

The Chevy Tahoe Hybrid:

Thinking Small While Building Big

By Roger Witherspoon

There was nothing elegant about the roll through the woods.

The highway through Bear Mountain split, with the left fork headed through the Seven Lakes region and the right meandering through the mountain to West Point. The Honda barely entered the left fork when it was cut off by an errant motorist. The driver, swerved sharply to avoid the collision, hit the curb, lost control, entered a ditch at about 50 miles per hour and the car rolled three times through the woods before its roof slammed into a tree – with the tumbling accompanied by the sound of a racing engine, breaking glass, and cracking tree limbs.

About 50 yards ahead of the Honda, two black SUVs pulled over and a squad of West Point medics returning from a training mission, double timed back to the upended vehicle. The doctor leading the squad barked out orders as the troops firmly but gently pulled five people from the wreck.

While they worked, other motorists pulled over, frantically tapping their cell phones in an effort to call for help. Finally, one woman yelled out “There is no cell reception in these mountains. Does anyone have OnStar?”

I was driving a Chevrolet Tahoe Hybrid SUV about 50 feet behind the Honda, and immediately pulled onto the shoulder and pushed the Red Cross button over the rear view mirror. Almost immediately, an OnStar emergency care voice came over the Tahoe’s audio system inquiring as to the emergency. I told her about the crash and, using her network’s satellite data, pinpointed the Tahoe’s location and set up a three-way patch to the nearest New York State Police headquarters. The Police dispatcher then sent officers and ambulances. In the meantime, the woman who had yelled for OnStar shuttled between the West Point medics and the Tahoe, relaying the medical needs to the state police who, in turn, informed the ambulance corps speeding through the mountain roads.

When the ambulances arrived the woman shook her head at her useless cell phone and said to everyone in general and no one in particular, “Thank God for OnStar.”

OnStar is General Motor’s everything service which utilizes 24 Department of Defense satellites to provide a stream of communication anywhere in the United States. There is a booster built directly into the satellite radio receiver unit in the vehicle which allows the OnStar system to work even in areas where cell phones cannot. For \$199 annually, the system provides both cell phone service – using a computer voice – and emergency response using live concierges. The system handles about 7,000 calls monthly from motorists in trouble, and another 5,000 “Good Samaritan” calls from motorists reporting accidents to other motorists. And every month, OnStar sends out electronic unlock signals to some 65,000 motorists who left their keys in the car.

For an additional \$100, OnStar provides “turn by turn” directions over the audio system. This works well for lower priced cars, such as the HHR or Pontiac GT, which lack navigation systems – though the computer voice sounds, well, mechanical.

As useful as OnStar is, one doesn’t buy a behemoth like the full sized Tahoe just for the communications systems. This is a truck based SUV with three rows of seats, the last one taking up most of the cargo area. Usually, a vehicle like this would have a

voracious V-8 engine and seemingly stop at every passing gas station. This Tahoe does carry the big, 6.0-Liter V-8, but it is mated to an electric motor and GM fuel saving technology which actually lets the company boast in its ads that its city mileage – at 21 MPG – is better than that of the regular, 2008 Camry SE sedan, which has an EPA rating of 19 MPG in city traffic.

GM's fuel economy for its gasoline engine is based on a system which cuts off four of the cylinders when the Tahoe is cruising. In addition, the electric motor is strong enough to drive the vehicle at speeds up to about 25 miles per hour. When cruising or going down hill, the electric motor takes over entirely, thus reducing fuel consumption further. Both the gas engine and electric motor work when the Tahoe is accelerating, thus increasing its takeoff. The combined system carries an eight year, 100,000 mile warranty.

How efficiently the combined power system works depends on how well the Tahoe trains the driver. The information LCD screen shows the flow of power between the gasoline engine, the electric motor, and the axle on this front wheel drive SUV. Flooring the accelerator pushes the mileage down to just 4 MPG, while taking off slowly under the battery power sends the gauge shooting up to 99 MPG. At today's gasoline prices, drivers quickly learn to adjust their driving habits to the power flow on the screen to maximize their gas mileage. It is not going to get the 40 miles per gallon achieved by a Camry hybrid, but it is a significant step for a truck.

Inside, the Tahoe Hybrid and its sister truck, the GMC Yukon Hybrid, contain most of the bells and whistles one would expect in a vehicle with a sticker price pushing \$53,000. It has three rows of leather padded seats, though getting to the back means stepping over the folded second row. This can be awkward for the less mobile or very young passengers, and it would be difficult to exit in a hurry. The 300-volt battery pack for the electric motor is under the second row and, as a result, the passenger seats do not fold into the floor and the cargo area is diminished accordingly. The third row can be removed entirely – though it is big, bulky, weighs about 75 pounds and takes two to handle easily.

But it is a comfortable ride, with AM/FM and XM satellite radio, as well as a DVD player for entertainment. The battery pack for the electric motor also powers a 115-volt electric outlet which can be used to plug in a laptop or video game.

If you have need for a large vehicle and hope to minimize the trips to the gas station, the Tahoe Hybrid just might fit your needs.

2008 Chevrolet Tahoe Hybrid 2WD

MSRP:		\$52,780
EPA Mileage:	21 MPG City	22 MPG Highway
Towing Capacity:		6,200 Pounds

Performance/ Safety:

6.0-Liter, cast aluminum V-8 engine producing 332 horsepower and 367 pound/feet of torque; two wheel drive; 2-mode hybrid; 300-volt electric motor; 18-inch aluminum

wheels; stability and traction control; 4-wheel disc brakes; dual frontal air bags; head curtain, side air bags for all rows; rear view camera.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM and XM satellite radio; CD and MP3 player with Bose speaker system; OnStar communications system; Bluetooth communications; DVD player; touch screen navigation system; 3 rows of seating. Leather padded bucket seats; heated front seats;