

Speeding Toward Plug-in Vehicles

By Sherry Boschert

The Bay Area in recent years has been a hotbed of activity around electric vehicles and plug-in hybrids, and now things are really heating up.

The mayors of San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose declared their intention to make the Bay Area the electric vehicle capital of the United States and formed the Bay Area Regional Electric Vehicle Initiative. Five new charging stations by Coulomb Technologies were installed in San Jose as a demonstration project, four near City Hall and one in the San Fernando and Fourth Street garage. San Francisco took the next step, creating a Green Vehicles Showcase in front of City Hall with three more Coulomb chargers installed in record time. Seven city agencies and departments got all the approvals and scheduling done in a month.

The San Francisco chargers serve three converted plug-in Prius hybrids – one owned by the city, and two belonging to car-share services City CarShare and ZipCar. City CarShare also planned to add a second plug-in Prius conversion to its fleet in Berkeley.

The Bay Area Regional Electric Vehicle Initiative gathered major stakeholders for a productive half-day meeting on “Preparing the Bay Area for Plug-in Vehicles.” The event drew around 100 representatives from the nine-county Bay Area including fleet managers, local and regional agencies and coordinating groups, utilities, companies, non-profit organizations, and others. Representatives from eight major automakers attended: BMW, Ford, GM, Mercedes, Nissan, and Toyota.

The Initiative laid plans to create three working groups to generate policy and funding that will focus on government, the private sector, and advocacy.

San Francisco and the non-profit group Plug In America are planning a public Next-Car Expo, tentatively schedule for the fall, to showcase plug-in vehicles that are on the market or that soon will reach showrooms. Check www.pluginamerica.org for details.

Cities that want to get ready for the new generation of plug-in vehicles can tap a new resource from the Rocky Mountain Institute, the esteemed non-profit organization known best for its work around energy efficiency. The Institute tapped the knowledge of major stakeholders and created Project Get Ready (<http://projectgetready.com>), which features a dynamic “menu” of actions that communities can take to accelerate the shift to electric drive, and includes the “business case” for each. The Project is partnering with Portland, Ore., Indianapolis, Ind., and Raleigh, N.C. as demonstrations, and hopes to attract 20 cities for regular discussions.

The federal economic stimulus bill included major funding for all aspects of plug-in vehicles, including significant incentives to buy them. Consumers can get a \$2,500 to \$7,500 tax credit for buying vehicles equipped with 4- to 16-kilowatt hours of battery energy. The legislation expanded the number of vehicles eligible for the tax credits from 250,000 from the entire auto industry to 200,000 vehicles per vehicle manufacturer. At least eight car companies have announced plans to put plug-in vehicles on the road in the next few years, which could mean 1.6 million plug-in vehicles could qualify for the tax credits.

The stimulus bill also, for the first time, included smaller tax credits for consumers who purchase two- and three-wheeled plug-in vehicles (like electric motorcycles or the three-wheeled Aptera), plug-in hybrid conversions, and neighborhood electric vehicles. Other funds in the bill will boost battery manufacturing, charging infrastructure, and more. If all the funds that potentially could be used for plug-ins and related industries are spent in these sectors, they would total \$1.4 billion.

President Obama pledged during his campaign for the presidency to put 1 million plug-in hybrids on the road by 2015. That number is likely to be increased by the effects of the stimulus money, the vehicle numbers targeted by Rocky Mountain Institute's Project Get Ready, and the efforts of forward-thinking communities like the Bay Area to move transportation onto electricity instead of oil.

The main thing that's still missing is the cars. So far all we've got from major automakers are promises. The only plug-in vehicles available today are the high-end Tesla Roadster sports car, electric bikes, scooters, and motorcycles, or low-speed neighborhood electric vehicles. All are good options, but are not enough to make more than a tiny dent in the greenhouse gases coming out of America's vehicles. To send a message to automakers demanding that they produce plug-in vehicles, see the "Take Action" page at Plug In America (www.pluginamerica.org).

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