

Sep 18, 2007

Going electric: Teen converts car to save gas money

By Erin Britton
McClatchy Newspapers

By now, teenagers are very practiced at complaining about climbing gas prices and lamenting the fate of the environment, but how much do we really do in our daily lives to reduce our nefarious carbon footprint? Do we turn off the lights when we leave a room? Bike to the grocery store? How about converting a gas-powered car to electric?

That is the undertaking of Bart Grabman, a senior at Stellar Secondary School in Anchorage, Alaska. His great idea to convert his car began where most great ideas begin, with a need.

“We have a class called Passages, and in that course everyone’s supposed to pick a project or idea that they want to expand and do something big with, and so I thought, ‘What’s something awesome that I can do?’” Grabman recalls.

As a member of Alaska Youth for Environmental Action, or AYEA, Grabman remembered a visiting speaker who had talked about converting his own truck to electric, so he decided to attempt the project himself.

The journey began for Grabman on the Internet: “There was a lot of research on cars, figuring out what I need to get, what I need to do, a lot of going on forums and talking to people.”

Then came finding a car — a cheap one — which Grabman describes as one of the greatest challenges. Then getting a manual on how to convert gas cars to electric, and finding the parts, all the while getting a crash course in car maintenance.

The greatest obstacle of all, as is often the case, is “mostly just money,” Grabman says. “If you have a lot of money it’ll be easy.” For instance, you won’t have to search for a month for a cheap car that is also in a somewhat serviceable condition. And it would be no problem at all to shell out the \$8,000 for electric car parts.

On that front, Grabman considers himself lucky. After a few weeks of looking, he found an electric car part kit on eBay for around \$3,500. Still, it is the rare teenager who has thousands of dollars sitting around, so finding financial support became necessary.

“People have been pretty supportive of the idea. I’ve gotten a lot of people who have offered to help and want to help out in any way they can,” says Grabman, who has gotten some donations from the Stellar parent group and from family and friends. “But mostly I just owe my mom a lot of money right now.”

But for all the costs, there are substantial benefits to owning an electric car.

According to Drive-Clean.ca.gov, electric vehicles (EVs) reduce pollutants by 90 percent compared to the cleanest gas-powered vehicles, even when factoring in emissions from power plants that produce the car’s

necessary electricity. Not to mention that their owners will never have to pay for gas again.

But with a do-it-yourself price tag of at least \$4,000, do the benefits outweigh the costs? For Grabman, the answer is an unhesitating yes.

“It’s a school project, it’s a learning project,” he says, un-concerned about whether the car will pay for itself in saved trips to the gas pump. “It’s about the process and the product, not just one or the other.”

Grabman, who hopes to complete his car by the beginning of the school year, recommends the project to science classes or individuals with the time, money and inclination. Mechanical prowess, or lack thereof, should not be a discouragement, says Grabman, who before this claims to have know nothing about cars except “how to drive them.”

“It’s been an interesting experience trying to figure it out, like, Oh, I guess I shouldn’t have taken that out. I didn’t really know what I was doing when I started, which is what kind of made the project so much fun. I’m not done with it, so I’m still learning a lot.”

It is rare to find a project in which the journey is as rewarding as the final result, not to mention one that helps the environment while saving you gas money. As EVs gain popularity, converting to electric may well become the way of the future.

For more photos and info about Bart’s electric conversion project, go to bart-sev.livejournal.com.

Erin Britton will be a senior in School-Within-A-School at East High School in Anchorage, Alaska.