



Electric car on the slow track

Ontario may let tortoises on the road if they meet new standards
By JONATHAN JENKINS, QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU

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Help is on the way for struggling automakers in Ontario.

No -- not those struggling automakers from Detroit with their smoggy SUVs and corporate jets -- but Canada's builders of low-speed electric vehicles (LSVs), the perky but unproven technology that could jumpstart the green economy.

"LSVs are a new kind of vehicle and it will take a new set of standards to allow them to be safely driven on Ontario roads," Transportation Minister Jim Bradley said after releasing a National Research Council study on the vehicles' safety earlier this month.

"Based on the study results -- and after consulting with manufacturers, municipalities and stakeholders -- we plan to announce LSV safety standards and the rules of the road for LSVs this winter."

LSVs are powered by electric motors and rechargeable batteries and reach a top speed of 40 km/h.

They are currently allowed only in parks, some university campuses and gated communities but a recent pilot project in Quebec is unleashing them on public roadways, provided they have additional safety features.

BACKED STINKPOTS

Prior to Bradley's announcement, Ontario had been in the awkward position of favouring massive public expenditures in support of traditional car makers, whose products create most of the smog that's choking Toronto and contributing to 9,500 deaths a year in the province, while effectively blocking an alternative in LSVs.

Ontario's own ZENN cars (Zero Emission, No Noise) had to build a factory in Quebec to make its product, which can't legally be used in the company's home province.

"Those of us in the electric vehicle business appreciate the province's commitment to getting LSVs on the road, and its commitment to consult with the industry before making the final rules," said Mike Elwood, of Azure Dynamics and chairman of Electric Mobility Canada.

"Ontario is moving in the right direction."

The major concern for LSVs in mixed traffic is how the slow-moving and light electric car would do in a collision with a heavier, faster gas-powered car or truck.

There are also concerns that the slower electrics will cause more collisions because of their speed, and that their silent engines could pose a problem for cyclists and pedestrians.

In Quebec, LSVs have to have window defoggers, three-point seat belts, windshield wipers, doors and slow-moving vehicle markers.

The NRC recommends Ontario consider tougher standards, including seat belt anchors, occupant protection, front and rear brakes and safety glass in all windows.

<http://www.torontosun.com/news/canada/2008/12/29/7869716-sun.html>