

Car or golf cart? Local dealer hopes it's the start of a trend

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WILLOW GROVE — Step into The Great Britains Automotive Group's showroom and you'll find yourself surrounded by high-end Saabs, Jaguars and Land Rovers. But take a peek in the back parking lot and you'll find that the sticker prices aren't the only thing that has The Great Britains' salespeople seeing green.

Proudly labeled with decals that read "all electric vehicle" and "zero pollution," five new Miles ZX40s electric cars form the newest additions to the auto dealership's inventory. They are among the first of 500 delivered to the United States last month from China, where they are manufactured by the Tianjin Qingyuan Electric Vehicle Co., and The Great Britains is the first dealership in the Delaware Valley to sell them.

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Michael Smyth
The Great Britains

"We believe in the green movement," said The Great Britains General Manager Thomas G. Burton, citing the ZX40s as the dealership's proverbial "foot-in-the-door" of growing consumer demand for environmentally friendly transportation.

The ZX40s runs entirely on electricity stored in six 12-volt batteries that are recharged by plugging into a regular 110-volt/20 amp wall socket. Brian Tully, director of electric vehicle sales at The Great Britains, estimates that the car generates less than a third of the monthly carbon footprint of a gasoline-powered vehicle.

This translates to an operating cost between 5.85 and 6.45 cents per mile, depending on the average miles driven per charge, versus 28.3 cents per mile if the vehicle were fueled with gasoline at \$3.00 a gallon and yielded 18 miles per gallon, according to analysis conducted by Miles Automotive Group Ltd., the Malibu, Calif.-based developer and distributor of the car.

"The cost of operation is a big benefit," Tully said.

There is one catch: The ZX40s has a top speed of only 25 mph, which puts it in a class of four-wheeled, electric vehicles that the National Highway Transportation Administration calls neighborhood electric vehicles, or NEVs. On top of that, the vehicle has a maximum range of only about 60 to 70 miles per charge.

Considering these limitations, Michael Hayes, senior vice president for sales and dealer relations at Miles, says that the ZX40s fills a niche market for low-speed, short-distance transportation needs.

"When you look at university campuses, corporate campuses, shopping malls, warehouses, ports, airports, municipal parking enforcement, they don't have to

go that fast," Hayes said.

Tully concurs, which is why he's been pitching the ZX40s to local parks and university campuses. He loaned The Great Britain's first ZX40s to Norristown Farm Park, a 900-acre park with a 15-mph speed limit, for a three-month trial period.

But Miles isn't the only player in NEV niche markets such as these. A range of electric alternatives exists, such as golf carts, John Deere Gators and other electric vehicles from companies such as Fargo, N.D.-based Global Electric Motorcars. Many of these options cost less than the ZX40s sticker price of \$16,950.

Such competition doesn't phase Hayes, though.

"We feel strongly that you shouldn't compromise your safety in the name of being green. When you use any of those other [electric] cars, you're compromising," Hayes said. Standard features in a ZX40s include crash-resistant bumpers,

fully lockable doors, seatbelts, front and rear fog lights and defrosters, a radio and a heater. Hayes believes that these and other safety, comfort, utility and weatherability features make the ZX40s the best choice in the NEV market.

"The whole focus of the car is to have it be environmentally friendly, safe and have

the utility of a full car," Hayes added.

At Norristown Farm Park, Montgomery County commissioners who tested the ZX40s during its unveiling lauded its utility and economy compared with other electric alternatives but were hesitant to equate its feel to that of a gas-powered car.

"It seems like to me the most economical use as far as transport around the park, more so than a [John Deere] Gator," Montgomery County Commissioner

vehicle to do the errands that you have."

Citing that 78 percent of Americans live 20 miles or less from their workplace, Hayes likewise recognizes the potential for using the ZX40s on public roads. More than 45 states have laws permitting the operation of NEVs on public roads with speed limits of 35 mph or less, according to the Electric Drive Transportation Association (EDTA), a Washington-based industry organization that promotes the commercialization of electric-drive technologies. Pennsylvania is not yet one of those states, but a similar law, Senate Bill 152, sponsored by Sen. Stewart Greenleaf, R-Willow Grove, is currently under consideration in the Pennsylvania State Senate.

With public concern about pollution and global climate change on the rise, the ZX40s may only be a flavor of things to come. Next year, Miles hopes to unveil the Javlon XM200 — a full-function, all-electric vehicle capable of driving 80 mph, with a range of more than 150 miles per charge.

"The fact that we have new entrants in our marketplace and some of those entrants, like Miles, are precursors to full-function electric vehicles demonstrates that people are embracing electricity as a fuel and electric drive as an option to the internal combustion engine," said Brian Wynne, president of the EDTA.

Michael Smyth, president of The Great Britains, said: "For us, the real opportunity will be in fact an 85-mph, 200-mile-range vehicle is developed and that's what we're really banking on. Without a question, alternative fuel vehicles continue to be a hot issue in this country." ■



Montgomery County Commissioner Ruth Damsker tests an electric car intended to whet appetites for next year's faster model.



Under the hood of a ZX40s — nothing but batteries.

James R. Matthews said.

"It feels like a cross between a car and a golf cart," said Thomas Jay Ellis, chairman of the Montgomery County Board of Commissioners. However, in terms of its utility, Ellis said that "a lot of our driving today is done at 25 or less in our city or suburban roads so it could be a perfect