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UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

news BY JUSTIN GAST

Riding Cheap

Junction City man designs efficient, inexpensive transportation.

Honda Insight: $21,500. Toyota Prius: $21,000. Ford Escape Hybrid SUV: $27,000. Knowing that your cost-efficient, environmentally friendly motorized bike will pass all those hybrid cars up as they sit, stalled in local traffic: priceless.

Oregon's average gas prices continue to hover at record highs. And as individuals continue to brook, spending their entire week's pay just to fuel up and drive to and from work, the news just doesn't get any better. Not only will local residents pay an extra two cents more at the pump with the city's gas tax currently being raised to a nickel per gallon, but with Lane County proposing an additional seven cent tax on top of that to help pay for needed road repairs, can we really afford to drive anymore?

Rick Mendes is a graying, austere 50-year-old man with a knack for science and the aplomb attitude to perfect it within everything he touches. Mendes hopes that his latest invention, a motorized bicycle, will help lessen the burden on local drivers.

"My motivation has always been to build alternative electric transportation that doesn't go necessarily fast, but will get you around town for really cheap," says Mendes. "The pollution problem now is enough to gag you. And as a nation, we're just killing ourselves with all the gas-powered machinery that's made available to us."

Originally inspired five years ago by a European made electric bike that he had witnessed on the Internet, Mendes, an auto body repairman, quickly began thinking science as he sketched a bike that he knew would work for local residents. Eventually, after years of trial and error production within his quaint two-car Junction City garage shop, Mendes believes he's finally produced a means of transportation that will benefit both people and the environment.

His black and gray Moto-Glide Kustom Kruiser has an attached mono-shock suspension trailer that houses three 30-month batteries (a combined 36 volts at 85 amp hours and a top speed of 20 mph). Mendes guarantees that the bike is safe for everyone to ride and enjoy.

"It's just as safe to ride this as it would be to ride a regular bicycle," says Mendes. "And if you live within 20 miles of work or your desired destination, then this bike is perfect for you."

Other components adorning the bike include: a speedometer/ odometer gauge; a handmade front headlight; a small backup light fitted with it's own generator (in case the main one fizzles out); and a motorcycle-like throttle and brake system mounted on the handlebars. Currently, Mendes is working on a dome-like compartment to enclose the batteries and provide storage for tubes, wrenches and other bike maintenance necessities. A back compartment will be big enough for bags of groceries.

"Outside of the motor and controller, which I have to order through shops or off the Internet, I try to keep everything local, buying as many of the parts as I can from local bicycle shops," says Mendes.

He estimates a total operation cost of about 30 cents a day. "Depending on how much you were going to ride the bike, the most you'd pay to operate and maintain it would be around $100 to $130 a year. And that's driving the bike at around 40 total miles a day," says Mendes. "If you are going to be using the bike everyday, then the batteries will be good for about a year, year and a half."

Eventually, Mendes hopes that individuals will become interested in the bikes and that he can mass-produce them out of a local shop with local workers. Keeping everything within the community is important to Mendes.

"I just feel we need to see more environmentally friendly vehicles such as these electric bikes or electric cars on our streets," says Mendes. "This isn't just a quiet, non-polluting, efficient, cost-effective mean of transportation. It's a fun way to transport about the town, especially when the weather's great, instead of sitting in a gas-burning car, waiting in traffic as you try to get to work or home."

Mendes says there are one or two bugs left to work out before he considers the bike perfect. but he guarantees the bike will be perfected this summer.

Individuals interested in the bikes, or with questions concerning the bikes, are asked to contact Mendes at his e-mail address, *superrick@comcast.net* EW