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Homemade electric car readies to ride

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James Boncek's 1993 Toyota Tercel is missing its hub caps, could use a paint job, and has almost 220,000 miles on it. While it may not look like much, it's got it where it counts.

That includes 900 lbs. of batteries in the reinforced trunk, the removal of the original gas engine, and the implementation of a new electric engine that runs almost completely silent. The Tercel can get up to 50 miles on a single charge with a high speed of 60 to 70 mph. All of this was installed by Boncek himself.

"This is something I've been wanting to do for a very long time -- 3 or 4 years now," said Boncek. "I've had this idea and I just haven't been in the financial or physical position to do it."

He added, "I suppose my primary motivation is that I know this is a possibility and it kills me to go to the gas pump every week."

Boncek has an associate's degree in automotive technology, and he took a course in natural gas where he had to convert an engine. It was a totally different procedure than converting a car from gas to electric, but it showed that it's possible.

"People need to see that this is a reality and it can be done, and the auto manufacturers just aren't doing it," he said. "That said, I needed to make a choice. On a daily basis we all wake up and make choices. I could go to the gas pump or I can choose to have an electric car, and I'm fortunate enough to have the knowledge, skills and abilities to do so, so

that's what I did."

A number of electric cars, such as the luxurious Tesla Roadster and the comparatively practical Chevy Volt have been receiving headlines over the past year, and electric cars are scheduled to reach the mass market next year. The Toyota Prius and Honda Civic Hybrids use electricity to improve mileage, but still rely on gasoline.

Like the pricey Tesla Roadster, which can cost upwards of \$100,000, Boncek's trusty converted Tercel is also strictly electric. It takes about six to eight hours to charge, and it cost pennies on the dollar compared to gasoline. The engine is also environmentally friendly since there are no emissions.

Now that the initial investment of 200-400 hours of work and \$10,000 for parts has been completed, very little maintenance will need to be made in the future.

"There are no oil changes," said Boncek. "There's no tune-ups -- no spark plugs. No wires. There's nothing to it. You got your suspension system. Transmission, which is a manual. The clutch is fine and gets used very little in an electric car and you have your batteries. That's it."

From a concept to a car

Boncek first purchased the car in 2004 from a friend. It was practically a giveaway at cost of \$100. All it needed was a new pair of tires and it was ready for the road. Since then, he's put 40-50,000 miles on the car. When it came time for some repairs, he decided to pursue the idea of an electric car that had been in his mind for years.

"The stars aligned and I was ready to make this happen," he said.

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Keeping such a worn car for a pricey project isn't something most people would think of doing, but to Boncek it was just another way of recycling.

"She's a great little ride, and why throw it to the dump when you can bring it back to life?"

Boncek works as the technical director at the Fairfield Theater Company and does a variety of freelance work, and he developed some contacts that helped make his plan become possible.

He knew some people from MXenergy, a Stamford-based natural gas and electricity company, and he sought their sponsorship. They enthusiastically agreed to help fund the endeavor. Boncek notes this made the project possible since the costs would have been too great on his own.

For MXenergy, this was an educational opportunity.

"There are no plans to go into electric car manufacturing," said Paul Lavallee, marketing director of the company, who added, "It's a means to educate consumers that it's important to think of how electrical efficiency might fit into our future."

One last Step

The customized Tercel runs, but it isn't street legal just yet. Either this week or next Boncek will have it towed to the Department of Motor Vehicles in Wethersfield for inspection. If it's approved, then the car will be registered and ready to go.

"I'm almost done," he said.

His Geico insurance covers the car, but not the \$10,000 worth of parts, so he's going to check out other options.

Throughout the four-month process, he received a

lot of help from some online communities that have done similar conversions. One person even converted their Tercel, so Boncek received a lot of information from him.

"With the guys I've spoken to online, they've designed the vehicle to meet their needs and maybe they need to drive 60 miles to work, and they work out charging outlets so they can drive 60 miles back, but they do it."

Boncek's commute is about five miles each way. Once the car becomes street legal, he could just barely make it to work and back for the entire week without having to charge it up. For longer drives, he has a Volkswagen Jetta with its original engine intact.

"It's a small [online] community for sure, but because it's so small, it's also important that those who do it go out and talk about it" and show to the rest of the world that it's possible," he said.

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