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AUTOS

SECTION E

Solar solution Indialantic company plugs into the sun

By Tony Boylan
FLORIDA TODAY

Doug Cobb and Robert Adams hope to give new meaning to Florida's reputation as the Sunshine State.

The two formed Solar Car Corp. in Indialantic last year to design and market electric-solar automobiles.

"I am very ecologically minded," said Cobb, who has built and designed solar-powered cars, trucks, golf carts, telephone systems and more. His solar golf cart was featured at the 1980-81 World's Fair in Knoxville, Tenn.

"We feel there's a niche market," said Cobb, an independent electrical contractor. "If we came

up with a number of utility vehicles, people would use them."

Cobb is also involved with Sea-Lectric, a company that plans to build electric boats.

Internal combustion vehicles using gasoline burn up oil, a non-renewable fossil fuel, and contribute to pollution and global warming. Electricity, depending on how it is generated, can be a pollution-free, renewable source of energy.

The company has two solar vehicles in operation. Over the next year, Solar Car plans to build about eight prototype vehicles. The models will range from one- or two-seat commuter models to larger cars and small trucks.

Cobb, a lifelong tinkerer, met Adams through a friend last year.

Adams is president of Venture Capital Management Corp. in Satellite Beach.

"Recognizing that present economic forces are going to make it more expensive to maintain a gas vehicle, it appeared timely to go into this field," said Adams.

"This technology has been around for years, but it's been underutilized," he said.

For the past two months, Cobb has been working on a Honda Civic wagon in which he has installed an electric motor. The hood and roof are covered with panels that collect solar energy to convert into electricity.

The 8-horsepower gasoline engine — which will eventually burn alternative fuels such as methanol — charges the electric battery, and can be used to drive the car. The electric engine runs at a constant 20 horsepower, but can surge up to 100 horsepower for rapid acceleration. Cobb said the car has a top speed of 70 mph.

When the electric motor runs down, it can be plugged into a standard wall socket for an overnight recharge. The solar panel is a constant source of electricity renewal — as long the skies are sunny. The braking system, which they hope to patent, produces a small amount of electricity that prolongs the life of the battery.

The car can travel 100 miles on just the electric charge, and farther when used in conjunction with gas and solar power.

"This isn't the car for a cross-country trip," Cobb said. "But if, like most people, you drive to

work in the morning and leave your car in a parking lot all day, it's perfect.

"You probably won't use much of the energy to get to work, and the car will charge up all day."

A trip in the prototype proved the car to have more than adequate pickup, while ride and handling are similar to gas-powered cars.

The two men hope to sell about 400 cars in 1992 and about 5,000 cars a year by 1994. Solar Car will build the cars by adapting existing gasoline vehicles and selling them for under \$15,000.

"Of course Detroit could do this," said Cobb. "But they're not."

The absence of a commercial car confuses Cobb and Adams.

General Motors Corp. has announced Impact, an electric car without solar panels, but does not have a production date.

Ford Motor Co. and Chrysler Corp. are studying electric automobiles. Electric cars and trucks are used to a limited extent throughout Europe, where fuel prices are much higher.

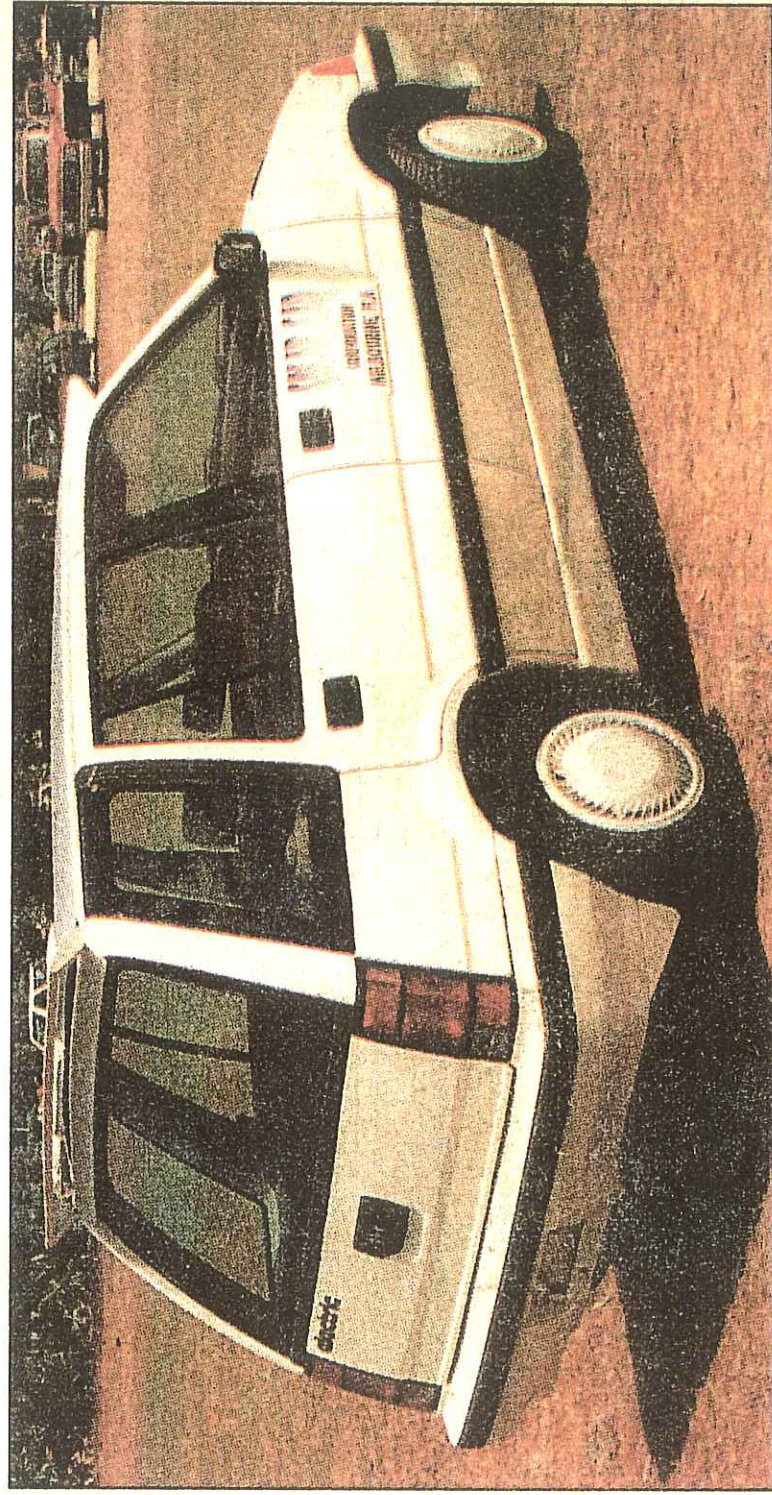
Cobb and Adams hope U.S. drivers will accept electric automobiles before gasoline prices equal those in Europe.

"If we succeed, believe me, Detroit will take notice."



Photos by Tim Shortt, FLORIDA TODAY

INVENTING DUO Robert Adams, left, and Doug Cobb formed Solar Car Corp. in Indialantic last year to build and sell solar-powered automobiles, such as this van.



MODIFIED HONDA Civic wagon has an electric motor and solar panels on the hood and roof. Solar Car Corp. President Doug Cobb says the car's top speed is 70 mph.