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Off the Interstate: Turning 'Blue Highways' Green

By Robert Chew

Kim Gallagher has a plan for America's "blue highways," the thousands of miles of dusty, old, single-lane heritage routes that wend desolately through the countryside: turn them green. Superseded by high-speed interstates, many of these narrow byways have been long forgotten, along with the faded small towns they connect, says Gallagher, a project manager for the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission. But off-the-beaten-path America could be revived, she says, by transforming little-used roadways into "green highways" that cater specifically to electric-vehicle drivers and other slow-moving, eco-minded tourists traveling by bicycle or on foot.

"We need innovation in [Michigan]. We've got beautiful scenery. And we see the low-speed, low-range electric-car industry bringing them together," says Gallagher, who is heading up a project to revitalize the U.S. 12 Heritage Trail in Michigan, her home state. She thinks green corridors could resuscitate Main Streets in Michigan and across the country. "This could be a small boon to local merchants, healthy-café owners, bed-and-breakfasts," she says. "We just want everyone to slow down and enjoy the view; the road is like a destination itself."

[\(See the top 10 green ideas of 2008.\)](#)

With tens of thousands of electric vehicles, or EVs, expected to hit U.S. asphalt over the next 10 years, Gallagher's idea of rebuilding tattered ribbons of country road is gaining traction. The initial concept of the green corridor may not be new — it started years ago with makeovers of abandoned rail beds to create scenic bike paths, often called "rails to trails" programs — but no state has yet created a comprehensive green-highway system designed to accommodate the electric-powered cars of the future.

The idea is to retrofit roadways with charging stations and tailor routes to low-speed, limited-distance electric and muscle-powered vehicles, including EVs, hybrids, bicycles, scooters, horses and Segways. The basic law: stay under 35 m.p.h., unless your vehicle is crash-tested and certified for higher speeds. Of

course, good old gas guzzlers are welcome too, as long as they go slow. "Everyone that's in this movement has a yearning for a slower pace," says Dean Curtis, who operates the website [Green Interstate](#). "The great thing about the green highways is that they already exist. People just have to be reacquainted with them."

[\(See the history of the electric car.\)](#)

But the green-highway movement is not a no-brainer, according to Dean Greb, a retired Chrysler marketing executive in Saline, Mich., and an EV enthusiast. He lives a half-mile from U.S. 12. "People don't fully understand the concept because they don't see a lot of electric cars and they don't know the trends," says Greb. "It will take funding and time to put in electric charge stations along the route and to promote the concept and to create events that draw people to spend their vacations driving from town to town."

"It has to be a bottom-up effort," says Curtis. "You need local buy-in every step of the way, so towns will pass resolutions to help start putting in charging infrastructure, put in special lanes and enforce speed limits."

This month, Gallagher and Peter Hanes, who manages 17 heritage routes for Michigan's Department of Transportation, will attend a meeting with representatives from the communities along U.S. 12 to decide exactly that: whether to pass a resolution to make the old roadway the country's first dedicated green corridor. U.S. 12 began as a patchwork of ancient Native American trails and became Michigan's first paved road, stretching 212 miles from Detroit to Chicago and connecting 25 quaint towns, each about 12 miles (or a day's lazy horse ride) apart.

[\(See pictures of the world's most polluted places.\)](#)

Many of them are nearly ghost towns these days, including the once popular auto-touring stop of Irish Hills, where two empty wooden observation towers loom over the rolling Michigan landscape. "A true green corridor might bring these places back to life," says Greb. "We could draw people from around the world. It could be the start of where the old-fashioned America meets the new."

If other, more famous heritage routes are any indication, a green-corridor network just might work. Route 66, the classic American road that runs 2,400 miles from coast to coast, is having a banner year in 2009 in terms of traffic, according to David Knudson, director of the National Route 66 Federation in Lake Arrowhead, Calif. "[Route 66] is more interesting than flying down the interstate; it's more scenic and it's low cost," he says. Seeing a different side of America and "traveling slow is what Route 66 is all about."

That's the message that Hanes hopes will get local communities on board and draw a new generation of travelers to a countryside they haven't seen yet — and at a pace they may not be accustomed to. "We can't get away from the need for speed, but what we can do is change the driver intent," Hanes says. "We want

people to experience the country and towns in their new EVs the same way people experienced it with their horse and buggies a hundred years ago." In other words, travelers, unplug while plugging in.

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