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STAFF PHOTO BY PATRICK WHITTEMORE

WONDER MODEL: Carl Dietrich, chief executive of Terrafugia, shows a model of the car-plane his company is aiming to build. Up first for the company: A key wind test of the model set for next week.

Jetsons-style car seeks model liftoff

By JAY FITZGERALD

Backers of a new hybrid car-plane hope the concept will really take off after a key test next week.

A working prototype of The Transition — the nickname of the flying Jetsons-like contraption being built by an MIT doctoral candidate and colleagues — won't be ready for about two years.

If all goes well, Carl Dietrich, chief executive of Terrafugia, the company designing and building Transition, said actual products could be commercially available to

drive off lots by 2009.

"I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't think it would work," said Dietrich, who's now working toward his Ph.D. in aeronautics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

But first things first: A model of Transition will be tested next week in an MIT wind tunnel to see if it even theoretically works as designed.

In coming weeks, Terrafugia (Latin for "escape from land") could also start accepting deposits from flying enthusiasts eager to be able to drive Transition from

their home right to an airport and take off.

"Trust me, I've heard it," said the 29-year-old Dietrich, when asked how often Transition is compared to the flying vehicles in the cartoon show "The Jetsons."

With retractable wings and a propeller at the back, Transition will be small enough to fit into an average home garage.

Using super-unleaded gasoline for its internal-combustion engine, the two-seat Transition is designed to be able to cruise at an average 120 miles per hour in the air

— and drive at highway speeds on the road.

Under federal law, it would have to conform to highway-vehicle safety standards if used on roads. And it could only take off and land at airports, those laws stipulate.

"It's going to be an eye-opening experience," said Sue McManus, a manager at the Alpha One flight school in Plymouth. Next week, the Terrafugia team will outline details of its futuristic product to members of the Plymouth Aero Club.

Club member Bill

Thurber, a pilot, said he's intrigued with the idea of a hybrid car-airplane, something he said has been talked about since the Wright Brothers' famous first flights.

But he questioned whether there's a big enough market for the Transition, which, as of now, is projected to cost about \$150,000. (A new Cessna 172 plane costs about \$200,000.)

One local flying expert, who asked not to be named, questioned whether Transition will perform well enough for pilots, who love speed and mobility.