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TEST DRIVE

Plug-in, Pump Less

2017 Toyota Prius Prime

DAN LYONS | text and photos
Special to the Times Union

Toyota launched its first Prius plug-in hybrid model in 2012. It was a year of historically high fuel costs, with petrol prices peaking at \$3.60 per gallon. Fast forward to 2016, and the launch of the redesigned Prius plug-in hybrid.

Now known as the Prius Prime, the second generation gas miser rolls into a decidedly different climate. Gas prices average \$2.21/gallon nationally, at this writing. While the price drop has been good news for our wallets, it's less than stellar for companies selling products that specialize in fuel savings. "Stiff headwinds," as one Toyota executive observed. Of course, fuel prices —

2017 Toyota Prius Prime
MSRP range: \$27,100 - \$33,100

like last winter's ultra-low snowfall totals — are subject to change. As they rise, so too will our interest in easing the impact of said rise. It's also true that for many people, leaving less of a footprint on the planet's natural resources is a worthy goal in and of itself, regardless of pocket payoff.

The Prius Prime measures 6.5 inches longer, 0.6 inches wider and 0.8 inches lower than the model it replaces. The body mirrors that of the gas hybrid version (now known as the Prius liftback), with an aero-friendly coefficient of drag of .25. The Prime's front and rear styling is distinct from the liftback. A pair of curved, thin LED



TOYOTA'S PRIUS PRIME is a plug-in version of the Prius (now known as the Prius Liftback). Slightly longer, wider and lower, with its oversized grille it sports a distinctly different front and rear styling than the Liftback.

headlights bookend the oversize front grille (shutters in the grille close automatically to reduce drag). A wrap-around LED light panel accents the rear view.

Prime's principal market figures to be current owners of cordless hybrids. The 2017 edition sweetens the pot by expanding its range. The new model can travel 25 miles on a charge, before the gas engine chimes in. That's significant, because Toyota's research suggests that 50 percent of Americans can get to work and back on one charge, using no gas. Prime therefore raises the prospect of a gas-free commute for a large portion of the population.

The basics of Prime's propulsion mostly mirrors the plug-less, Prius models. A 1.8L four-cylinder gas engine is combined with an electric motor and generator, channeled through an electronically controlled, Con-

tinuously Variable Transmission. The main difference is that Prime can be plugged in, to recharge its larger, lithium-ion battery pack. And, because of its new, one way clutch, both the generator and the electric motor can be used to provide drive force when required, for improved, EV performance.

The Atkinson cycle gas engine makes 95 h.p. and 105 lb. ft. of torque. The combined net output for the hybrid system is 121 h.p. Drivers choose their preferred method of propulsion: EV (at speeds of up to 84 mph), EV Auto (EV used first, but combined with gas engine when its more efficient to do so) and Hybrid (primarily gas-powered with electric support). Three driving modes (Normal, Power, Eco) can also be selected, which change acceleration response based on user needs.

Collectively, this technology produces impressive

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