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Theresa Lehman column: Hybrid cars help wallet and ecology

Today headline news is centered on two main issues: How are we going to reduce our dependency on foreign oil and how are we going to address the challenges associated with climate change?

Many think part of the solution may be our personal choice to drive a hybrid or a vehicle that uses alternative fuel technologies. But does it make sense?

Let's face it; the primary advantage of hybrids and alternative fuel technologies is improved fuel efficiency. As consumers, we are tired of the constant price increases at the pump — the solution — a more fuel- efficient vehicle.

So should you buy a flex fuel, hybrid, fuel cell, diesel, biodiesel or standard "fuel-efficient" vehicle? So many decisions, so many opinions, so many pros and cons and so little time to research and analyze.

So how do you decide which vehicle choice is going to make the most financial sense for you? That answer is going to be different based on how you answer the following three questions:

Do you know the differences in hybrid/alternative fuel technologies? If not, get to know them. There are major differences in fuel efficiency, the price of "fuel," the availability of fuel, the power, the reliability and the ownership costs.

A great Web site to visit is: http://autos.yahoo.com/green_center. It contains information such as the best green vehicles, technology, federal and state incentives and it even has a gas mileage calculator.

What are your driving/ comfort needs? Do you spend the majority of your time on the highway, or do you spend the majority of your time running errands and/or your kids around town? Do you spend your time driving (or should I say waiting in traffic) in large metropolitan areas with heavy traffic?

How many people do you travel with? Do you need to be able to haul items with your vehicle?

What is the total cost of vehicle ownership (i.e. life-cycle cost)? What is the initial cost of purchasing the vehicle? Are there any federal or state financial incentives? What is the cost of the "fuel" to operate the vehicle? What are the estimated miles per gallon? Does the vehicle require any specialized maintenance?

What is the durability of special parts, such as nickel metal hydride (NiMH) battery or lithium-ion (li-ion) battery? Can you perform the maintenance, or does it require an authorized mechanic with special tools or computerized equipment? Are there insurance discounts?

Depending on how you answer these questions, you will be able to determine which vehicle is the right choice for you. Sometimes you may even find out that your preconceived notions are incorrect.

Ultimately though, your decision could not only help save you money, but also assist in making our environment a more suitable place to live.

