

10/2/2007 10:00:00 PM

[Email this article](#) • [Print this article](#)

Cabbie says corn is the future

Non-profit taxi looks to alternative fuels

By Bob Skolnik

More than 25 years ago Mike Shapiro drove a taxicab powered by propane gas during the oil crisis of 1979 and 1980 when gas prices topped out at more than \$1 per gallon. He remembers waiting in line for nearly an hour to get gasoline for his car. Shapiro was sure that the future was in alternative fuels and went so far as to secure a contract to build an ethanol plant in Jamaica. Then the price of oil plunged, gas was cheap again, and Shapiro started working as a loan officer in the mortgage business.

When the mortgage industry collapsed this year Shapiro found himself back behind the wheel of a taxicab for the first time since the early 1980s. But his interest in alternative fuels never waned and now he is preparing to launch a new taxicab company in Forest Park with cars that will be powered by E85 fuel.

"I guess God has a warped sense of humor and I'm back on track with ethanol," Shapiro said. "I didn't design it or choose it. How can we have all these cabs in 1979 burning propane and now no one is doing anything? It's scary."

Shapiro is calling his new company E-Cab. Last month the village council awarded him four taxi licenses. He plans to start small. Initially it will be just he and his 2002 Ford Crown Victoria. Shapiro said it will cost him approximately \$1,000 to convert his Crown Victoria to burn E85, which is a mixture of 85 percent ethanol and 15 percent gasoline.

Once his car passes its village inspection, Shapiro will get it converted to burn the corn-based fuel and he hopes to be ferrying passengers in a couple of weeks.

Ethanol, also known as ethyl alcohol or grain alcohol, can be produced from many different sources, but is typically made from corn. Most gasoline sold in the United States contains 10 percent ethanol.

E85 is cheaper than regular gasoline and produces fewer greenhouse gas emissions when burned. Riverside Minuteman, located at 3346 Harlem Ave., is the closest gas station to Forest Park that sells E85. There, ethanol sells for \$2.59 a gallon compared to \$3.05 a gallon for regular gas,



Eco-friendly ride: Mike Shapiro shows off his taxi that he hopes is the first in a fleet of environmentally friendly cabs fueled by ethanol.

Photo by Frank Pinc



according to Bill McCloskey, a vice president for Texor Petroleum, the company that owns the station. E85 advocates also point out that ethanol comes from renewable sources and reduces our dependence on foreign oil.

"Generally I'm in favor of alternative fuels," Forest Park village council member Rory Hoskins said. "The jury is still out about the overall benefits of E85."

Hoskins campaigned in part on a platform to lessen the community's impact on the environment. The benefits of E85 include a reduction in the use of oil, but the downside is the increased price of food as a result of a steeper tab for corn products, he said. Hoskins said he hoped that in the future more ethanol can be produced from sources other than corn.

Another downside to E85 is that a vehicle's mileage will decrease by 20 to 30 percent, according to the website fueleconomy.gov. Ethanol contains less energy than traditional gasoline, thus limiting its fuel efficiency. However, using E85 will not cause a vehicle's performance to lag.

McCloskey said the dip in fuel economy can be even greater and pegged the range at 15 to 40 percent.

Nonetheless, Shapiro estimates that cab drivers could cut their fuel costs by as much as 20 percent using E85, and as for ethanol's impact on commodity markets, Shapiro likes the idea of supporting American farmers.

"We're doing it to help the American economy and not some foreign oil country," Shapiro said. "The farmer will make the money no matter what crop we use."

Since January, Shapiro has been driving a cab for the Red Cab Company, but hopes to have E-Cab up and running soon. He expects his business to be a mixture of trips to airports, hospitals and late night patrons of Madison Street's drinking establishments. Ultimately, he hopes his company can expand into an association of drivers in which each driver will own his own cab and share marketing and dispatch costs.

His cabs will be painted green with a picture of a corn cob each door.

Reader Comments

Posted: Thursday, October 18, 2007

Article comment by: **Christine Miley**

It's really an economic war against OPEC and believe it or not, every US citizen can do their part to fight this war and bring our troops home. E85/Ethanol will have a tremendous global effect on the economy, we can go from being the top consumer to the top producer and stop making middle eastern countries wealthy.

Posted: Thursday, October 04, 2007

Article comment by: **Bonnie Corso**

Finally, an idea whose time has come!! I'd love to see our 10,000 cabs in New York City convert to Green...