

VEGA DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION HISTORY, 1968-1975

by John Hinckley, GMAD-Lordstown Vega Launch Coordinator

Not much has been written about the early development of the regular Chevy Vega, from which the Cosworth-Vega was later derived. While digging in earnest through my old Lordstown files to research information specifically for the articles on the Cosworth derivative, I came across a great deal of old memos that were part of my Production Planning job in those days, planning the assembly process, plant conversion/rearrangement, and tooling for the original car during the two years prior to the Vega production launch in late June, 1970. I thought I'd compile the highlights in chronological fashion, and some of those issues will generate stories of their own.

The Chevy Vega was conceived in 1968 as a simple, low-cost transportation vehicle to utilize the newly-developed all-aluminum die-cast engine block technology. In October of 1968, there was only one body style (the "11" style notchback coupe), one engine, one transmission (the MB1 Torque-Drive manually-shifted 2-speed automatic), no headliner, one base trim level, a bench seat, molded rubber floor covering, no glove box, no air-conditioning option, ventilation only through the upper dash direct from the wiper plenum, and exterior paint on the interior.

As the program progressed into development, the market changed, and so did the product:

December, 1968 – Hatchback, station wagon, and panel delivery styles added. Kickpad floor-level ventilation added. Optional performance engine ("L11" 2-barrel) added; predicted at 20%, actually ran at 75%. Bucket seats replaced bench seat as standard equipment. Carpeting and headliners added for hatchback and station wagon. Air-conditioning option added; predicted at 10%, actually ran at 45%.

February, 1969 – Opel three- and four-speed transmissions added (3-speed standard, others optional), Powerglide added (now four transmissions), mechanical fuel pump replaced by in-tank electric pump, power steering option added, base "11" style notchback trim upgraded to match hatchback and wagon (carpet and headliner).

April, 1969 – Gauge-pack cluster option added, HD suspension and wide tire option added (ran at 40%), adjustable seat back option added (ran at 45%), bumpers restyled, lower valance panels added, swing-out quarter window option added (ran at 10%).

July, 1969 – Electrically-heated backlite option added (ran at 10%), "GT" package option added at \$325.00 (ran at 35%), bright window-frame and roof drip moldings added to hatchback and wagon (instead of painted).

September, 1969 – Interior trim color painting now standard (previously only part of Deluxe Interior and “GT” – others were to get exterior color inside), D-88 Side Paint Stripe added (ran at 15%), “Mag-Style” steel wheels added to “GT” option, lower valance panels restyled again with big round front lamps and painted body color. Plastic front fender liners cancelled due to \$2.28 cost per car.

June 26, 1970 – start of 1971 model production

This is essentially how the car launched as a 1971 model. After the National GM strike (9/70-11/70) ended, bright roof drip moldings were added to the base “11” style notchback; moldings were sent to dealers to update units already in the field in December. The car still had no glove box.

May 1, 1971 – running at 100 jobs per hour.

August, 1971 – 1972 model launched with changeover in 5 days; glove box added, cloth custom trim option added, 3-speed automatic added (now five transmissions).

October, 1971 – Fisher Body and Chevrolet plants combined under GM Assembly Division management; major production losses through March, 1972 due to work stoppages, slowdowns, sabotage, and the politics of local union consolidation into one local. Much negative national publicity (“60 Minutes”, “20-20”, “blue-collar blues”, etc.), supervisors shot at and run off the road on the way home from work, company cars “keyed”, bashed, and flipped over leaving the plant gate by hooded pickets.

March 6-27, 1972 – Local strike over GMAD efficiency improvements, settled with no changes – effort begun to improve relations with local union. Production resumes with normal attainment of 100 per hour (1600/day).

August, 1972 – 1973 model launched.

September, 1972 – Vega production begins at Ste. Therese, Quebec, on one shift at 35 per hour (280/day); total Vega production now 1880/day.

January, 1973 – Wood-grain station wagon option introduced (ran at 8%).

March, 1973 – Deluxe “11” style option introduced – vinyl top, etc. (ran at 3%), Station wagon roof luggage rack added.

April, 1973 – First Cosworth Pilot Program conducted at Ste. Therese, Quebec Assembly Plant (Lordstown Assembly not operating due to adjacent Fisher Body Stamping Plant strike); seven silver cars built for Engineering.

May, 1973 – Ste. Therese adds a second shift to increase plant output to 480/day; total Vega production now 2080/day. “Millionth Vega” option added at \$500, 6500 built at 10 per hour from 5/1 to 7/1. “Spring Stripe” package added.

August, 1973 – major change for 1974 model, 3 week model change – new underbody welding system, major body structure changes for new bumpers, new front and rear end styling.

December, 1973 – Ste. Therese increases volume from 35 to 50 per hour for plant output of 800 per day; total Vega production now 2400/day.

January, 1974 – Plastic front fender liners added (after replacing thousands of sets of rusted-out fenders under warranty on 1971-74 models).

February, 1974 – “Spirit of America” package (white trim, vinyl top, side stripes, etc.) added – 7500 built through May.

April, 1974 – Cosworth emission certification car burns exhaust valves at 46,000 miles of 50,000-mile test; program delayed to 1975 model year – was to have launched in May, 1974.

August, 1974 – major 1975 model change – Pontiac Astre added, third luxury trim level added; “rolling model change” at 100 per hour with no downtime or lost units (GM’s first).

February, 1975 – Five Cosworth Pilot units built during the first week, both Cosworth emission certification cars successfully complete 50,000-mile test at the end of the same week.

March, 1975 – EPA indicates Certificate will be issued on the 25th, first salable production Cosworth is built on the 27th.

April 17, 1975 – Lordstown Media Event for Cosworth production launch.

You know the rest – at this point, it was planned to also convert the South Gate, California, Arlington, Texas, and Lakewood, Georgia plants to Vega/Monza production, which would mean four U.S. and one Canadian plants building nearly 5,000 per day. Buick would get a new version of the Vega and there would be 4 cylinder (standard and Cosworth), 262 V8, and rotary engines. Sanity prevailed, however, as sales began to fade, and those plans were cancelled.

I was promoted and transferred back to GMAD Production Engineering at the Tech Center in July, 1975 after six years at Lordstown, and that’s where my Vega and Cosworth files stopped. I detail some of the fascinating Vega development “stories” from 1968-1970 in my other articles!