

# The Times-Tribune

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## 2005 Honda Accord Hybrid

**There's much excitement these days about the budding field of fuel-cells and their promise of 100-percent enviro-friendly motivation.**

I have to admit that the prospect of making a run to Lackawanna State Park and leaving naught behind but water vapor and pleasant memories is a tantalizing one.

But until the technically complex issue of how to mass-produce vast quantities of hydrogen — which already is mated to the oxygen in watery wedlock — is solved, mainstream fuel cell applications will remain this side of cold fusion.

Fortunately in these days of \$65-a-barrel oil prices, there are increasing numbers of gas-electric hybrid vehicles available to the car buyer.

On its face, hybrid technology is fairly straightforward: A gas engine is supplemented by an electric motor that is powered by a large battery, which is in turn recharged by deceleration, brake force, and the gas engine itself. The results of this mechanical symbiosis are higher-than-normal fuel efficiency with lower-than-normal emissions in a liveable family car.

Honda was first out of the gate in 1999 when it introduced the Insight, a sleek two-seat coupe that worked better as a technology statement than a daily driver. The company soon installed its Integrated Motor Assist (IMA) hybrid system in the Civic, making an already-frugal vehicle all the more stingy at the pump.

Both the Insight and Civic Hybrid employ electrically assisted small four-cylinder engines that, while efficient, offer less-than-scintillating performance. They aren't exactly golf carts, mind — they simply lack the sort of accelerative powers drivers often look for.

Come 2005 and the Accord Hybrid sedan, featuring this time a stronger electric motor and an extra pair of cylinders. The result is a five-person family hauler designed to meet the real-world challenges of interstate driving and three-dollar-a-gallon gas.

### The look

Looking for all the world like a garden-variety Accord sedan, the Hybrid is a successful exercise in function over form. This is a good and bad thing.

The good: Honda's long been known for sensible design. There's no pretense or unnecessary decoration to the Accord. With the company's rep for near-surgical engineering and bullet-proof reliability, the Accord doesn't need to put on airs.

The bad: It's my guess that a goodly number of environmentally minded car buyers probably like to be "seen being green." Unique-looking hybrids like the Toyota Prius are sure to attract attention quicker than a four-door Accord adorned with a tiny rear-lip spoiler and aerodynamically efficient alloy wheels.

### Under the hood

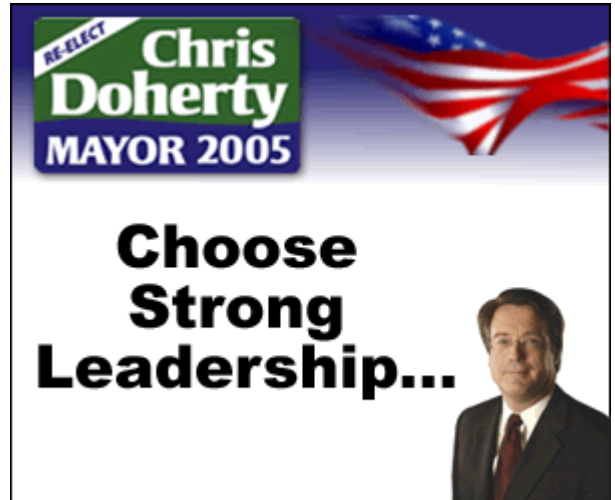
The bulk of the power is supplied by a highly modified version of Honda's smooth-running 3-liter V6 engine. Using the company's variable-valve timing system and auxiliary 16-hp electric motor, the V6 churns out an impressive 255 horses (15 more than the standard Accord V6) and 232 lb-ft of torque that's transferred to the front tires via a five-speed automatic transmission.

Though similar in displacement to the Accord's standard V6, the Hybrid V6 also features a dual-stage intake manifold, high-performance lock-up torque converter and — most importantly — the company's Variable Cylinder Management (VCM) system that shuts down the rear bank of cylinders during relaxed driving. The engine also shuts itself off when coming to a stop, immediately whirring back to life once the brake is released.

As is the case with almost all gas-electric vehicles, the Accord Hybrid keeps the driver informed of drivetrain goings-on through a digital display located in the gauge cluster. A simple bar graph indicates whether the gas engine is in "eco" mode (running on three cylinders), is being assisted by the electric motor or when the battery is getting re-juiced through braking or deceleration.

### ON THE ROAD

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Put the pedal to the metal and the Accord Hybrid scoots with authority, peeling roughly a half-second off the standard Accord V6's 0-60 mph time. It's a surprisingly quick car, considering its do-gooder intentions and 3,501-pound curb weight.

The trade-off for enthusiastic acceleration, of course, is gas mileage that falls well short of the EPA estimate of 29 city and 37 highway mpg. In one period of mixed driving, our tester averaged 24.5 mpg, not bad for a V6 but nowhere near the promised average. During another two-day period, though, I laid off the accelerator and got a far better 33.6 mpg in mixed driving.

The gas-electric tango manifests itself with brakes that feel a little grabby and noticeable downshifts during deceleration — both of which serve to recharge the nickle-metal hydride battery.

Our test vehicle also had the occasional habit of emitting a deep thrumming noise (think of feedback through a subwoofer) while cruising in "eco" mode. This happened on only in 90-degree-plus summertime weather and would, I imagine, warrant a quick trip to the dealership.

Otherwise, the Hybrid's handling and driving characteristics are pretty much in line with other Accords (which is to say excellent). The electric power steering is light and precise while the independent suspension is set up for comfort. The spacious cabin offers plenty of room for five, but the trunk area shrinks to 11.2 cubic feet to make room for the battery.

#### FOR THE MONEY

The Hybrid takes top spot as the most-expensive Accord with a base sticker price of \$30,140, nearly three grand north the top-of-the-line Accord EX powered by the traditional V6. Our test car included Honda's voice-activated satellite navigation system and XM satellite radio setup, which pushed the asking price to \$32,505.

When one considers that a similarly equipped Accord powered by Honda's smooth-revving 2.4-liter four-cylinder delivers nearly identical gas mileage (24 city and 34 highway) for almost \$6,000 less, the decision of whether to buy a Hybrid boils to depth of one's commitment to the environment as well as one's bank account.

The Hybrid makes a strong case for itself, though, by being the first gas-electric vehicle to mate new, environmentally friendly technology with the real-world expectations of drivers. Provided that Honda's stellar reputation for quality and reliability holds true here, the Accord Hybrid offers a pleasing mix of frugality and go-power, as well as a glimpse of the future.

Vehicle type: Four-door, five-passenger family sedan

Engine: Three-liter V6, 255 horsepower @ 6000 rpm; 232 lb-ft torque @ 5000 rpm, supplemented by permanent magnet motor, 16 hp @ 840 rpm, 100 lb-ft torque @ 840 rpm

Base price: \$31,990

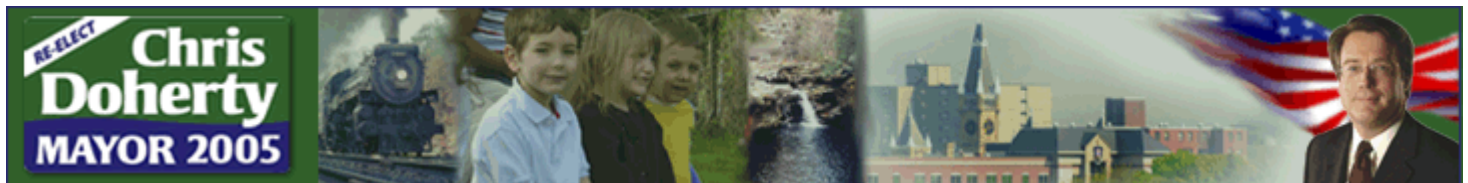
Price as tested: \$32,505

EPA fuel efficiency: 29 mpg city, 37 mpg highway

The good: Stout V6 power with teetotaling tendencies at the pump; commodious interior; promise of Honda reliability.

The bad: Pricey for a mid-sized sedan; ho-hum styling doesn't advertise one's Earth-saving commitment; as with any new technology, you pays your dime and takes your chances.

The bottom line: This high-tech family hauler is ready for the mainstream.



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