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## Pump lets natural gas Civics go to market

By David Kiley, USA TODAY

DETROIT — Honda next year will begin mass-marketing natural-gas-powered Civics that will come with a device to fill the car's tank in the owner's garage.



Honda's Civic GX runs clean on natural gas, and owners can fill up at home.

It's the first time an automaker will sell a natural-gas vehicle broadly to the public. Up to now, sales have been mostly limited to specialized fleets such as airport vans and university campus vehicles.

Honda has sold 500 to 1,000 natural-gas Civic GX models a year since 1998 to customers such as the New York Department of Transportation, which owns 400. They are popular for commercial fleets that travel short distances and have their own designated filling stations.

"What's kept natural-gas vehicles from driveways is an easy, reliable way to refill, and we've got that now," says Stephen Ellis, head of Honda alternative vehicle sales.

Honda will sell an appliance, called a "Phill," with each Civic GX to fill the car's tank from the homeowner's gas line. Phill will cost \$2,000, but tax credits may knock the end-cost down to \$1,000. Civic GX will cost \$20,000, about the same as a hybrid gas/electric Civic.

Phill, made by Toronto-based Fuelmaker, requires eight hours to half-fill a vehicle, good for 100 miles. GX owners also can refill at approximately 1,300 natural-gas stations nationwide. Filling stations that dispense compressed natural gas under pressure can fill a tank in three to five minutes.

Honda views the market as mostly second and commuter cars. Ellis expects Civic GX sales, which will start in California, to follow the pattern of hybrid Civics. Honda sold 13,000 hybrids last year, and that many through July this year.

"We know we can eventually sell tens of thousands a year, but it wouldn't be possible without a home refueling option," Ellis says.

Running a vehicle on natural gas historically costs about 80% of what it costs to run on gasoline. Just as gasoline prices have spiked this year, so have those for natural gas. Tuesday's price of \$5.83 per million Btu is down from \$11.89 in February but still higher than the year-ago price of \$3.61.

Peter Beutel of energy consultant Cameron Hanover says the 80% price ratio to gasoline should hold up over time. "But you never know," he adds.



Honda views natural gas as a critical bridge to acceptance of hydrogen-powered vehicles it expects to sell in large numbers by 2015. By putting Phills in garages, Honda hopes people will accept the idea of a hydrogen fuel-cell generator in their garage later.

"Natural gas is an important transition step to hydrogen so people get used to filling up vehicles with gaseous fuel," says David Friedman of the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Compared with gasoline, natural gas emits 70% less carbon monoxide, 87% less nitrogen oxide and 20% less carbon dioxide.

The 'Phill' refueling device allows owners to fill their tanks at home.

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