

For release: Immediate

Electric car prototype built in Wabash

WABASH, Ind. -- Indiana's first electric car designed to be affordable for the masses will be built in the world's first electrically lighted city -- Wabash.

The car's electric propulsion system is the creative effort of two Indianapolis businessmen who were introduced to Bill Konyha, president and CEO of the Economic Development Group of Wabash County, who in turn introduced them to Norm Benjamin, who in turn introduced them to the world outside Indianapolis.

The Indianapolis connection consists of John Johnson, 58, president and CEO of ClearFlex Automotive Technologies, and Adam Goldstein, 39, the company's chief technical officer.

The Wabash connection is Konyha and Benjamin, president of Bulldog Battery and Precision Battery Fabrication. Bulldog has been making industrial-strength batteries in Wabash since 1985.

"Our support of this project and our support for entrepreneurs is a continuation of the community's economic history," Konyha said. "Entrepreneurs gave us such industries as Honeywell Inc., The Ford Meter Box Co., Container Corporation and Diehl Machine, which was one of the earliest economic development projects in the history of Wabash County.

"It was our desire with this project to form a strategic alliance with Bulldog Battery, facilitating a customer for an existing local business while also creating economic and employment opportunities for the people and businesses in the county."

The ClearFlex move to Wabash happened in a time span of about 60 days. It currently operates out of rented space in Benjamin's PBF facility in the Wabash North Industrial Park.

The space in the 25,000-square-foot addition to the original building became available when PBF's tire rack business went away as car sales declined across the country and Bulldog's industrial battery business also declined as the U.S. economy struggled. Its workforce has been cut in half.

But Benjamin has a reputation for being an innovator and "can do" person. When presented with an idea, he doesn't focus on the negatives or why it can't work. His attitude is "How can we make it work?"

Johnson and Goldstein had traveled around the country and across the Internet in search of the “perfect” battery to power their electric propulsion system. “And we found it,” Johnson said. “We had the perfect battery.

“Then we talked to Norm, and he came up with a better idea,” he added. “Our perfect battery became pathetic.

“We feel fortunate to be here (in Wabash),” Johnson added, “but it was the Bulldog product that Norm came up with that makes this possible. His facility here and downtown and the craftsmanship is hard to find.

“You won’t find this kind of craftsmanship and ‘I can do that’ attitude anywhere else.”

“The cooperation here (in Wabash) has been phenomenal,” Goldstein said. “New concepts, new ideas that would take days, even weeks, to turn around elsewhere, Norm makes happen in hours.

He and Johnson agreed that being in Wabash had put the project at least six months ahead of schedule.

What ClearFlex does is take a standard 2,400-2,600-pound compact car, be it a Ford Focus, Chevy Cobalt or Toyota Corolla, and take out everything that has to do with the internal combustion engine, which amounts to between 500 and 700 pounds. That includes the engine, exhaust system, emissions system and radiator. They even take out the spare tire.

You don’t need that stuff anymore and they need the room for the lead-acid batteries, the oldest type of rechargeable batteries. Those batteries will be located throughout the car. About half of them will be located where the spare tire and exhaust system were located. Another bank of cells will take up the space gained in the engine compartment.

Cells will also be located in the fender wells, something Chrysler is already doing. Audi puts its battery underneath the rear seat.

When it’s all said and done, the car will be the weight of a mid-size car and drivers will get the added advantage of a smoother ride.

“This is an electric car that no one has talked about – an electric car for the working class and middle-class family,” Johnson said. He estimated people could buy a new car up-fitted with the ClearFlex propulsion system for around \$25,000.

“The other electric cars you’re hearing about are being made with lithium batteries. They’re estimating those cars at \$80,000. People who can afford those kinds of cars aren’t worried about \$5-per-gallon gas.”

They can also retro-fit an existing car for as low as \$12,000 to \$15,000.

The ClearFlex propulsion system will be available for placement into new or used automobiles yet this year.

“While other companies in the electric car business have targeted sexy, we have looked to the real benefit of electric propulsion, which is utilitarian,” Goldstein added. “By leaving the manufacturing of the car to Ford, GM, Chrysler and Toyota, we can focus on electric propulsion for a combination of inexpensively mass-produced excellence.

And there’s even more good news. Lead-acid batteries and their plastic containers are both recyclable. Currently, “there is no infrastructure in the United States to recycle lithium batteries,” Benjamin said.

Lead-acid batteries are also safe. Cars have been using lead-acid batteries since Day 1.

The ClearFlex electric propulsion system is designed to take a car up to 100 miles without recharging the batteries. Goldstein said a U.S. Department of Transportation study shows that 75 percent of Americans travel less than 50 miles a day and 50 percent of those people travel less than 25 miles a day.

In its current configuration in Wabash, ClearFlex could turn out three electric cars per day. When production begins, a work station will consist of two lifts and three employees. Cars will come, be put up on one lift, get stripped of unnecessary parts, move across the aisle and go up on another lift for installation of the electric motor and batteries.

Goldstein envisions 15,000 cars per year would require 17 works stations and 51 employees. Up to 10 support personnel would also be required.

And, a successful venture would allow Bulldog Battery/PBF to add back to its workforce.

All parts taken off new cars go immediately back into the supply chain, Johnson said.

In addition to equipping cars with electric propulsion systems, ClearFlex also makes a flex-fuel module that allows regular cars and trucks to be retro-fitted to use E85 (ethanol) and/or regular gasoline. That part of the business will require nine employees at start-up and 17 by the end of the third year, Johnson said.

Konyha said Wabash was competing with several similar communities for the ClearFlex project.

“The skill sets and availability of an appropriate workforce were among the factors that put Wabash on the competitive map for this project,” he added. “Our performance and that of our people and businesses are what enabled us to win the competition.”

As Kim Pinkerton, president of the Wabash County Chamber of Commerce, reminded, “Wabash continues to be the birthplace of bright ideas.”

For more information about ClearFlex Automotive Technologies, Johnson and Goldstein can be reached by calling 1-800-443-3492.