

B.C. should allow low speed vehicles on all streets

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Somewhere in Ottawa, officials with Transport Canada are gnashing their teeth in frustration today.

Their campaign to keep low-speed electric vehicles off the road suffered a setback in Vancouver this week.

Low-speed electric vehicles, also known as LSVs, LSEVs or neighborhood zero-emission vehicles, are light, plug-in cars and trucks that have been in use in the U.S. and other countries for more than a decade. They are not designed to head out on the highway. They are, however, the only kind of electric car you can buy here now.

We have been building them in Canada for several years, but effectively keeping them off the roads here despite the promise they hold as a much greener alternative to the automobile for short runs around town.

The vote by city councillors on Tuesday night to allow LSVs to mingle with ordinary traffic on streets with a speed limit of 50 km/h or less makes Vancouver the first major municipality in Canada to give the environmentally friendly vehicles a green light, following similar action by the much smaller Victoria suburb of Oak Bay.

Vancouver will not be the first major city in Canada where these vehicles will be operating, however.

Confused? You're not alone. The confusion stems from the provincial policy on low-speed electric vehicles that seems almost designed to perplex.

While Quebec has launched a three-year pilot project in allowing LSVs to operate on any street in the the province with a speed limit of 50 km/h, the B.C. government in its wisdom abandoned a promise to do the same and instead left the decision up to individual municipalities. That means even with Vancouver's blessing, LSVs will be of limited use to anyone who has to cross into any other municipality that doesn't follow suit.

The province put the brakes on after Transport Canada issued recommendations that LSVs be used only in institutional settings, such as universities or hospital grounds.

Transport Canada's concern is that the LSVs, which range from models that are little more than closed-in golf carts to small, conventional-looking cars, don't meet

all of the usual safety standards applied to regular vehicles.

As with scooters and motorcycles, if they run into a truck or a heavier car, they will not fare well.

While the safety concerns seem legitimate, in other jurisdictions the dangers remained theoretical, while the benefits are very real.

Catherine Scrimgeour, spokeswoman for Toronto-based Zenn Motor Cars, says that with 45,000 LSVs on the road in the U.S., there have been no fatalities associated with their use in the past 10 years.

That's not to say you won't be killed driving one, but people are killed every day in fully crash-tested vehicles.

Zenn manufactures a cute little two-seat model that has an advertised range of 50-80 kilometres per charge and a fuel cost of less than two cents per kilometre. Compare that to what you are driving now and you can see the attraction for running errands around town.

Zenns have been selling through a dealer network in the U.S., including one in the Seattle area, but despite the fact that they are manufactured in Quebec, the regulatory chill in Canada has kept the company from selling them here.

As a result of the recent thaw in Quebec, Zenn is opening a factory outlet at its assembly plant in Saint-Jerome, where they can be picked up for a list price of \$16,900.

There was once a made-in-B.C. version. But in the face of ongoing regulatory intransigence, the manufacturer of the "IT," an LSV that looks a lot like a miniature Volkswagen Beetle, sold the Delta plant to a company that is now preparing to ramp up production in Pakistan.

Danny Epp of Dynasty Electric Vehicles Ltd. still has the last remaining half a dozen ITs in his driveway for sale at fire-sale prices.

After watching what he believes was a lost opportunity for B.C. leave town, he's still not persuaded provincial and local governments are interested in making the changes necessary to allow British Columbians access to LSVs, despite lip service given by the province to finding greener alternatives to the cars we drive now.

It's a curious stance for a provincial government that's supposed to be serious about cutting greenhouse-gas emissions.

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