

## Who Killed the Electric Car?

On Sunday, October 29, The Salt Spring Island Energy Strategy Task Force sponsored a special showing of the documentary film "Who Killed the Electric Car?," followed by a panel discussion. The film was a riveting case study of why solutions to the energy crisis are so hard to implement. Electric cars seemed a logical part of the energy equation, with lower consumption than internal combustion engines and no tailpipe emissions in the bargain. They were made available on a limited basis by the auto industry - primarily in response to a California "Clean Air" regulation, but the industry claimed there was no market for the cars. The car manufacturers pulled them off the roads and ceased production when the regulations were rescinded by the California Air Resources Board. The owners of the electric cars fought to keep them, having been sold on their advantages, but in the end the cars were scrapped, "the body was disposed of." In looking at this "Environmental Crime," the film fingers several suspects: the consumer, the auto industry, the oil industry, the government, the California Air Resources Board, and even the hydrogen fuel cell, touted by the industry as a better alternative. Of these, only the Battery is absolved. Stan and Iris Ovshansky, inventors of the battery technology used in the General Motors EV1 car, had their company bought out by oil company interests. Frustrated in their goal of large scale production for the transportation industry, they now focus on photovoltaic technology. Even though battery technology has improved, electric cars are a rarity. The environmentally-conscious auto buyer, a growing sector of the market since more of us "get it" now, is forced to consider the gas-electric "hybrid".

The Fritz Theater was packed out for this event, and viewers were shocked, angered and even saddened by the missed opportunity and unwanted waste symbolized by the heaps of crushed cars. The panel that followed the film focussed on local issues and realistic solutions. There was as much interest and expertise in the audience as at the front of the room, and Bob Weeden, the moderator, kept the discussion flowing. Gordon English shared his experiences with electric car conversions - you can have an electric vehicle tomorrow, if you want. A truck or car can be switched over to electric by a BC company, Canadian Electric Vehicles, for about \$15,000. There was a comment that range and battery life are still problematic, but they still seem suited for Island use. It was also noted that there are a few electric vehicles commercially available, mostly "Neighborhood Electric Vehicles" (NEVs) that are designed for limited range (100km) and speed (40km/hr). The Dynasty Electric Car Company, in Delta, BC manufactures an NEV that is in use on Mayne Island, and might become a Salt Spring alternative to the popular "Smart Car." As an NEV, however, these cars and trucks can only be used on roads posted at 60km/hr or less, so that the speed limit on some Island roads would have to be reduced, possibly upsetting some residents who are used to racing to Fulford Ferry. Other commenters noted that the substitution of alternative vehicles still perpetuates the use of cars, creates consumption and waste (including spent batteries) and inhibits the support for (or in Salt Springs' case the institution of) viable public transportation. Chris Dixon, who recently advertised in the Driftwood seeking car co-op members, shared innovative ideas such as car-sharing and ride-sharing programs, and several existing models were identified, such as the Victoria Carshare Coop. There was excitement about the possibility of working through the Cooperative Auto Network, and many islanders said they are willing to set up or participate in future projects.

Gary Holman of the Capital Regional District (CRD) talked about a new bylaw in the works that will establish a Transportation Commission on Salt Spring Island. When it is up and running, hopefully this spring, the CRD will have a mechanism to better address transportation issues, and more importantly, receive and distribute funding from the provincial gas tax. He identified improved infrastructure for walking and cycling as a priority. The target area for projects is focussed on safer and easier travel from Ganges Village Market down to Rainbow Road and out past the schools to the site of the new pool/recreation center. A consultant is currently working on a design for public input. Gary also discussed the state of public transportation on the Island, a situation he termed "very sad" in that five years ago there were significant start up subsidies available. Seventy-five communities in this province have received money, but that funding source has dried up. He identified the need for a transportation referendum to get the money flowing again. Meanwhile, there is a proposal that has been made to BC Transport for a \$200,000 annual subsidy. Even if partially funded it could be the basis for a Island public transportation system, which the CRD

board has in principle, agreed to administer. Gary noted that two private operators started up public transport that failed to stay in business, so a subsidy is essential. In response to comments about "informal public transport" e.g., hitchhiking, Gary said that the new CRD Transportation Commission could address the liability issues that have stymied the launching of planned rideshare projects. Lastly, Gary noted that electric bicycles have been approved for use on the trail system, promoting their utility as alternative transportation.

Jean Gelwicks emphasised the need for the new Commission when she talked next about developing trails and pathways, where liability and funding are barriers to implementation. The need and desire for a system connecting the entire island has been well established, and preliminary work has already begun. The CRD Parks and Recreation Commission (PARC) Urban Trail Taskforce has a goal in mind: you could walk out your door, connect to a neighborhood trail circuit, and that would in turn connect to other circuits that could access every part of the island. Pathways, which run alongside of roadways, are a priority as well. The Island Pathways Group is creating a path in the GVM area that will provide a safe alternative to walking on the roadway shoulder. The vision is that Salt Springs trails will link Fulford, Ganges and Vesuvius and in turn be linked to the Regional Trail System's Vancouver Island circuit. Elizabeth White provided a rationale for car reduction strategies, pointing to the "transportation slice" of Salt Spring Island's energy pie chart. She explained that public transportation and trails and paths that promote walking and cycling are all interdependent. She also had some hard figures: in order to maintain our vehicle emissions at 2002 levels, 23 heavy commercial vehicles and over 600 cars would have to disappear from the Island overnight. One bright spot is that 12% of new car registrations on Salt Spring have been gas-electric hybrids (37) or "Smartcars" (22).

The next panelist, Dorothy Cutting, urged everyone to read the book Heat: How to stop the Planet from Burning, by George Monbiot, which she recently reviewed for the Salt Spring Island Energy Strategy Task Force Newsletter. The Author declares that by 2030 a 90% emission reduction is needed to stave off a climate crisis. Dorothy warned that this need to reduce, or the failure to do so, will make the future radically different. We have to overcome our resistance to change - if no fossil fuels are available, electric vehicles will be a necessity, not merely an option. Lowering the local speed limits to a maximum of 60km/hr would be a change, but would benefit the Island. Dorothy also stressed that community effort, neighborliness and "local solidarity" will be required to save the planet. We are lucky that those things are an abundant local resource. Salt Spring Island is also fortunate to have several proponents of Biofuels, and a local provider, Pretzel Motors. The last panelist, Jan Stinman, driver of the "Veggie Van Gogh" truck, spoke about the tradeoffs (Food/Fuel) posed by increasing ethanol production, touting the use of waste vegetable oil, and waste biomass. He called biofuels "silver BB's" - not a silver bullet that will solve the lack of fossil fuels, but something that can be produced locally, and is more sustainable. There were several questions about biofuel use and vehicle conversion, and a "nuts and bolts" discussion was still going on when time was called.

"Who Killed the Electric Car?" drew a capacity audience who came specifically to hear the panel and contributed to the informed and spirited discussion. There were a lot of suggestions, a lot of energy (pun intended) and a sense that the Island is aware of the need to get serious about the climate crisis, and is looking at ways to do so. It was noted several times during the discussion that the Official Community Plan (OCP) revision and other ongoing planning processes will provide an opportunity for us to address the energy challenge. The Salt Spring Energy Strategy Task Force will be organizing more events to keep the community engaged in this effort, including an Alternative Energy Transportation Fair, scheduled for Spring 2007. For information on other energy initiatives, check out the Task Force website at [www.saltspringenergystrategy.org](http://www.saltspringenergystrategy.org). There is also information on rebates that are available for people living on Salt Spring, as pilot in the Community Action on Energy Efficiency (CAEE) program. If you want to more information on the Salt Spring Island Energy Strategy Task Force, or be included on the task force list serve and receive the electronic newsletter, e-mail [marionpape@telus.net](mailto:marionpape@telus.net).