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For the ecologically inclined, cars that go easy on energy

By -- Elina.Shatkin @latimes.com

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THE Alternative Car & Transportation Expo posits a world that looks like a green utopia styled like "The Jetsons." We trundle around on Segways, sip home-brewed beer and rendezvous with friends at neighborhood transit hubs.

To get there, we need people like transportation consultant Roy Reynolds.

"Here in Los Angeles and Orange County, we're the canary in the coal mine," Reynolds says. "We're going to reach a point when we just can't build any more rail lines, freeways or surface streets. Yet the population will continue increasing. As average transit times get longer, we will reach the tipping point where we have to consider public transit and personal rapid transit alternatives."

With its fun, futuristic zeal, the expo focuses on sustainability and urban planning, with 120 exhibits showcasing every imaginable alternative power source -- and a few you probably haven't imagined.

"When you go to the L.A. Auto Show, you'll see a little peek at the technology that's coming. Then they'll show you the same thing they had last year but with bigger cup holders, wider wheels and less miles per gallon," says Rick Sikes, fleet superintendent for the city of Santa Monica, which is co-sponsoring the event.

Santa Monica, of course, is about as green as it gets -- 81% of its municipal fleet, including heavy-duty vehicles such as trash and water service trucks, now runs on some sort of alternative energy.

Most common are natural gas and electric vehicles, but the expo will turn hydrogen, fuel cell, biodiesel, propane, ethanol and plug-in/hybrid technologies into crowd pleasers.

Aside from the gee-whiz factor of test-driving futuristic vehicles like Segways, fuel cell cars and the Vectrix electric motorcycle (which makes its West Coast debut at the expo), the centerpiece of the event is the Ecological Footprint exhibit. Attendees enter into a computer data about their lifestyles (the size of their homes, how much they drive, what they eat, what they buy, etc.), and in minutes they receive a report detailing their resource consumption.

"I think most Angelenos don't realize that alternative technologies aren't just something for the distant future," says activist Christine Dzilevalis, the expo's founder. "They have no idea about the vast amount of choices that exist or how they could incorporate these into their lives. If even a small fraction of the population was able to make a small lifestyle change, it would have a profound impact on the world."

ALTERNATIVE CAR & TRANSPORTATION EXPO

WHERE: Barker Hangar at Santa Monica Air Center, 3021 Airport Ave.

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday

PRICE: Free

INFO: (310) 390-2930; www.altcarexpo.com

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