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Lafayette '60s Beetle, now powered by sun

By Pippa Fisher



Steve Falk with Baby Blue Photo Pippa Fisher

Former Lafayette city manager Steve Falk, who won the Sunrise Rotary Club's grand prize last year of a completely renovated 1961 baby blue Volkswagen Beetle, says he is using the car every day. And with the personalized plate, people will recognize and see him coming . but they won't hear him.

That's because Falk has converted the car. It is completely electrified now.

"I'm trying to live my values," explains Falk who resigned from his long-held city manager position at the end of last year, citing his conflict of conscience around housing policy and climate change. He notes that his car that he calls Baby Blue is charged entirely from the solar he has powering his home. As his license plate holder says, "Electric Beetle powered by the sun."

The car no longer has the distinctive VW Beetle engine noise, but otherwise it is in mint 1961 condition.

The Rotarians had spent a year renovating the car that had been sitting, neglected for decades. After their many volunteer hours Falk says the car looked spectacular.

Falk took delivery of the car and noted the warning from the project leader to always carry a fire extinguisher because the engine had a history of catching fire.

As Falk says, this didn't sit well with his wife, Nancy, who informed him immediately after the Rotary members left that they could not have a car prone to catching fire in her garage.

Prompted by her logic, Falk decided to look into the options for electrifying the vehicle. After much research he found a company, EV4U, near Mount Shasta, one of only three companies in California that specialize in converting vehicles, and spoke to founder Richard Van Wyhe who has converted dozens of cars, mostly VWs. Falk decided to take the car up there.

Falk explains that with a 34-horsepower engine, the car was woefully underpowered. "It had a top speed of 57 mph," he says, so he and his son Nathan mapped out a route using only back roads, avoiding freeways.

The trip took two days and was almost thwarted by the winter's heavy flooding on some of the smaller roads. Undeterred, man and machine navigated gingerly through the underwater roads, chronicled on video by Nathan and included in the complete story of Baby Blue on a video Falk posted on YouTube (see link below).

The same car that Van Wyhe delivered back to Falk during much sunnier weather two months later, now has a three-phase AC induction motor in the back and modern lithium ion fuel cells under the hood. A monitor on the dashboard shows how much charge is left on the battery. The car can do 90 miles on a full charge.

Whereas the top speed had been 57 mph, Baby Blue now does 75 mph comfortably and is probably capable of much more, says Falk.

"It drives great," he says. "It's got so much pickup that you have to be careful not to stress the transaxle too much. It just gets up and goes."

With the weight more evenly distributed now between the motor in the back and the battery in the front, Falk agrees with those who say the car actually has improved stability. He says he hasn't noticed a difference in steering.

And the cost? All Falk will say on the subject is that he could have bought a new car for less.

But it's one less combustion engine on the planet.

To see the complete story of Falk's 1961 Baby Blue electric VW Beetle conversion go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJyI5i7UUNU>

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