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Monday, May 17, 2010

A flying car

MOVE OVER, JETSONS; AERO-CAR HITS FLY DAY



Test pilot Philip Meteer stands near the Transition flying car Saturday at Fitchburg Airport. (T&G Staff/PAUL KAPTEYN)

By Paula J. Owen CORRESPONDENT
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FITCHBURG — It's what many people dreamed of as kids — a car that can fly.

Terrafugia's chief executive and technical officer, Carl C. Pietrick, helped bring that vision to reality with the Transition, an aero-car that removes big obstacles for many pilots.

Mr. Pietrick brought the Transition to Fitchburg Municipal Airport Saturday for "Learn to Fly Day," sponsored by the Fitchburg Pilots Association. It's a national event free to the public at airports across the country.

Around 400 people showed up at Fitchburg's airport on a beautiful Saturday to check out the planes on display, including the North American Aviation T-6, a 1960s helicopter, a Cessna Skyhawk, a Piper Cherokee, a Piper Warrior, the new Diamond DA-40 — and the

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flying car.

The Transition, Mr. Pietrick said, is a pre-production prototype and has been successfully flown 28 times.

Inside the two-person car is everything a regular road-worthy vehicle has — gas and brake pedals, steering wheel, air bags and signals. It also has a few added features not seen in a typical car — a control stick, a yoke and its own parachute loaded on a rocket motor behind the front seats, ready to be deployed in an emergency through the back window. It's called a ballistic recovery system, says test pilot Philip Meteer of Littleton.

Mr. Meteer is the only pilot to have flown the Transition.

It also has two wings on each side of the exterior that fold up when it is ready to go on the road.

Mr. Pietrick said his company, out of Woburn, is working on improving the design and will come out with another prototype design July 26.

Having a plane that is street-legal removes some of the biggest obstacles for pilots looking to cover distance in the least amount of time, Mr. Pietrick said.

One such obstacle is bad weather. When pilots are faced with bad weather, they have three lousy options, he said: Land and wait, land and get in their car and drive home, or push it and fly anyway. The latter is one of the leading causes of accidents, he said.

The Transition, says Mr. Pietrick, gives pilots a fourth option: Divert to the nearest airport, fold up the wings and drive away.

Another obstacle is the high cost of renting a hangar or not finding one available. Renting a hangar can sometimes cost \$1,000 a month or more, said Mr. Pietrick. When the Transition's wings are folded, it can fit inside a standard-construction, single-car garage.

The fuel is cheaper and more environmentally friendly, too, he said. The Transition runs on super-unleaded automobile fuel, which is 36 percent cheaper than aviation fuel and does not contain the lead still found in aviation fuel.

Other money and time savers with the Transition are not having to wait for a taxi or pay for a rental car once a pilot lands at an airport, not having to wait for the airport's staff to fill the plane's tank and not having to move bags or equipment from the plane to an automobile.

But, Mr. Pietrick admits, the Transition is not for people in the market for a new car. At \$200,000, it costs a little more than a new small plane would cost.

"It's not a replacement for a car," he said. "If you're in the market for a light aircraft, this is the vehicle for you."

Mr. Meteer tested the plane at an airport in Plattsburgh, N.Y. He was chosen because of his extensive flying experience as a trained U.S. Air Force pilot, and as a test pilot.

The car's speed, he said, reaches 100 mph and the plane can reach an elevation of 14,000 feet.

The first flight was unbelievable, he said, and anyone can drive the car.

Ashlea P. Mirsky and her husband, Sam A. Mirsky, a small plane pilot, brought their three children from Shrewsbury to the event. Mr. Mirsky has been a member of the Fitchburg Pilots Association for six months.

Their two sons, 8 and 10, both said they wanted to fly in the Transition.

"I thought it was cool that it can actually drive and fly," said Ben A. Mirsky, 10, who has flown with his dad four times. "It would be cool to fly in it."

Mr. and Mrs. Mirsky said they had talked about how it would be convenient to have a Transition to visit family in New York, but until it comes down in price and can seat five people, they won't be buying one any time soon.

Richard B. Bullock, president of Bullock Charter in Princeton, who displayed one of his company's Lear jets hangared at the Fitchburg airport, said it was the flying car and other innovations like it that inspire young people.

"It's what aviation in the U.S. is about," Mr. Bullock said. "Dreaming about things like that. It has taken a lot of dreamers to get where we are, beginning with the Wright brothers."

The next round of tests with the Transition prototype are coming up in the next few months and may take place at airports in Lawrence or Orange, said Mr. Meteer. The Orange airport has already been approved as a testing site by the Federal Aviation Administration, he said.

Charley J. Valera, president of the Fitchburg Pilots Association, said Learn to Fly Day was successful. It was the

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first time it was held at Fitchburg's airport and he said he would like to do it again next year.

His thoughts on the flying car?

"I think it is absolutely amazing — the wave of the future," said Mr. Valera. "They have 70 on order already and I can see why. You can laugh at all new inventions, but that is amazing. It just makes sense and takes the stress out of flying. It may seem like the Jetsons, but it is less money and less time-consuming than having to fly commercial."

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