



## No prizes, but Canadian firms win anyway

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

They won't collect any of the \$10 million prize money from the Progressive Insurance X Prize contest that concluded this week, but at least two Canadian teams who entered the competition to develop real-world, high-mileage vehicles, are already reaping other benefits.



JOE KNYCHA/FPR THE TORONTO STAR

OptaMotive of Stittville built one E-Rex prototype for the X Prize competition to showcase its battery management and drive systems.

A North American auto manufacturer has approached one to build and sell its vehicle, and both are negotiating the sale of their leading edge, high-tech battery management systems for auto industry use.

The X Prize goal was to encourage the private-sector development of roadworthy, appealing cars that attain at least 100 miles per U.S. gallon of gasoline (120 mpg per Imperial gallon, or 2.35 litres per 100 km), or the equivalent using other fuels or power sources.

The vehicles also had to be production-ready and have enough popular appeal that people would want to buy them.

Teams from around the world — 111 of them — entered the contest last year, including one Canadian entry each from Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba and British Columbia.

That number was soon culled to 43 teams, then to 29 by late April of this year that included the Canadian entries, none of which made it through the knockout stage, leaving nine mostly-American finalists.

Winners in the three categories, Mainstream (\$5 million) and Alternative in tandem and side-by-side configurations (\$2.5 million apiece), were announced Thursday.

The dream isn't still just alive, says Todd Pratt of Future Vehicle Technologies (FVT) of Maple Ridge, B.C., "it's thriving."

A North American auto manufacturer with a proposal to build and distribute its plug-in eVaro electric car — which graces the September cover of *Popular Mechanics* magazine — has approached FVT.

Pratt declined to name the company until a deal is signed, but hinted that an announcement could come sooner than later.

"For our purposes, we wanted to work with a North American company rather than one from offshore," Pratt said, adding: "The X Prize wasn't the destination for us, but more a stepping stone along the way."

"We're also selling our technologies and this fall we'll release a commercial battery pack with our high-voltage lithium battery management system."

The heart of an electric vehicle is its battery pack, he said.

"A battery might have 12 to 100 cells in it, all of which need to be (electronically) balanced with one another for efficiency. That's what ours does very well."

FVT's system will work in purpose-dedicated electric vehicles, and in conversions, he added.

The fourth-generation all-electric eVaro recharges for about \$1.50, at current electric-grid rates, and has a per-charge range in excess of 275 mpg (gas equivalent), he said, adding that further improvements including a lighter, more powerful generator will help the eVaro surpass the 300-mpg equivalent milestone.

Ironically, he said, the eVaro was dropped from competition because of emissions that exceeded X Prize limits. Officials insisted that the small gas engine used to recharge the batteries run full

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X Prize limits. Officials insisted that the small gas engine used to recharge the batteries run full-time throughout the knockout stage.

Unlike other gas/electric hybrids, he said, the eVaro's engine runs only to recharge the batteries when they're low. "It doesn't push the car, and it doesn't run constantly in real-world conditions.

"We had enough range and power to complete the competition without having to use the gas motor, which normally runs only five to 10 per cent of the time," he said.

Among early favourites in the X Prize competition was the all-electric OptaMotive E-Rex, based on the high performing three-wheeled, gas-powered T-Rex built by Campagna Motors of Boucherville, Que.



OptaMotive, of Stittsville, Ont., built just one E-Rex prototype specifically for the X Prize competition, not so much with a view to building and selling cars but to showcase its commercially-viable 'advanced chemistry' lithium battery management and drive systems, for which "we're seeing interest from a number of different areas," said company principal Mark Demers.

"We wouldn't build the vehicle ourselves, but we'll provide the components to Campagna, should they decide to produce the E-Rex, or to firms who want to build other electric vehicles.

"Our focus for going forward is systems development and integration."

OptaMotive was disqualified from the X Prize competition when an electrical wire became entangled in the E-Rex's steering column and sheared, forcing a repair that caused the team to miss the start of the knockout stage.

"We were incredibly disappointed (to be cut from the competition), being the only team eliminated who were compliant with the rules.

"We appealed for another chance, but they stood firm," he said, noting that other teams — such as U.S.-based Aptera, which required 42 tries to pass the lane-change (accident avoidance) exercise — were given multiple chances to make good.

The other two Canadian teams were eliminated earlier in the competition.

Team Urbee of Winnipeg failed to reach the shakedown stage for lack of a body for their car and inadequate insurance; Veperformance of Quebec City, the only Canadian team to enter the Mainstream class with its fully-electric Chevrolet Camaro conversion, was faulted for sending crucial information to the judges after strict deadlines had passed.

Neither Team Urbee nor Veperformance officials could be reached for comment.

For both FVT and OptaMotive, the X Prize experience was both fruitful and enlightening.

"We got to 'look under the hoods' of all the other vehicles in the competition," Pratt said, "and still believe our technology is superior to all the others. In the end, we have a production-ready vehicle that's better and cleaner than any gasoline-powered car.

"Cars are freedom and we don't want to take away from that. In fact, our goal is to enhance that notion."

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