal circumstances this would be great cause for concern. This, however, was no normal car. I was sitting in the surprisingly spacious cabin of a Zenn (which stands for zero emission, no noise) Neighborhood Electric Vehicle.

Editor's note: this story was originally published in our February issue, but it is timely with the Sierra Club North Star Chapter's showing of the Zenn car on Monday, April 7, at the end of their Transportation Committee meeting, which begins at 5:45 p.m. Cushman Motor's Tim Commers will present the car in the Sierra Club parking lot, 2327 E. Franklin Ave.

I learned to drive on a manual transmission Ford, so this was a great surprise to me. After getting used to the idea of a quiet car, I put on my signal and turned out of the Cushman Motor Company's parking lot onto East Franklin Avenue. Joining the flow of traffic, I got a few interested looks from other motorists. Though I wish I could say it was because of me, my money is on the car.

The look of the vehicle itself is fantastic. The two-seat, three-door hatchback is small, sleek and smart. The interior has basic utilities such as heating, air conditioning, and a stereo. It is entirely user-friendly and easy to drive, and it handles very well.

As a European diesel vehicle imported by a Canadian company and transformed into an electric vehicle, it is one of the few neighborhood electric vehicles currently on the general market with a fully enclosed automotive body and the look of a real car — compared to many others that look like a modified golf cart.

The Zenn, with a price range of \$12,500–17,500, has been available for purchase since September at Cushman Motor Company, 2909 E. Franklin Ave., which has partnered with Linden Hills Co-Op to sell the Zenn. "Right now, a lot of what we're doing is introducing this vehicle to the public and telling people about it," Cushman President Tim Commers said. "There is a learning curve regarding what they are and what they're capable of. We're working to establish a dedicated, local website that will be able to provide a lot of information about them, and we're also participating in a lot of community-based events."

One thing that Commers has encountered is a lack of knowledge among people about what exactly a Neighborhood Electric Vehicle is and what its capabilities and limitations are. Neighborhood Electric Vehicles are designed for short-distance trips at low speeds, which makes them ideal for city streets. There are federal regulations limiting them to roads with a 35-miles-per-hour (mph) speed limit or less, and a vehicular top speed of 25 mph. They are entirely electric, requiring a four-hour charge in a traditional power outlet for 80 percent capacity when starting at zero charge.

"What this all means is that they work well in inner-city neighborhoods, because 25 mph and short distance trips are just fine... That is where these vehicles really shine," Commers said, indicating that Cushman uses several Zenns for their own business needs in the area. "A lot of us still need to have highway vehicles, to conduct business, but what we really find is that we're often running errands in the

neighborhood, and we don't need to use our trucks for that. While on one hand, the vehicle might work for some as their only vehicle, in most cases it is a second or third vehicle. With [the Zenn], you can run those errands without contributing any emissions."

That environmentally friendly aspect of the Zenn is what elicits the majority of consumer interest, and it is initially what attracted Commers to selling the vehicles at Cushman, which is primarily a distributor of commercial-industrial vehicles. "A lot of those vehicles over the years have been electric," said Commers. "We have been advocates of electric vehicles for many years because they have proven to be extremely reliable, trouble-free and have had enormously long service life in some pretty harsh environments.

"You can't be a citizen in this country and not have some awareness of the issue of carbon emissions," Commers said. "We have long had an understanding of electric vehicles and a familiarity with their benefits, so when licensable electric vehicles started to become a reality a couple years ago, it seemed like a good fit, even though we've never considered ourselves a car dealership."

To learn more about Cushman Motor Company and the Zenn, visit www.cushmanmotorco.com, or call 612-333-3487.

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