



By Michel Deslauriers,

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Young and old, I know plenty of people who can't live without a car. But the price of gas is getting so high, that going to the corner store for a quart of milk costs more than the quart itself.

At the same time, I can't help but feel that I'm not doing enough for the future of my children. It's especially the case since I met Vice-President of Production Gilles Allard, head honcho at ZENN's St. Jérôme, Québec [assembly plant](#) that builds zero-emissions vehicles.



The company has been producing and distributing an electric car for a year now, and they are selling them in the United States as well as a few in British-Columbia. That's right; a Canadian company with management headquarters in Toronto and production in Québec, and virtually all their output is sent to the USA. But now, *La Belle Province* is [regulating LSV](#) (Low-Speed Vehicles) for limited use in select cities starting July 17<sup>th</sup>.

What is an LSV? It's basically a road vehicle that's limited to a top speed of 40 km/h, or 25 mph, like the [ZENN](#). What exactly is a ZENN?

#### How a ZENN is born

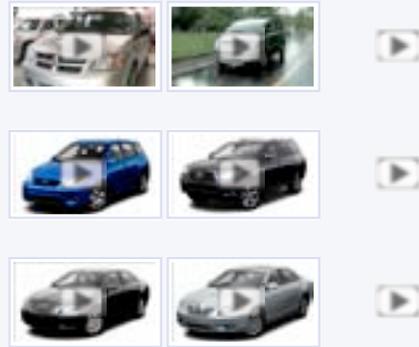
The company buys unfinished bodies of the MC2, a small gas- or diesel-powered vehicle sold in Europe by a manufacturer simply called Minicar. The vehicles are shipped to ZENN's assembly plant without powertrains, and an electric motor is squeezed in the tiny engine bay. Six batteries are also placed under the cargo area floor.

Other modifications are performed while the cars and their batteries are fully-tested before being sent to their proud owners. The car is built on an aluminum space frame and all body panels are molded in ABS, a type of plastic resin. The car requires virtually no maintenance.

The 2-seater ZENN rides on a 2,080-mm wheel base and is 3,068 millimetres long. Compared to a smart fortwo, it's longer but slightly narrower and lower, but offers more cargo space, 368 litres versus 340 for the smart; that's about the size of a Honda Civic's trunk.

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### Silent grocery getter

Driving the ZENN is a quite amusing. It speed up to 40 km/h in about 9 seconds and hits its electronic speed limiter, so merging in city traffic is not a big worry. Every state has its requirements for identifying LSVs on the road, and in Québec, every ZENN must have an orange triangle warning sticker as well as an indication of the car's maximum speed.



There's no engine noise, obviously, but you will hear the electric motor whirring, a little tire noise and a moderate level of suspension noise. People walking down the street will barely hear the ZENN pass by, though, but the car is fortunately equipped with a loud horn. Outward vis bility is very good all around.

Braking is provided by four-wheel disc brakes; they look pretty small but they effectively stop the car without drama. There are, after all, only 617 kilograms (1,360 lbs) to immobilize, not including the two passengers and their groceries, of course. The brakes regenerate a small amount of energy while in use.

The suspension is a little harsh, but for a basic-transportation vehicle, we find it quite acceptable. Our only concern is that bigger potholes will chew up those skimpy 145/70R13 tires, so a ZENN owner must be particularly observant of the road ahead, but at such low speeds, he or she has time to do so. The steering is a little heavy during parking manoeuvres, but otherwise, it feels like you're driving a go-kart.



### Now with air conditioning!

You can drive up to 80 kilometres on a single charge, which allows you to comfortably drive around town and run your errands. To recharge the ZENN, simply plug it to a standard-issue 110-volt power outlet; the battery pack is recharged at 80% capacity in about 4 hours, and reaches a full charge in 8 hours.

The charging system is safe; you can leave it plugged in for days at a time, as it shuts itself off when a 100% charge is reached. Allard claims the battery pack is good for more than 500 recharging cycles, which means you can use and recharge the car every day for over 2 years before replacing the batteries (which currently cost about \$1,400).

Right now, the car's enemy is cold weather, as the batteries won't be as effective in sub-zero temperatures. For now, the ZENN will be happiest sleeping in the garage, but the company says it's working on a way to insulate the batteries, and there's room in the underfloor to do so. It's Allard's second winter in a ZENN, and he says it has no problem getting through the white stuff with winter tires on.

The ZENN can now be equipped with optional air conditioning, which triggered a spike in sales, particularly in sunny Florida. You can also get a power canvas sunroof and a radio, while every ZENN quietly sneaks out of the factory with alloy wheels, power windows and a choice of 3 colours: blue, silver or green.



#### **Okay, how much?**

The all-important question is how much does the ZENN cost, and will the average consumer will be able to afford one. Final pricing for the Québec market hasn't been finalized yet, but should be announced before the July 17th on-sale date. According to Allard, figure a base price of between \$15,000 and \$16,000 CDN. Options pricing are also approximate; \$2,000 for the air conditioning, \$895 for the sunroof and \$195 for the radio.



Let's crunch some numbers. Let's say we drive 18,000 km a year (about 50 km daily), fuel costs \$1.50 a litre, and both the ZENN and the smart cost \$15,000. The two has a combined estimate of 5.4 L/100 km, so it will require 972 litres for a

year of driving, which will cost \$1,458 annually. Recharging the ZENN every night will cost substantially less.

ZENN is currently taking orders via their website, but there aren't any Canadian dealerships yet. The car obviously isn't thrilling to drive, but it provides a low-cost, zero-emission, environmentally-friendly way to get around town.