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2011 Honda Odyssey

The word minivan generates all sorts of images, but it's safe to say that lightning bolts aren't among them. Yet the lightning bolt will be a key element in the design of the fourth generation Honda Odyssey, unveiled as a concept at February's Chicago Auto Show.

This is standard Honda auto showbiz. Although it was presented as a concept, the Odyssey's exterior is 99 percent production accurate, according to a Honda insider. About the only show element unlikely for the showroom version is the brake system, which employed flashy, race-style cross-drilled rotors and painted calipers.

It's a much sportier look for Honda's popular people-hauler. A wider track; more aggressive fender flares, particularly in front; a slightly lower roofline, a rear spoiler that wraps around the rear window; and a steeper rake to the windshield all contribute to a design that's significantly sleeker than the current Odyssey.

But the key departure in the new look, according to project design chief Catlain Matei, is a dip in the rear beltline that he calls the lightning bolt.

Matei says the bolt serves two functions. The beltline dip gives third row passengers a little better view of the outside world, and it also peeps up the appearance of the whole package, providing look that's surprisingly sporty by minivan standards.

At 202.8 inches, the Odyssey concept is a little longer than the current model, a little lower at 68.3 inches, and considerably wider: 78.5 inches versus the current 77.1. The wheelbase is unchanged at 118.1 inches, and all these dimensions are expected to be present in the production van.

The show van lacked interior furnishings, and its darkened windows made it impossible to see inside. However, Honda says there will be more room for second- and third-row occupants, plus accommodations for three child seats in the third row.

The powertrain will continue to be a 3.5-liter SOHC V6 with variable cylinder management, mated with an automatic transmission. The current automatic has five forward speeds, and a six-speed model is anticipated for the next generation, though Honda sources would neither confirm nor deny this expectation.

There was no official word on engine output, either, though insiders suggest a small increase from the current 244 horsepower and 240 or 245 pound-feet of torque.

However, Honda was willing to forecast substantial improvements in fuel economy. The current Odyssey is rated for 17 mpg City, 25 Highway. Honda anticipates ratings of 19/28 mpg for this next-generation van, thanks in part to variable cylinder management. The Honda system shuts down two and sometimes three of the V6 cylinders, depending on driver demand, to enhance fuel economy. It'll be a standard feature on all models.

Beyond that, Poconi forecasts an improved fun-to-drive index and, in typical auto show hyperbole, suggests that the new Odyssey will redefine the minivan. That's a strong assertion, but it does seem likely it will stand out from the crowd a little more than the current van.

Pricing remains months away. Current Odyssey prices range from \$26,805 for a basic LX model to \$40,755 for the top-of-the-line Touring edition. Expect small increases across the board when the new vans roll into showrooms for the 2011 model year.

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