Neighborhood electric vehicles street legal

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In Part 1 of this series titled “Everything you need to know about electric micro-cars, NEVs, LSVs, & golf carts,” we discussed the various categories of micro-cars, neighborhood electric vehicles (NEVs), low-speed vehicles (LSVs), and golf carts. We also covered how these vehicles are becoming such popular car alternatives for so many people. Now in Part 2, we’ll dive into the important topic of what makes these vehicles street-legal for use on public roads.

As we discussed in Part 1 of this series, the term LSV (or low-speed vehicle) is the only important consideration here, as “NEV” is merely a colloquial nickname. The term LSV, on the other hand, is codified into law by the US Department of Transportation and is a federally recognized category of motor vehicles by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

That’s the key to making many of these tiny cars street-legal for use on public roads, though the downside of that is you’ll probably have to register, tag, and insure your LSV in most states in the US.

One point should be made extremely clear though: In almost every case, the question of whether or not an LSV is street-legal comes down to its manufacturer, not to you as the owner or driver. Outside of a few specific cases in a minority of cities and states, non-street-legal LSVs can not be modified or turned into street-legal LSVs by their owners. They need to be originally manufactured to meet federal regulatory guidelines.

In order for LSVs to be considered for sale in the US to be used on public roads, they must be produced to meet federal regulations for LSVs. This means that they must be designed and manufactured from the outset for street-legal use.

The first step is ensuring that the factory is registered with the NHTSA. Before buying an LSV, you should always ask the vendor if the vehicles are registered with the NHTSA. If the answer is “don’t worry about it, they only go 25 mph,” then 99 out of 100 times you’re not looking at a street-legal LSV.

Without this critical step of being registered and approved as an LSV manufacturer by the NHTSA, proper VINs (vehicle identification numbers) can not be assigned to the vehicles for registration. A VIN that conforms to the same rules as those used on all street-legal vehicles in the US - including full-size cars and trucks for highway use - is just one of more than a dozen federal requirements for LSVs.

This is the step that most foreign-manufactured and imported LSVs miss, since very few overseas LSV

factories are actually registered with the NHTSA, meaning they can’t offer a US VIN code. Chinese micro-cars that are imported to the US often have VINs on the frame, but they are Chinese VINs. That’s the case with my internet-famous mini-truck from China. It has a VIN, but it means nothing in the US since it’s a Chinese VIN.

Next, there are several other requirements that mimic those for full-size cars, from visibility to safety equipment. Low-speed vehicles must have backup cameras with very specific viewing angle requirements. Again, these are the same requirements used for full-size cars and trucks in the US. Slapping a camera on the back of a micro-car or golf cart isn’t enough to fulfill this requirement.

These are some of the more difficult and cumbersome regulations applied to LSVs since they share the same rules as existing cars, but they’re not the only ones. LSVs must also have lap belts or 3-point seat belts that meet DOT requirements for full-size cars as well as windshields that use specific DOT-approved glazing. Both the windshields and the seat belts must be produced by suppliers that are already registered with the DOT. Simply installing any basic seat belt isn’t enough.

Where LSVs differ in street-legal requirements from full-size cars largely comes down to the more complicated safety requirements. Crumple zones, airbags, radar, and other major pieces of safety equipment aren’t required in LSVs, and the vehicles themselves aren’t required to undergo crash testing. If they were, the results likely wouldn’t be pretty due to the reduced safety equipment in the vehicles.

That’s one of the reasons that LSVs are limited to just 25 mph (40 km/h) top speed and can only be operated on roads with speed limits of 35 mph (56 km/h). Both of these are part of the federally mandated LSV regulations and are designed to prevent these vehicles from mixing with larger full-size vehicles at higher speeds, where the result of crashes are more likely to be fatal.

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