

Federal Role on Cars Expanding

IF an electric car prescribed by Congress becomes a workable reality, should we expect future automobile designs to become election campaign issues?

The Department of Transportation has spent \$9.7 million on the electric car's specifications and design. The third phase of the five-year plan is development and safety testing. In the fourth step, the government will evaluate the cars. Some could be on the highways by the early 1980s.

It is somewhat incongruous to observe lawmakers and bureaucrats taking over fundamental aspects of the automobile business. It grew up as a notable example of what free enterprise can do to raise standards of living. With 63 vehicles for every 100 Americans, our lives are geared to the highways.

A federal report called "Commercial Vehicle Post-1980 Goals Study" has predicted — and recommended — that wider, longer and heavier supertrucks, many pulling one or two trailers, be built for use then.

The report suggests there is no reason why the public "cannot compromise their prejudices in the interests of saving fuel, saving lives, saving money and improving the environment."

With the start they now have, it doesn't seem impossible that Congress and federal agencies might eventually try to take a hand in allocating vehicles to businesses and individuals by types.

The government has tried to specify air bags for safety in accidents, but this hasn't worked out. Many drivers resent the nagging warning device required on seat belts, and others fear they might be trapped in wrecked cars by air bags.

Congress is still struggling through a two-year battle over automobile emissions standards, demanded by environmental groups. Action might be delayed until 1980, but eventually what comes out of a car's tail pipe will be specified by law.

The public has not accepted the

55 mph speed limit imposed as a safety and fuel-conserving measure. Even threats to withhold highway funds unless states meet federal enforcement "goals" have failed. Drivers going only 60 mph are apt to be passed by a majority of cars and trucks headed the same way.

Proposals for heavy penalty taxes on fuel and big cars to compel people to use less gasoline have found little support. People who need big cars would buy them and those who use their cars to get to jobs would continue to do so.

Futurists predict that there always will be big cars and that some day we might see automated cars on electronic highways. Presumably, they would be programmed in Washington.

There might even be an electronic backseat driver in our future. A toymaker has brought out a toy van this year that obeys voice commands to start, turn, stop or back up. If this is developed to full scale dimensions, it could change our lives.