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With gas prices consistently on the rise and no sign of relief in sight, many drivers are feeling the sting, with more of their paychecks than ever before going to fill up the gas tank. Add to that the fact that high gas prices are putting a damper on summer vacation plans and pushing produce prices up in grocery stores across the nation, and things might appear bleak for drivers. It might look even bleaker for car dealerships.

Not so.

In fact, car dealerships in Carteret Country, including Rick Gladwell Chrysler-Dodge-Jeep, have seen an increase in cars with good gas economy. "I've seen an increase in economy vehicles and a slight decrease in cars that use a lot of gas," owner Rick Gladwell says.

While manufacturers are sweetening the deal to get drivers to purchase by offering gas incentives, many of today's drivers are opting for either the hybrid or fuel savers, which are simply vehicles that get excellent MPG (miles per gallon).

Hybrid vehicles are a popular option because, in addition to being the latest technology, they offer a plethora of advantages, including tax breaks and other incentives. But, perhaps most importantly, hybrid vehicles appeal to drivers who are looking to cut down on gasoline costs.

While much ado has been made about electric cars in the past, the hybrid is a combination of an electric motor with a gasoline engine. A hybrid's gasoline engine is much smaller than that of a traditional car. Additionally, hybrid vehicles have larger than normal batteries. Essentially, the vehicle uses both the battery and the gasoline for energy when driving, which allows for higher MPG (miles per gallon).

To ensure the best gas mileage with hybrids, drivers are encouraged to drive slower and at a consistent speed. Energy is also saved when hybrid drivers don't stop abruptly – stopping abruptly causes the battery to use more energy.

According to a 2006 report by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Energy, those hybrid vehicles with the best mileage include: the Honda Insight with 60 MPG in the city and 66 on the highway, the Toyota Prius with 60/51, and the Ford Escape (SUV) with 36/31.

For those drivers who prefer hybrid trucks or SUVs, there are plenty of hybrid options including the GMC Sierra Hybrid, the Chevrolet Silverado Hybrid, the Dodge Ram Hybrid, the Toyota Highlander Hybrid, and the Mercury Mariner Hybrid. Furthermore, some are speculating that hybrid cars could curb the United States' dependence on foreign oil. According to the Energy Information Administration, if the majority of drivers opt for hybrid vehicles, there's the potential to save more than 4,000

barrels of oil on a daily basis by the year 2025, leaving the United States with a surplus of gasoline. The surplus will likely, in turn, mean lower gas prices.

With global warming a major concern, hybrids are also an attractive choice for those who are concerned about the environment. Because they burn less gas than traditional vehicles, hybrid vehicles cut back on pollution and smog. Additionally, compared to traditional vehicles, hybrids emit less pollution when idling in traffic.

While hybrid drivers in Carteret County don't yet enjoy any tax incentives, according to Suzie Guthrie of the Carteret County Tax Department, there are federal tax benefits for hybrid drivers nationwide. The Energy Policy Act of 2005 states that hybrid drivers are entitled to a tax credit upon purchase of their vehicles. The amount of the tax credit depends, in part, on the make and model of the vehicle purchased.

According to the IRS, buyers of the 2006 Chevrolet Silverado 4WD Hybrid Pickup Truck, for example, are entitled to a tax credit of \$650. For a full listing of eligible vehicles and other conditions of the tax credit, consumers should consult their accountants or the IRS directly.

In addition to the tax credit, some states offer hybrid owners other benefits. Several states, including Florida and California, allow drivers of hybrid vehicles to use the HOV (High Occupancy Vehicle) lanes regardless of the number of passengers in the car while hybrid drivers in Baltimore enjoy deep discounts at participating parking garages.

North Carolina has yet to adopt incentives for owners of hybrid vehicles, but hybrid drivers may find they enjoy car insurance discounts. Travelers Insurance, for example, trumpets the fact that it offers up to a ten percent discount for hybrid drivers.

Of course, no vehicle – hybrid or otherwise – is without its disadvantages. However, one major myth surrounding the hybrid is simply not true. There has been some concern that the hybrid's electricity poses a major hazard to both the hybrid's occupants and EMS workers in accidents, but Morehead City Firefighter Paul Barnes disagrees.

“It's (the electricity) still low voltage. We've run into more trouble with the large capacity batteries. There's more potential (of a hazard) in a wreck if battery acid is spilled. That is more of a hazard than the electricity,” he says.

Despite its popularity, whether or not the hybrid is around for the long-term is yet to be seen. Randall Parker of Parker Honda and Parker Pontiac-Buick-GMC, Inc. in Morehead City believes the hybrid is merely a transitional vehicle. “It is very much an interim technology that will bridge the technology gap between a strictly internal combustion engine and fuel cells,” he says.

The evolution of fuel cells in hybrids is set to lead to one thing: the elimination of the gasoline engine, which will be replaced with fuel cells. In conjunction with the hybrid's battery and electric motor, the fuel cells will power the vehicle.

While hybrids tend to have a higher price tag than traditional vehicles, drivers can still enjoy the benefits of high MPG with fuel savers. Fuel savers are simply traditional vehicles that get high mileage per gallon.

The EPA and Department of Energy list the top fuel saving vehicles as the Volkswagen Beetle and Volkswagen Golf with 37/44, and the Volkswagen Jetta with 36/41. Alternately, the trucks with the highest MPG include the Ford Ranger Pickup (24/29) and the Mazda B2300 (24/29).

Donn Buck, General Manager and Partner at Morehead City Ford, has noticed an increase in the fuel savers Ford Focus and Ford Fusion while Mile Toler, Owner of Kurtis Chevrolet Inc, has seen a rise in sales of the Chevrolet Cobalt and Chevrolet Impala, also fuel savers.

According to Gladwell, another popular vehicle option for those looking for good fuel economy is the Jeep Liberty and other diesel-based vehicles.

“Diesel runs very clean,” he says, and while “diesel is almost as much as gasoline, it (the diesel powered vehicle) uses 25 percent less fuel and has the same horsepower.”

Ultimately, whether it's by driving a hybrid, a fuel saver, or even a diesel-based vehicle, drivers can conserve gasoline while saving considerable money filling up the gas tank. And, while the hybrid is only interim technology, it is still a step in the right direction, benefiting drivers and the environment while slowly decreasing the nation's dependence on foreign oil.