

Hybrids becoming highly popular as gas prices rise

BY CAROL SOUTH

Special to the Record-Eagle

Sixty-three miles per gallon. Tom Mair's record for best gas mileage clocked in at that jaw-dropping rate after an extended cruise around hilly Leelanau County in his hybrid Honda Civic.

Typically, the Traverse City resident and his wife, Susan Odgers, note mileage in the 30-40 miles per gallon range in their 2003 hybrid which features a gasoline engine as well as an electric motor that cuts in when driving at lower speeds. The electric motor also automatically recharges the battery — situated behind the back seat — when braking or slowing down.

The result of this combination of gasoline and electricity is increased gas mileage and decreased pollution.

"It's gets about 10-12 miles per gallon better than my last car did at its best," said Mair, who purchased the car the first year the model was available. "Going downhill, you're charging the battery and

uphill you're using its battery, extra energy coming off the electric motor."

Personal savings at the gas pump were not the primary motivation for Mair, head of the Traverse City Watershed Greens and a passionate environmentalist. He has organized Alternative Fairs in Traverse City for the past two summers and is contemplating initiating a hybrid car road rally with a prize for the highest gas mileage.

Believing that oil eventually will run out, sooner than later, and unhappy how the country's demand for oil impacts foreign policy, Mair is determined to minimize gasoline consumption. In addition, the hybrid car's reduced emissions reduce pollution from exhaust.

"It's a political statement; I think hybrid cars are the cars of the future," he said. "One of the things we have to stress to people thinking about buying a hybrid is the air pollution — it's not just about saving gasoline."

In addition to Honda, which

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Tom Mair with his hybrid Honda Civic. Mair chooses to drive a hybrid vehicle for political as well as economic reasons.

offers also offers the Accord and Insight, hybrid gasoline-electric models are available from Toyota, Chevrolet, Lexus and Ford. Styles include economy cars, sedans, pick-ups, mini-SUVs and luxury SUVs — offering something for everyone.

Automakers have been increasingly emphasizing the manufacturing and sales of hybrid vehicles. This month in news reports, the chairman and CEO of Ford Motor Company, William Ford, declared that half of his company's models would offer a gas-electric hybrid version by 2010.

Locally, where environmental interest runs high, consumers are "super excited" about hybrids, said Dan Isaac of Grand Traverse Auto in Traverse City. Ford released the mini-SUV Escape in 2004 and the Mercury Mariner last



July. The latter vehicle is on a four-month backorder.

"It surprised me, frankly," said Isaac, in sales for 18 years. "I expected to see good acceptance on hybrids, but since they've come out we've always been trying to play catch up — they've sold before we get them in."

Hybrid gasoline-electric cars cost more than standard models, Mair said, noting he paid approximately \$4,000 more for

his hybrid Civic than a standard model. While lowered gasoline costs help offset the increased cost of a hybrid car, it is at a rate that could take a few years to achieve, even with skyrocketing gas costs.

"Even with gas costs, it's probably not going to pay for itself," he said of his car, which was rated at 48 mpg in city driving and 47 mpg for highway driving.

However, the government has stepped in with tax incentives to help offset the increased sticker price. When Mair purchased his car, he took a \$2,000 deduction on his federal taxes, part of a government incentive to promote the vehicles. Mair also noted that Michigan Representative Dave Camp is proposing a package of tax incentives for alternative energy and hybrid vehicles.

This price difference has illustrated to Isaac a thread of a larger social commitment among some of his purchasers. They have a vision bigger than their personal pocketbook or concerns about the environment.

"I've heard the comment, 'One of the reasons that I'm

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