

Seattle's love for 'green' cars pays off as the technology goes mainstream



Rich Costello works in Carkeek Park with one of the city's Neighborhood Electric Vehicles. (Photo by Barry Gibbons)

For electric vehicle proponents, Seattle is a great place to be.

The city is on the leading edge of an EV wave that could hit the U.S. as soon as next year, says Steven Lough, president of the Seattle Electric Vehicle Association (SEVA).

Lough says he hasn't seen this kind of open-armed embrace of EV technology in Seattle in the 30 years he has been an advocate for the alternative-energy vehicles.

"We're very excited and thrilled that this is finally coming to reality," Lough says.

The city's long-running interest in EVs and recent grants from the federal government have placed Seattle among the country's leaders in developing and spreading the technology. Here are a few examples of how the city is advancing EVs:

Charging stations

The biggest buzz-generator is the city's participation in a pilot project with Nissan and Phoenix company eTec to build 2,500 charging stations for electric vehicles.

The EV Project, which is funded by a \$100 million U.S. Energy Department grant, will put 1,000 stations free of charge into the garages of people who buy a new Nissan Leaf electric car, expected to hit Seattle in 2010. The remaining 1,500 chargers will be placed in local public and commercial venues, such as shopping malls and park-and-ride lots.

Hybrid fleet

Seattle clinched the deal with Nissan and eTec because of the city's involvement in an Energy Department program to evaluate the use of plug-in electric hybrid vehicles in city motor pools, says Rich Feldman, who advises Mayor Greg Nickels on EV policy.

Nearly half of the city's compact and subcompact cars are hybrid gas/electric vehicles (mostly Toyota Priuses), giving Seattle one of the largest fleets of hybrids in the nation with 400, says Chris Wiley, the city's Green Fleets coordinator.

The fleet includes a few Neighborhood Electric Vehicles -- small battery-powered cars that can travel up to 35 mph -- as well as electric bicycles and Segways. The city also purchased four heavy-duty hybrid trucks in 2007 and plans to expand hybrids in its specialty fleet as truck technology develops.

Largely because of its deployment of these green vehicles, the city won an "E-Visionary" award in May from the World

EV growth

An estimated 1 million to 1.5 million plug-in electric cars could be on the road within five years. According to other estimates, a third of all new cars in the Northwest may be plug-in electric cars by 2030.

-- Associated Press

Electric Vehicle Association.

Wiley says the new generation of all-electric vehicles, such as the Leaf, will be carefully evaluated for inclusion in the fleet. "We're absolutely open to that," he says. "For short trips they could be ideal, but we need to kick the tires on the vehicle first."

Greener transit

Before leaving to become the deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, King County Executive Ron Sims worked to bring electrification to the region's mass-transit system. King County Metro Transit now operates 214 hybrid-electric buses and about 160 electric trolleys -- the buses that connect to overhead electrical wires downtown and in surrounding neighborhoods.

The city will receive 113 more hybrid-electric buses in 2010 to replace older models and to expand the fleet, according to Rochelle Ogershok, public affairs manager at the King County Department of Transportation.

"Seattle is one of three or four North American cities in the lead for the EV approach," says SEVA's Lough. "Vancouver, B.C., is another, along with San Francisco. We're set to become a guiding light for other parts of the country."

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