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Thrifty Electric Car Turns On One Town

By JOHN J. FIALKA
February 26, 2007

LINCOLN, Calif. -- Electric cars are getting a lot of public-relations mileage as lawmakers and auto makers search for ways to curb vehicle emissions linked to global warming. But many of the electric vehicles being touted are pricey, years away from being ready, or both.

Not the 150 electric cars purring around the residential streets here.

The cars, which resemble souped-up golf carts, are simple, cheap and have a top speed of about 25 miles per hour. They can travel 30 miles before their power system, which is composed of six car batteries, run out of juice. This city of 38,000, located 25 miles northeast of Sacramento, is spending \$1 million to change its roads and traffic signs to accommodate the cars. Several other California towns are preparing to copy Lincoln's approach.



Roger E. Oldenkamp sitting in his Global Electric car in Lincoln, Calif.

Global Electric Motorcars LLC, which was bought by **DaimlerChrysler** AG in 2000, has sold 33,000 of these neighborhood electric vehicles, known as NEVs. Fargo, N.D.-

based Global Electric is positioned to be among those first in line for possible new state and federal incentives designed to promote the use of alternative-fuel vehicles.

Electric cars could help meet goals set in a proposal by President Bush that would mandate increased use of alternative-fuel vehicles. That could mean new and probably larger tax incentives to buy them, replacing a tax credit that expired last year, which was worth roughly 2.5% of the price of the car. Meanwhile, in Sacramento, state regulators are studying new incentives and mandates for electric cars to meet California's new law to curb global warming.

NEVs aren't intended as full-fledged car replacements that can reach high speeds and take to the highways. Others, including **General Motors** Corp., **Renault** SA, **Toyota Motor** Corp. and French aerospace magnate **Serge Dassault**, are working on more versatile battery-powered vehicles. But the cars may not be on the market until 2010 or later, and could cost as much as \$50,000 because of the high-tech batteries they will have to use.

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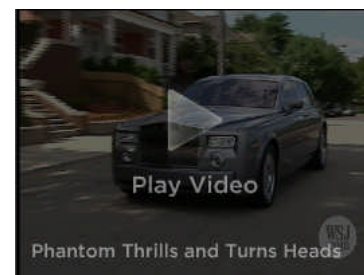
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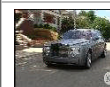
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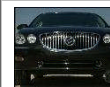
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CAR CAST

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At least four other small companies are gearing up to sell little electric cars in the U.S. Zenn Motor Co. of Toronto offers a \$12,000 model that looks like a standard compact car. Friday, Mr. Bush posed next to a small electric truck parked on the White House lawn. It was made by Phoenix Motocars Inc. of Ontario, Calif., one of two companies beginning to sell highway-capable electric vehicles. The price starts at \$45,000.

The strategy behind the NEV is deliberately low-tech. It has the suspension and control system of an automobile and standard safety features such as seat belts, headlights and turn signals. The price range for Global Electric models runs from \$6,800 to \$9,700 for the two- and four-passenger versions. The company is making a six-seat version for hotels, industries and government agencies that would replace shuttle vans.

"Our drivers are very sensitive to price," Larry Oswald, chief executive of Global Electric, said in a recent interview. "We're normally the second or third car in a household. We strive to keep our costs down and make it very simple to own."

Critics don't like the fact that the small cars can't be used on the highway. "We believe in vehicles that are freeway capable," says Ron Freund, chairman of the Electric Auto Association, a nonprofit Palo Alto, Calif., group.

But the cars have a lot of fans here. Roger E. Oldenkamp, a retired civil engineer who bought a Global Electric vehicle in May 2003, says, "Parking is a lot easier. You get to meet more people. They wave at you and you stop and chat."

Unlike golf carts, NEVs meet federal and state requirements to drive on residential streets in more than 40 states. Lincoln, which is in danger of violating federal antimog rules, is installing special lanes for them on major roads that have speed limits exceeding 35 mph. The city is also requiring shopping centers to install charging stations for the vehicles.

According to Global Electric, annual fuel costs for an NEV driven an average of 100 miles a week will come to about \$58, compared with \$425.63 for a compact, gasoline-engine car that gets 27 miles per gallon.

Global Electric's car was the brainchild of Dan Sturges, a Boulder, Colo., businessman and former designer for GM. He left the big auto maker to develop an NEV prototype in the mid-1990s. A product recall later sent his Livonia, Mich., company into bankruptcy. Its remains were sold to a Fargo businessman who moved the business there and later sold it to DaimlerChrysler, just as California's first electric car mandates were looming. "We were the story of how the second mouse gets the cheese," Mr. Sturges says.

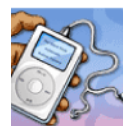
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