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Car-lite

Sacramentans cruise the grid in their electric cars

By [Ellen Cochrane](#)This article was published on [05.24.07](#).

When she floats down the street, men's eyes narrow and women smile. There's no macho rumble under the hood but, well, she's cute. She lacks the punch of a Detroit muscle car, but at under \$10,000 and \$0.02 a mile, even men agree that the neighborhood electric vehicle (NEV) is one sweet ride.

If you live and work within the flat, well-paved grid of central Sacramento and its neighborhoods, it's possible to forget hybrids and go totally electric right now. So what's the problem?

Simply put, it's mindset. We want to be green. We want to diffuse oil politics. But Detroit brainwashing has us thinking that we must drive 70 mph on posh leather seats in humongous SUVs. With gas creeping up to \$4 per gallon and affordable, full-sized alternate-fuel cars barely visible in the distant future, it's time to get smart about city driving.

Sacramento could be an NEV paradise. These petite, lightweight, low-speed cars can zip into a Safeway parking slot, park and charge for free in city garages and cruise smugly past the pumps. It's the gap car that could carry us through the lean years until major automakers drop the price of full sized plug-ins. And it's oh so cheap!

Harvard Fong of East Sacramento saw the solution years ago. He went NEV in 2002. "Going electric in Sacramento is not about replacing your internal-combustion engine. We use our other car for long trips. The NEV is our second-car option. It's all about saving money." Fong drives a GEM e2 to work and parks at the 10th and I streets city of Sacramento lot. It takes about six hours to charge his car and it has a range of 35 miles. "I got it because I'm cheap," he laughed. "But really, there's not a reason to burn gas around town. My NEV fills a great niche. Putting around the neighborhood eats gas."



The Wrights were the first Sacramentans speeding over to Davis Electric Cars to buy a new Zap Xebra. SN&R PHOTO BY LARRY DALTON

NEV incentives:

Free parking with an EV parking pass in some City of Sacramento lots. Free charging station available in Lot I.

A "zero emissions vehicle" decal means free parking and charging in lots throughout California.

SMUD offers a discount rate on electricity used to recharge NEVs during off-peak hours.

Farmer's Insurance is offering the first ever discount for those who drive alternative fuel vehicles. Save five percent.

Federal income tax credit of \$5,000 for some NEVs bought between 2006 and 2010.

Visit www.DriveClean.ca.gov for more info.

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Fong saves approximately \$155 in monthly parking fees and he never has to smog his car. His registration is about \$125 and insurance is minimal.

A neighbor of Fong's, David Wright, waited patiently for NEVs to go on sale in the local area. "My wife and I were looking for the technology for a long time. When Davis Electric Cars opened up in April, we were the first people from Sacramento to get the Xebra," he said. "It's great for us. My wife crosses the J Street bridge in her commute."

Local availability has been an issue, but Davis Electric Cars now has various makes and 13 vehicles in stock. The best-selling manufacturer of NEVs, Global Electric Motorcars, also identifies local dealers in Elk Grove, Roseville and Folsom through its Web site, www.gemcar.com.

But what is it really like to drive one of these cars in Sacramento? On a sunny weekend, I test-drove three NEVs. They were all 110-volt plug-ins. The four wheelers' top speed was a measly 25 mph, but three-wheelers could hit 40 mph. It was an adjustment to slow down, but not a burden. Honestly, I was just plain giddy over the money I could save. The NEV can drive on all roads posted 35 mph and cross roads posted 45 mph. Manufacture-supported repairs are easy, but rarely needed. Near-freezing weather can be hard on the batteries and may take you off the road for a couple of days a year.

Karma

Ahh! The queen: the Zenn car. People gave me thumbs up and waved. Sun roof, air conditioning, bells and whistles, all at 25 mph. This luxury, about-town car has trunk space and is roomy. The four-wheeler's ride is smooth and it handles well, but it's the priciest on the lot. Base cost is \$12,750.

A Gem

My favorite. The GEM car is perky, roomy and handles really well. The front windshield is generous and gave me a great road view. The word "golf cart" does come to mind, but the design really elevates the look. It's got the colors and the curves of a traditional American car. You can buy this car without doors, or soft doors, but don't. Get the hard doors. The four-wheeler comes in two-, four- or six-seat versions. Base cost is \$7,620.

Model X

At Davis Electric Cars, the salesman didn't ask for my driver's license and let me test drive alone. But, then again, where exactly was I going to go with a lime-green, three-wheeled NEV? The Zap Xebra is a low-to-the-ground, eggish vehicle. Climbing in is easy enough, but leg room is spare. It's a three-wheeler with a top speed of 40 mph, which makes it a little more street flexible. Xebra is not for the joint challenged. The frame rattled like castanets and it's cramped. Speed, dependability and economy are its strengths. It starts at \$9,950.

My experience was exhilarating. For once, I knew that I wasn't a cog in the oil cartel's machine. It's not often you can drive your car and feel like you're doing the right thing.