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Zenn called unsafe at low speed

Company, Transport Canada at odds. Footage of government crash tests shows electric vehicles suffering extensive damage

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Transport Canada and Zenn Motor Co. have been arguing for months about whether the company's low-speed electric vehicles should mix with regular cars on city streets.

The Zenn (Zero Emissions No Noise) vehicle - which company CEO Ian Clifford says will be on Quebec roads by the end of December - came under scrutiny after recordings of crash tests by Transport Canada were made public this week.

Clifford wouldn't reveal how many Zenn vehicles have been sold in Quebec, although the city of Montreal announced it had purchased one for the Côte des Neiges/Notre Dame de Grâce borough in September.

The footage, showing Zenn vehicles suffering significant damage in the tests, has raised concern about the safety of all low-speed vehicles.

It has also provoked a heated exchange between Clifford and Transport Canada, with the federal department claiming it published the images in the public interest.

Broadcast by the French-language television network TVA, the footage showed hoods flying off several low-speed vehicles as they were crashed into a wall at 40 kilometres an hour.

Legally, low-speed electric vehicles, which can go as fast as 40 kilometres an hour, don't have to pass federal crash tests.

Quebec is the only province to permit the use of low-speed vehicles on roads with speed limits of 50 kilometres an hour or less - under the auspices of a three year pilot project that began in June.

Unlike other manufacturers, Zenn has been pushing to have its vehicles rolling on city streets, even though they were designed for gated communities with little traffic, a Transport Canada official said.

"One low speed manufacturer has been quite vocal about getting their vehicles on the road with mixed traffic," said a Transport Canada official, who spoke on condition her name wouldn't be printed.

"We see that if (the low speed vehicles) are put with other cars that have higher safety standards, that are built more solidly, this is what can happen."

Clifford defended the performance of the Zenn, which is assembled in St. Jérôme

from chassis imported from France.

"Releasing these images without the statistical frame of reference is somewhat irresponsible on Transport Canada's part," Clifford fumed.

"Our assessment is that low-speed vehicles are among the safest vehicles on the road. I drive our vehicles all the time. I drive the vehicles with my children in them."

Of the more than 40,000 electric vehicles in circulation since 1996 in the United States - 12,000 of which are currently in use - there has never been a single fatality, he said.

While Clifford acknowledged that motorists have been injured while driving electric vehicles, he said most collisions are averted because of the low speeds.

The Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec, which is running the pilot project, said the Zenn is safe for motorists.

Spokesperson Audrey Chaput said the SAAQ was aware of the Transport Canada crash results from the project's start.

The video can be seen at www.tc.gc.ca/roadsafety/lsv.htm

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