



Lexus unveils vehicle with solid-state batteries

One of the latest automotive offerings with electric running gear is from Toyota's premium division, which is reportedly planning to launch an electrified version of the new-for-2019 UX compact utility vehicle. Dubbed the **UX300e**, the vehicle is rumored to come with solid-state batteries instead of lithium-ion batteries. Solid-state batteries are claimed to be lighter, more compact, have greater storage capacity and are non-flammable. They also don't tend to degrade as quickly. Although there's no official release date, the Lexus UX300e is expected to go on sale in early 2020.



Exterior side-impact bags could considerably soften the blow in a side-impact crash. Auto supplier ZF is developing the technology.

On the way: External side airbags

Even your humble Automotive section was surprised by a recent announcement from parts supplier ZF. The company confirms that it's developing an **exterior side-impact-airbag** system that would deploy from beneath the bodywork if it senses an imminent collision. (In ZF's prototypes, the 13-pound airbag has been tucked away out of sight in the rocker panel, just below the door.) Given that some vehicles rolling off assembly lines now are already be equipped with up to 20 of the inflatable bags — tucked into steering wheels, dashboards, doors, ceilings and even seat belts — it's something we should have expected. Maybe even demanded. ZF claims the side airbags will reduce impact velocities and intrusions by more than 30 percent, a measure its research shows dramatically decreases the seriousness of injuries. What's more, a ZF spokesman said such a system — which would use a combination of camera- and radar-based sensors — might be ready within the next two years.

Side impacts account for a 40 percent of all crash-related deaths, so this would be a huge step forward in terms of automotive safety.



The \$1.2-million GT-R50 is a bespoke version of the production Nissan GT-R.

Nissan's \$1.2m supercar

The recently revealed **Nissan GT-R50** will actually go into production beginning in 2019. Each of the planned 50 models will be priced at — wait for it — \$1.2 million.

That's a lot of coin for any Nissan, especially one based on the 2019 GT-R Nismo that sells for \$175,450. Italy-based Italdesign created the GT-R50 show car and will build all subsequent iterations.



That process includes replacing much of the GT-R Nismo's skin with hand-formed aluminum panels, redoing the interior according to customer specifications, and upgrading the twin-turbo, 3.8 L V-6 to

produce 710 horsepower, up from the 600 horsepower that the Nismo makes. In addition, the GT-R50 will feature a retooled suspension with continuously adjustable damping Bilstein system and upgraded Brembo brakes, not to mention reinforced driveshafts to handle the added power.



Now that there's a reintroduced Chevrolet Blazer, how far behind can a GMC version be? Word is that General Motors division will dust off the Envoy name for it.

A GMC-branded Blazer?

Word is that an all-new model from **GMC** is headed for production. They're also hearing that this General Motors division will dust off the retired **Envoy** name and that the vehicle will be based on the new-for 2019 five-passenger **Chevrolet Blazer**.

This suggests the new Envoy will get a 193-horsepower four-cylinder engine and an optional 305-horsepower V-6. Both powerplants would also come with nine-speed automatic transmissions.

When/if the Envoy arrives — presumably for the 2020 model year — look for a base price that mirrors the Blazer's, in the low-\$30,000 range.

TEST DRIVE

2019 Honda Insight

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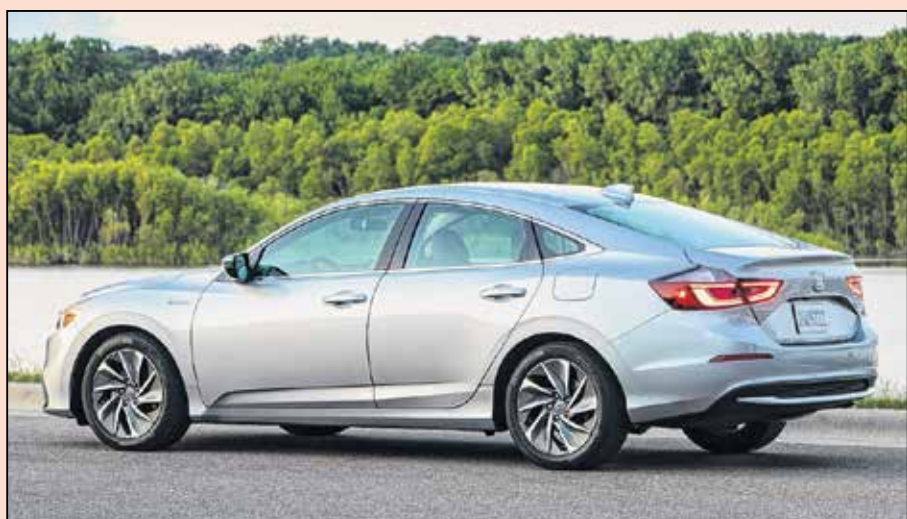
little appetite for sport. It has a traditional sedan's ride quality, and is a comfortable trip taker. Steering is well boosted for maneuvering, though it offers little feel through the wheel.

The interior presents nicely, with a clean instrument panel display. The 8-inch infotainment system screen is an easy read from the driver's seat, and happily now has an actual (as opposed to virtual) knob for on/off/volume adjustment of the sound system.

The system is smartphone friendly, compatible with Android Auto and Apple CarPlay. The HVAC controls centered just below are arm's length away, and minimally distracting to use. The shift selector is a straight line, multi-level push button arrangement. Located at the base of the center stack, I'd trade it for something more conventional and intuitive.

Front seats are comfortable, though the lack of adjustable lumbar support is a surprise on a top trim level car. Rear seat leg room is, at 37.4 inches, more than Clarity (36.6 inches), less than Accord Hybrid (40.4 inches) and sufficient to fit six-footers behind same size folks in front. The trunk is, at 14.7 cu. ft. (Touring, 15.1 in EX and LX), less than Clarity (15.5) and Accord Hybrid (16.7), but large enough to be useful. Rear seatbacks fold forward (and split 60/40 on EX and Touring) to a mostly flat, two-level load floor.

Honda's take on blind spot monitoring is called LaneWatch (standard on EX and Touring, unavailable on base EX). It displays a camera-generated view of what's behind you when you switch on the right hand turn signal or press the button on the end of the stalk. The view — which is displayed on the center screen — is of the right side rear only. That's good, but since drivers make left hand lane



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changes as well as right, it's only half as good as it should be.

Honda Sensing is a suite of driver assistance and active safety technology, offered as standard equipment on all trim levels. The package includes Forward Collision Warning, Lane Departure Warning, Collision Mitigation Braking, Road Departure Mitigation, Traffic Sign Recognition, Adaptive Cruise Control and Lane Keeping Assist. I think that some of these (lane keeping, road departure) are mainly useful as added insurance when driving at night, or when tired, but otherwise too intrusive.

The forward collision warning system is a little nervous, flashing warnings before they're necessary. However, this

Insight was slightly less prone to do so than the Clarity that I last drove.

Low, stable gas prices make hybrids a tougher sell, strictly on the basis of fuel economy. In times like these, normalizing the design and driving experience of hybrids becomes more important than better mileage. The less difference there is in looks and feel between hybrids and their conventional equivalents, the fewer the barriers there are to further acceptance. That's the track that the third generation Honda Insight is taking.

A regular contributor to the Times Union for more than 25 years, Dan Lyons is the award-winning author of six books, and photographer of 180 calendars.