Road-worthy plane? Or sky-worthy car?

February 3 2009, David Chandler

The Transition® Roadable Light Sport Aircraft Proof of Concept with wings extended at Lawrence Municipal Airport. Photo courtesy / Terrafugia

(PhysOrg.com) -- What began as an MIT student project has evolved into a working prototype of a two-seater airplane that can be quickly converted into a road-worthy car. The car-plane has begun test flights and is expected to go on sale next year. But at a price similar to that of a new Lamborghini, this is one car that you really don't want to get dinged in traffic.

"Flying cars" have been a science-fiction staple for decades, but have never made for a practical commercial product. The graduates of MIT's Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics think their plane, called the Transition, could change that. Featuring wings that fold out of the way at the touch of a button, it offers a solution for aviators flying to places

where finding ground transportation may be difficult. The craft could also allow a pilot who encounters bad weather to simply land at a small airport and continue the trip by road.

The Transition® Roadable Light Sport Aircraft Proof of Concept runs on premium unleaded auto gas. Carl Dietrich, CEO/CTO is shown with the Transition®. Photo courtesy / Terrafugia

The plane is made from modern composite materials, uses an advanced airplane engine, but runs on ordinary unleaded automotive gasoline. With its wings folded, it can fit in an ordinary garage or parking space.

The alumni formed a new company, Terrafugia, to produce and market the vehicle -- which they prefer to call a "roadable plane" because it is primarily an airplane but can be converted into a roadworthy car. The company is taking advantage of a new licensing classification offered by the Federal Aviation Administration -- light sport aircraft -- to make the new plane possible.

The Woburn-based company was founded by CEO Carl Dietrich '99, SM '03, PhD '07, COO Anna Mracek Dietrich '04, SM '06, and VP of

Engineering Samuel Schweighart SM '01, PhD '05 The group began working on the project while they were still at MIT, and won a prize for their plans in the 2006 $100KEntrepreneurship Competition.

Provided by MIT