

The future of electric cars in the Quad Cities

Getting charged up:



Coming home from work and plugging in your car — just like your cell phone — may not be part of your daily routine. It could happen sooner than you think, however, if a group of Quad Cities leaders and business people has anything to say about it.

By Becky Langdon

In June 2011 a committee met for the first time to begin a study on electric vehicles, or EVs. The committee, headed up by Paul Rumler, Senior Vice President of Community Development, Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce, will be looking at the infrastructure necessary to support EVs, how to get funding for public charging stations, and how to encourage public adoption.

One committee member who is optimistic about EVs succeeding is Steve Chesley, Executive Manager of the Quad Cities chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA).

"What we have right now is a perfect storm," says Chesley. "Gas prices are increasing, there's the desire to reduce dependence on foreign oil, the desire to be green, government incentives... we think the Quad Cities needs to be prepared for it because there's going to be demand."

Another committee member committed to EVs succeeding is Lujack's Marketing Director, Gwen Tombergs.

"We're the only Chevy dealer in the Quad Cities on the Iowa side of the river, so we've been trying to be proactive to help get the community ready," says Tombergs.

Ready or not, EVs are coming. There were two Chevy Volts along with product specialists at the John Deere Classic in July, and Lujacks should have one arriving in late summer. The Volt is a plug-in hybrid electric vehicle with an extended range, meaning it runs on pure battery power for the first thirty-five miles before the gas-powered generator kicks in to extend the range by several hundred miles. The Nissan LEAF, which will arrive several months behind the Volt, is a battery electric vehicle that relies exclusively on an electric charge and has a range of about 100 miles.

While the committee met only recently, the groundwork was laid in February. The local NECA chapter, Lujack's, and the NewVentures Center collaborated to host an information session in downtown Davenport with over thirty city and county leaders. NECA's Executive Director of Market Development, Rob Colgon, flew in to present an overview of the EV market and the charging infrastructure needed for it to succeed.



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— Rob Colgon, NECA's Executive Director of Market Development

"I thought it was pretty forward-thinking of Steve and Gwen to try to get out in front of this," says Colgon. "The mayors and the city officials were excited about the opportunity to be known as green and innovative."

Another committee member is Molly Arp Newell of EnviroNET, Inc. in Davenport. Newell is a consultant brought in by the Delta Redevelopment Institute in Chicago to help frame up the questions and issues related to building an EV infrastructure in the Quad Cities.

Delta is a non-profit environmental, economic group that has identified the Quad Cities region as a Sustainable Reuse Pilot Community. They've agreed to examine the potential for EV charging stations as part of their work. Newell says that Delta's aim is to get a pilot demonstration charging station on a brownfield area. The biggest challenge is funding.

"We're trying to optimize the chances of a Department of Energy grant to get something up and running," says Newell.

The adoption of EVs will represent a cultural change for everyone. Instead of gas stations, plug-in electric vehicles will require charging stations. Buying a car will be a different experience for consumers, too.

Colgon says, "They'll have to deal with an electrical contractor and an inspector, and might have to add a service upgrade to support the charger."

While the process may seem like more work, NECA's goal is to create a great customer experience by training and equipping electrical contractors.

The first wave of charging stations will most likely be installed in people's garages, so that EV owners can charge their cars overnight during low power usage times. Consumers and businesses will have to choose a charging station based on cost and charging speeds.

A Level 1 charger will fully charge your car in about eight to ten hours. Level 2 chargers take four to six hours. In test markets in the East, these are the chargers most homeowners are putting in their garages. They run about \$2,000. Level 3 chargers can recharge a battery in fifteen to thirty minutes, but these can cost \$50,000 or more due to limited supplies.

Chesley says that most businesses are looking at Level 2 chargers. While four to six hours may seem like a long time to wait, it may simply require a mindset change. When you go to the store to get groceries or go to the mall, you plug in your car to "top it off" before you head home to charge it overnight. The NorthPark and SouthPark malls, downtown areas, and other business are all potential locations for charging stations. As the technology is embraced, battery life and charging stations will only improve.

"This is a big culture change for everyone that could be great for the economy and great for the environment," says Tombergs.

The potential economic and environmental impact shouldn't be taken lightly.

Consumers who charge at home will spend between fifty cents and a dollar-fifty per day, depending on utility rates.

Colgon says, "It's like buying your gasoline at fifty or seventy cents a gallon."

Federal tax credits of up to \$7,500 can reduce the cost of the vehicles as well.

The environmental impact is equally important. According to the Electric Drive Transportation Association, recharging the battery of an EV with a Level 1 or Level 2 charger produces less than half the greenhouse gases of the most efficient gasoline-powered engine, no matter what the source of electricity is.

Because of these benefits, the Quad Cities area isn't the first or only region looking at an EV infrastructure. Some cities, like Portland, Oregon, have already installed a significant number of charging stations.

Tim Gauthier, Executive Manager of the Oregon-Columbia chapter of NECA, is not surprised at the early success.

"Portland is as green as green can get," he says. "This is something that is wildly embraced here."

Nationally, President Obama has called for one million plug-in hybrid and electric vehicles by 2015. Auto manufacturers and other stake-

holders are gearing up for the demand. By the end of 2012, every manufacturer in the country will have a purely electric or hybrid electric vehicle.

While Lujack's will be selling the cars, wholesale distributors, like The Republic Companies in Davenport, may supply the equipment for charging stations. The biggest question is the timing.

"With any technological development, you have laggards who are saying 'It's never going to happen.' I do know it's coming," says Republic's Vice President Don Adams. "At the end of the day, the consumer will be the ultimate judge of how fast it happens."

One point on which everyone agrees is that for EVs to succeed, the community has to embrace them. Chesley, Tombergs, and the rest of the committee are doing everything they can to educate the Quad Cities on the economic and environmental benefits of this opportunity and pave the way. ☺

