

High on Honda -- Franklin County residents make Accord, Civic the top-selling cars - and that's no surprise

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Despite last year's troubling jump in gasoline prices, which had Central Ohioans paying more than \$3 a gallon, pickup trucks, minivans and SUVs were among the most popular with Franklin County new-vehicle buyers in 2005.

But when it came to vehicle makes, Honda Motor Co. Ltd. was the sales leader.

New-car registrations in the county show the Honda Accord was tops with buyers, with 1,889 registrations in 2005. In fact, Honda makes three of the five most-purchased vehicles in Franklin County last year and five of the county's top 15.

For even the most detached observers, that likely comes as no shock. The Japanese automaker has a huge presence in Central Ohio, where it employs more than 12,000 workers at plants making Accords, Civics and other models and engines.

Still, the popularity of Hondas in the county ran counter to Americans' automotive preferences.

Honda turned out 354,000 coupes and sedans at its Marysville assembly plant last year.

While Honda sales to its production workers, who receive price discounts, likely contributes to the company's sales base in Franklin County, car dealer Jeff Brindley thinks demand for Hondas is high nonetheless.

"The dealer network all over the country pretty much sells every car that Honda builds," said the president of Roush Honda in Westerville.

Adaptable market

Steve Pinkston, who operates Mazda Direct and Toyota Direct in Columbus, was surprised to learn Franklin County residents bought more Honda Civic cars and Odyssey minivans individually than Toyota Camrys. The Camry was the top-selling car in the U.S. last year, marketer J.D. Power and Associates reported.

"It surprises me that the Odyssey outsells the Camry," Pinkston said, "but then (Honda) makes great cars."

Pinkston said many customers looked at Japanese vehicles last year because of soaring fuel prices.

"It influenced hybrid sales as well," he said. "We never have any Toyota Prius (hybrids) in stock. I have a 90-day waiting list for them."

More hybrids are expected to hit the market this year and in 2007, including the Honda Fit, a four-door hatchback, and a Camry version. Pinkston expects deliveries could be slow.

"The industry cannot adapt fast enough (for the demand)," he said.

Still, plenty of gas-guzzlers drove off dealers' lots and into Franklin County driveways last year. Among the top 10 models registered in the county were two pickup trucks, the Ford F-150 and the Chevrolet Silverado 1500; the Chevrolet Trailblazer, a sport-utility vehicle; and two minivans, the Dodge Caravan and Honda Odyssey.

Rhett Ricart, a co-owner of Ricart Automotive Group in Columbus, said rising gas prices discouraged some buyers last year, but others were undeterred.

"Truck buyers buy trucks," he said. "Where gasoline prices hurt were sale of SUVs. But once gas comes down to \$2 a gallon or so, everyone starts buying again."

Adaptable consumers

Dave Cole, chairman of the Center for Automotive Research in Ann Arbor, Mich., isn't making bets on what vehicles will be popular this year.

"Dynamics of the car market are crazy right now," he said. "It's hard to understand the market now."

Consider, he said, that General Motors Corp. planned to eliminate a third shift at its Moraine truck-manufacturing plant, but kept the line working longer last year because of stiff demand.

Still, Cole thinks gas prices continue to worry consumers.

"But by their actions, they're demonstrating that (gas prices) aren't as important as once thought," he said. "What consumers may be doing is balancing their lifestyle with the costs. Maybe they're not willing to give up going to their cottage for \$500 a year."

Cole said there's no telling what 2006 will deliver in auto sales, and he wouldn't speculate on what effects the financial troubles of GM and Ford Motor Co. might have on the industry.

"If anyone went into Chapter 11 that would make (sales) more difficult, (but) most people don't believe that's going to happen," he said. "If they don't believe it, they won't change their buying habits."