

# South Africa to roll out first electric-powered vehicle

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LOCAL motorists can look forward to carving huge chunks off their monthly petrol bills from 2010 onwards with the launch of the first South African-made, electric-powered family car.

The six-seater Joule, launched at the Paris Car Show this weekend, was designed by a team of South Africans with R50 million worth of support from a government-funded scientific innovation scheme.

The Joule, to be made by Cape Town-based Optimal Energy, is designed to run at speeds of up to 135km/h and have a daily range of 200km (or 400km when fitted with a spare battery).

Owners would have to plug in their vehicles for a seven-hour battery charge overnight, but the company says motorists can expect to save up to 90% on fuel costs and up to 50% on service costs because the Joule's electric-powered engine is cheaper to maintain.

The final price tag has not been fixed, but Optimal Energy says the car is likely to retail for about R200 000. The company aims to produce up to 50 000 vehicles a year for the domestic and export markets.

Speaking at a function in Cape Town last month, outgoing science and technology minister Mosibudi Mangena



A PROTOTYPE of the new South African-made electric car, the Joule, that went on display to journalists and car enthusiasts at the Paris Car Show this weekend

acknowledged that the launch of a South African-made electric car for the export market might seem to be a "foolhardy venture". However, Mangena said he believed that the Joule had special attributes and advantages that would make the venture successful.

The main figure behind it is Kobus Meiring, an engineer who worked on the Rooivalk attack helicopter and other hi-tech projects at Denel, Atlas Aircraft Corporation and the SA Large Telescope programme.

Mangena said that although petrol- and diesel-driven

engines were likely to remain dominant for the next few decades, the government had decided to lend financial support through the National Research Foundation and Innovation Fund.

"The talented individuals who put their heads together to develop this electric car are the kind of South Africans we need to lead this country into a knowledge-based economy."

The body and interior were designed by former South African Keith Helfert, who was closely involved in the design of several recent Jaguar models.

