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# A Drive In The Controversial e-Carriage That Could Replace Horse Drawn Carriages in Manhattan



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I offer thoughtful coverage of the auto industry.

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On every passing corner of Manhattan's Upper West Side, Jason Wenig's e-Carriage draws smiles and praise from slack-jawed onlookers as it slowly makes its way down Broadway.

Like the self-professed "proud papa" that he is, being creator and builder of this three-ton electric retro-mobile, Wenig revels in the attention, honking the funny sounding "ahooga" horn and yukking it up with kids and cabbies who can't help but gawk at the glinting brass on his eight-foot-tall green giant.

"Wherever the car goes it gets swamped," says the native New Yorker, who founded The Creative Workshop, an antique auto restoration outfit in Dania Beach, Fla. "It's really quite nice. I mean, as a guy who built something from scratch, you pray to God, 'Is anyone going to like this thing?' And especially when it's in the middle of all of this controversy."



*This nine-seater e-Carriage was inspired by electric tour buses that operated in Manhattan in the early 1900s. (Photo credit: The Creative Workshop)*

Wenig created the nine-seater e-Carriage at the behest of and with funding from New Yorkers for Clean, Livable, Safe Streets, or NYCLASS for short. The animal rights group is seeking to ban the horse-drawn carriages that cart tourists around Central Park and is proposing to replace them with Wenig's creation, or something like it.

Wenig is trying to stay out of all the controversy, though. "I'm not an activist. I'm not on either side," he says.

What Wenig really is, is a true car nut. His company restores all manner of exotica, from Jaguar E-Types to Lamborghini Miuras. It also created a one-off Sport Speciale Spyder featured on the cover of AutoWeek in 2007.

Though getting rid of quaint horse-drawn carriages in favor of an electric vehicle might seem to lack charm and sever ties with history, that's not actually the case. The e-Carriage is an homage to Brass Era tour busses popular in Manhattan during the early 1900s. They were made by long forgotten companies like Atterbury, Grabowsky and Stanley Steamer.

The chassis and overall design are completely original, but they borrow elements from the classic busses—to include, surprisingly, their electric propulsion. “Not only were electric cars pretty typical, as a matter of fact they were almost dominant [in the early 1900s],” Wenig says.

Steel fabricator Vicon, which supplies companies like Peterbilt, made the beefy frame rails. The steering box is from Chrysler, the front axle from Grumman, the rear is an eight-lug Dana unit, the same as on a Ford F-250 pickup. “The major mechanics are all NAPA parts, so if anything breaks, it's very easy and cheap to repair,” Wenig says.

His fanaticism shows in the e-Carriage's details. Almost everything but the mechanical running gear and electric propulsion system is custom-made, from the LED headlamps with elaborate brass housings to the 26-inch wheels machined out of a solid block of aluminum to the beefy parking-brake lever copied from a WWII military transporter.



*The custom brass hand brake to the left was patterned after one on a WWII military transporter. (Photo credit: The Creative Workshop)*

“I stumbled upon a picture of military vehicle, like World War II personnel carrier, and I called about two dozen military guys asking, ‘Do you know what this car is?’” Wenig says. “...And finally I stumbled upon a guy who said, ‘I might have one of

those in the yard.' He lived in Idaho; he probably had like 30 acres, you know? And lo and behold, here it came in the mail."

The front-mounted electric motor runs off of lithium iron phosphate batteries and drives the rear wheels. Total output is 84 horsepower and 180 pounds-feet of torque. Top speed is electronically limited to 25 miles per hour.

Total range is about 100 miles—more than enough for a full day of carting sightseers around Central Park's three-mile loop, Wenig says. The batteries take about six hours to charge from empty using a 220-volt outlet (the kind used to power major appliances).

Wenig installed custom leaf springs that give a smoother ride than turn-of-the-century technology would, but not overly so: They were designed specifically to "give you a carriage bumpy feel."

Riding in the cushy, faux-leather front seat is relaxing and comfortable, though you must be prepared to chat with strangers at every turn.

"Is that an old vehicle?" asks a cabbie at a stoplight—one of a dozen who would make chit chat during our brief drive.

"No it's brand new," Wenig says. "It's an homage to an original car. It's almost exactly the same size as a tour bus that would have been in New York City back in 1910."

A few minutes later, pulling up to another intersection, a pair of young women smile and wave. Wenig honks the ahooga horn in response.

"Oh, you do have room for more people," one of them says.

"Come ladies, let's go!" Wenig jokes, as we pull away.

But even without the incessant attention from onlookers, driving the e-Carriage is a unique experience. Wenig made sure it would be.

"I want the driver to be immersed as much as the passenger," he says. "So when you're driving this thing, the steering wheel moves and the car shimmies and shakes."



*The Jason Wenig's team at The Creative Workshop custom made every bit of the interior, including the e-Carriage's huge wood and brass steering wheel and detailed gauges. (Photo credit: The Creative Workshop)*

Wenig recommends keeping a light grip on the wheel as it gently jostles over bumps and potholes. “It self centers, so just let it do it’s thing,” he coaches as I drive.

That part was easy, but acclimating to the vehicle’s more than seven feet of width took some getting used to, as did judging how fast to go around corners. There’s now power steering and the large wood and brass steering wheel requires more turns than a modern car does. But once all those things are accounted for, driving the e-Carriage is a delight.

There’s just enough power to keep pace with city traffic and ascend hills without issue. The brakes work well, as we found after getting cut off numerous times by taxis. Hydraulically assisted four-wheel discs are hidden behind faux drums, to preserve the period look.

It took Wenig and his team of coachbuilders a year and \$500,000 to design and manufacture the e-Carriage entirely from scratch. Though he could start production immediately—at \$175,000 to \$195,000 per unit (much less than the cost of a taxi medallion, he points out to various curious cabbies we encounter), now that development costs are out of the way—the final decision is embroiled in a political battle among entrenched constituents fighting over the fate of Manhattan’s 68 horse-drawn carriages.

The tentative contract with New York City, should the e-Carriage get approved for use in Central Park—by either private owner/operators, or tourism companies—is for Wenig to build three vehicles a month over two years, with production to be based in one of the city’s five boroughs.

The last few months have been quiet on the political front, thanks to a “request for

proposal” period mandated by the city to allow other alternatives to the horse drawn carriages to be proposed. But that period has just ended, and constituents expect the jousting to pick back up a again.

Regardless, Wenig is unfazed. He has personally seen plenty of interest in his big green machine, including from the city of Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. and tour bus operators.

“We were driving down Midtown, and one of the guys in the double-decker bus lines walked up to me and said, ‘I’m part of the management committee of the double decker bus company. I want to buy your car. I want to buy these things, and I want to run them with my buses.’”



*Jason Wenig, behind the wheel of his e-Carriage, poses with his team at The Creative Workshop in Dania Beach, Fl. (Photo credit: The Creative Workshop)*

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