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Wings-N-Wheels Fly-In hosts rare ‘flying car’ in Bethalto

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Here is Owen's vehicle, parked next to a conventional bi-plane, background, on the tarmac for comparison. Owen is confident that vehicles like his will become more common by 2030. (Bruce Darnell photo)

By Bruce Darnell • Parked on a runway at St. Louis Regional Airport, a 13-foot carbon fiber drone sits with an empty cockpit, waiting for its pilot. It has eight propellers, two wings and was entirely hand- built. It is both a helicopter and a plane, and the pilot, Dean Owen, said it is kind of like a toy — he also said it will soon replace cars.

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“In five years, these things will be as common and as affordable as cars,” Owen said. “It looks incredibly dangerous, but it’s not ... you are in the air, and if you get stupid, you hurt yourself, but it’s about as simple as riding a bicycle. And I would suggest being on our interstate system is far more difficult than flying this aircraft.”

The reason the cockpit-operated BlackFly, a prototype all-electric, vertical takeoff and landing aircraft, or eVTOL, hasn’t yet replaced cars is because of Federal Aviation Administration regulations, Owen said, whose weight limits don’t allow for heavier batteries — which correlates with longer fly periods — and due to a lack of a highway-like system for the skies.

What Owen calls the “flying car” doesn’t need a runway to get in the air and requires about a 50 by 50 square foot lot to land, which, in addition to its speed, makes it an attractive alternative to cars.

“To get here to the other side of St. Louis during rush hour is a long, long, long commute,” Owen said. “With the BlackFly, you could get from here to the other side in about 20 minutes.”

Owen said the BlackFly is about as loud as a diesel engine on the inside, which for a helicopter-like aircraft is pretty quiet. Also, with a push of a button, it goes from “helicopter-mode” to “airplane-mode,” he said.

The Wings-N-Wheels Fly-In was held on Sept. 27 in Bethalto and prototype flying machines weren’t the only vehicle on exhibit. They also had traditional aircraft, a car show, concessions, and informational tables for guests to peruse through.

Also taking to the skies during the day’s events was 95-year-old Korean War veteran Bob Taylor. He said flying again was “kind of nice,” and that it was a smooth day to be in the air.

Taylor had a desire to fly since he was 5, in 1935. A similar youthful enthusiasm could be found on the tarmac in Bethalto as hundreds of children explored aircraft designs as old as the 1920s all the way up to the 2020s.

Owen and his crew came from Paducah, Kentucky, for the exhibit. Their company, HHO Carbon Clean Systems, is franchised as far east as South Carolina and as far west as Colorado, crew member Carl Skinner said. Skinner said the company cleans carbon for diesel and gas engines.

Owen is one of just a few civilian owners of this type of aircraft. It’s made by Pivotal, a company based in Palo Alto. Despite being scheduled to take off at 10:30 a.m., Owen’s team encountered confirmation errors with a team in Palo Alto, who Owen said was constantly in direct communication with his team and must give the go ahead for him to fly.

With a handmade craft like his, Owen said the price is upwards of \$200,000. However, he said Pivotal plans on mass producing them, which he says will drop the price down. He also said, outside of possible civilian use, the drone is used for medical evacuation or rescue purposes, getting to places cars cannot reach.

“There’s incredible innovation across the country, and creative people are doing things that are going to change this world radically in the next five years,” Owen said.



Captions – Dean Owen is trying to bring flying cars to reality, step closer than Back to the Future II. This 13-foot-long example dropped in to the Wings’n-Wheels Air Show in Bethalto on Sept. 27. (Bruce Darnell photo)

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