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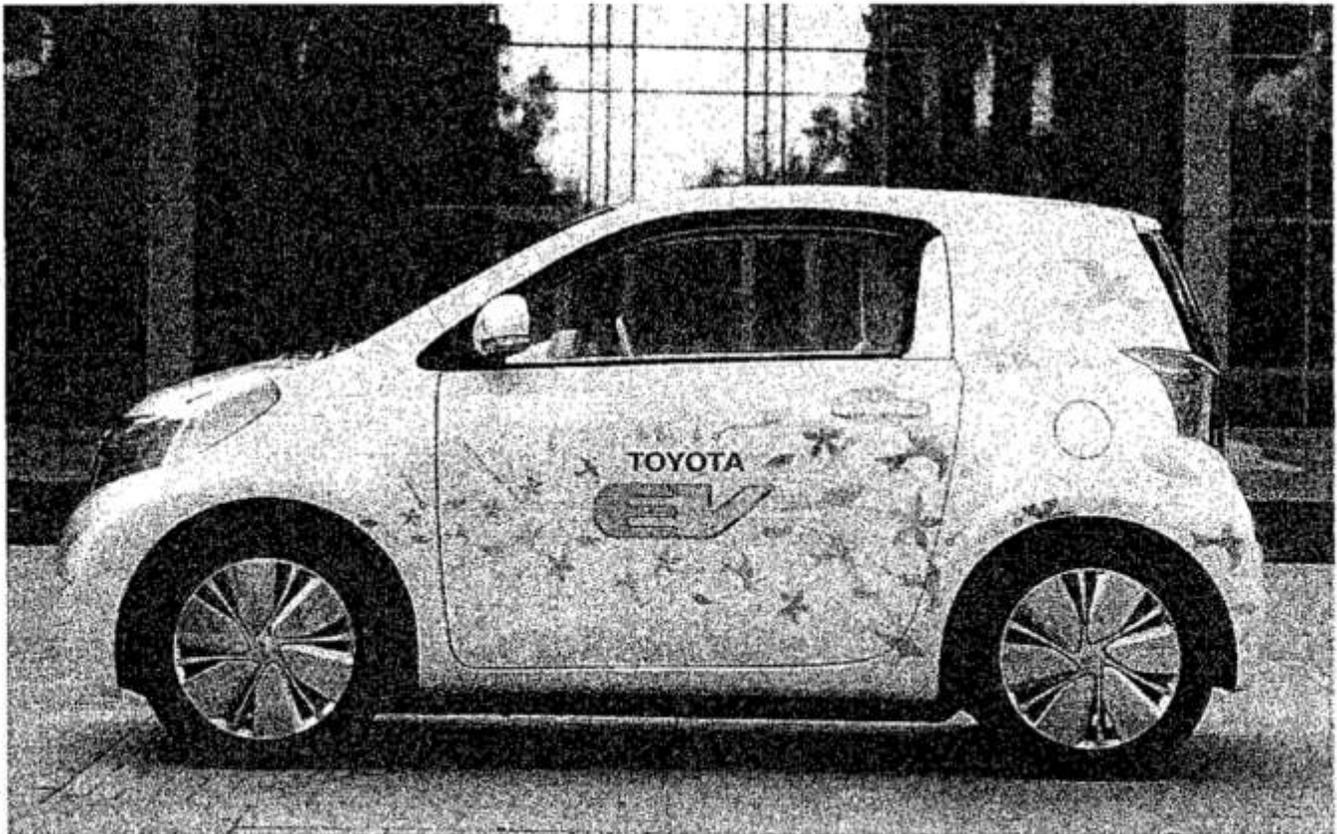
Expect a baby electric from Toyota

2009 Toyota FT-EV

By Trevor Hofmann, Canadian Auto Press February 3, 2009 6:06 AM

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2009 Toyota FT-EV.

Photograph by: Handout photo, Canadian Auto Press

Yes, this is what most of us think an electric car should look like. Small, eccentric, techno-geeky, Toyota's FT-EV has got all the right electric cues, and most importantly it confirms a battery-electric future for Toyota, one that the company says will become a reality in 2012.

Certainly, Toyota has partial-electric vehicles in its fleet now, dubbed hybrids. The Prius is by far the hybrid leader, making up for more than fifty-percent of global hybrid sales, while Toyota and its premium Lexus brand make a bevy of hybrids that are the envy of autodom. But so far Toyota is being left behind in the all-important plug-in hybrid segment, by Saturn of all companies. Not to worry, though, as 500 plug-ins are scheduled to arrive in late '09, if only for global lease-fleet customers.

The FT-EV is important in that, along with the compressed natural gas powered Camry Hybrid concept shown at the 2008 Los Angeles Auto Show in November, it signifies an expansion of green alternative powertrains for the hybrid brand.

"Now, more than ever, we cannot lose sight of our future," said Stephen Beatty, Managing Director at Toyota Canada Inc. "Nowhere is this more important than with our industry's duty and commitment to provide true sustainable mobility with vehicles that significantly reduce fuel consumption, our carbon footprint and overall greenhouse gases."

If you recognize the FT-EV's shape, it's basically Toyota's ultra-cool smart car fighting iQ (not available here yet) without the cool angular headlight clusters. Certainly, the new concept's gold light bar is kind of cool in its own way, if you're into that sort of thing, and it's a clear differentiator between the gasoline-powered internal combustion production car and this electrified urban commuter. Either way, it would be as much of a hit as the little four-place iQ is in Japan, where it's already on sale, just because it's cute and ultimately thrifty.

The FT-EV's target consumer is an urbanite who commutes about 80 km (50 miles) per day, and has somewhere (anywhere really) to plug it in for recharging. The market, while not as hungry for this type of vehicle as it would have been over the summer when gas prices spiked to record levels, has been prepared for the inevitable, when oil shoots back up to the nether regions of reality.

Whether that happens later this year or sometime in the distant future, oil appears to be a finite resource destined to deplete, and as its availability lessens the commodity markets will enjoy a nice ride up the board. Personally, I don't think there's a car buyer out in our current market who doesn't factor fuel economy into their purchase, the wounds of such high prices not necessarily still festering, but scar tissue remaining as a constant reminder of how things could easily sway to the negative.

"Last summer's dollar-thirty-a-litre gasoline was no anomaly. It was a brief glimpse of our future," said Beatty. "We must address the inevitability of peak oil by developing vehicles powered by alternatives to liquid-oil fuel, as well as new concepts, like the iQ, that are lighter in weight and smaller in size. This kind of vehicle, electrified or not, is where our industry must focus its engineering and innovation."

Toyota hasn't given up much information about what's inside its little FT-EV, but suffice it to say that the electric powertrain will be sustained by lithium-ion battery packs. The company owns 60-percent of Panasonic EV Energy Company, Ltd (PEVE) after all, a purchase that will help it reform its Prius from higher polluting nickel metal hydride batteries in coming years as well as power its upcoming fleet of plug-in hybrids (PHVs).

So get ready for a brand new future, and one that is going to happen whether you want muscle cars to rule the world or not. Let's face it, the only three car companies with new versions of traditional muscle at the Detroit show are currently fighting for their lives, and Toyota, despite suffering through the worst year of the 71 it's been in existence, remains on solid footings and fully capable of internally funding the world's automotive future.

Of course, there are other car companies too, and therefore alternatives to Toyotas alternative powertrains will be forthcoming in the future like they're already in our present, but companies the size of Toyota have the ability to create entire market segments, as it did with the Prius. Give Honda credit for its early attempt at an HEV, the somewhat sporty but totally useless Insight, and the others that have followed, but Toyota's Prius is responsible for creating the functional dedicated hybrid segment, and a testament to the car's brilliance is its rival's all-new Insight, a car that comes so close to mirroring the current Prius that it's emulation bordering on flattery.

The new FT-EV, however, is unique like the Prius, and without the ultra-kitsch gold exterior trim and decals-gone-wild visual statement would make a cute little runabout. Of course, outside of Toyota's inner circle, who's to say exactly what the proposed electric vehicle Toyota has in mind will look like when it comes down the pike in 2012, the launch date the automaker's national alternative-fuel vehicle manager, Bill Reinert recently announced. All in know is if it comes between the FT-EV and an electrified iQ, I'll take the latter.

Specifications (2009 FT-EV Concept):

Body Type: 2-door hatchback
Engine: electric motor
Battery: lithium-ion
Exterior Dimensions (L/W/H): 2,980 / 1,680 / 1,480 mm (117.3 / 66.1 / 58.3 in)
Seating Capacity: 3 (+ 1 child)
Website: www.toyota.ca

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