

The road less traveled

Mid-valley a haven for electric vehicles

BY NANCY RASKAUSKAS
GO GREEN

Otmar Ebenhoech can take his orange 1974 Porsche from zero to 60 mph in less than five seconds, but as he pulls out onto Highway 34 on a recent afternoon and accelerates, there is no roaring engine or burning exhaust. As the bumper sticker in the back window explains, this car is "Powered by American electrons."

When he's not commuting between his south Corvallis home and work, Ebenhoech uses his electric vehicle as a test bed for new motor controllers at his company, Cafe Electric, just east of Corvallis on Eastgate Circle. There, he and a small staff create and install their custom brand Zilla controllers.

"Really, this is just research and development," Ebenhoech said later while gesturing into what originally was the Porsche's engine compartment. Inside, instead of an engine and all of the things you would expect in a conventional car, there is a much smaller electric motor and its controller. Just above is another compartment lined with 20 batteries: the battery pack.

The basic mechanical premise is that the pack supplies the electric motor with the energy to get moving down the road while the controller regulates the amount of power from the batteries so that the engine doesn't burn out.

There are several types of batteries available with varying performance and cost, and owners must also routinely

plug their vehicles into a power source to recharge.

Most electric vehicles need very little maintenance, because the electric motor needs no oil and no tuneups.

However, all types of batteries have to be completely replaced every few years, and Ebenhoech cautions against buying an electric car to save money on gasoline.

"It's hard to recoup the cost of the initial conversion," he said.

This could be \$7,000 to \$12,000 in parts and labor each.

But, electric car owners have a lot of other reasons to drive electric. A common one is a desire to travel in a way that contributes to a sustainable lifestyle.

"The electric car is the only car I know of that the older it gets, the cleaner it is," said Ebenhoech.

His car is just one example of the variety of electric vehicles on mid-valley roads.

Some people take their electric car technology further.

Gary Oliver, who owns Alpha Omega Computer Systems, drives a 1981 Subaru van that he hasn't plugged in for a charge since January. He doesn't need to, because it is outfitted with solar panels on the roof rack that recharge the batteries.

Standing in the parking lot of Peak Internet, in Corvallis, with friend and fellow electric vehicle driver Alan Batie, he gives another reason for driving electric vehicles.

"We're geeks," said Oliver. And it's true, in addition to the environmental benefits there is a certain appeal to owning a special piece of technology.

Oliver hopes for continued development and production



Otmar Ebenhoech shows off the Zilla converter in the trunk of his 1974 Porsche. Ebenhoech's Corvallis company, Electric Cafe, manufactures and repairs the converters that allow for high performance from batteries in electric cars. It can go from zero to 60 miles per hour in less than five seconds.

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of electric vehicles in the coming years, so that prices come down and more people have access to electric cars.

"I look forward to the day when the state will have to figure out a way to get electric cars to pay the fuel tax," said Oliver.



■ **ELECTRIC CARS:** To participate in conversations about electric vehicles join the Corvallis electric vehicle club listserv. To sign up see: <http://lists.evcl.com/listinfo.cgi/corvallisevclub-evcl.com>.



Otmar Ebenhoech sits in his 1974 Porsche, which he converted into an electric vehicle in the late '90s to test converters from his company, Electric Cafe.

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