

Which comes first? The charge or the electric car?

Ford plugs its electric fleet but wants more charging stations in Chicago

By Julie Wernau, Tribune reporter

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When Ford Motor Co. brought its fleet of plug-ins to Chicago on Friday, it was more than just a preview of the automaker's soon-to-be-released vehicles. The event also was an effort to push the city to support more charging stations.

"In a dense area like Chicago, generally what we'd like to see is that consumers can get to a charging station within 2 or 3 miles," said Sherif Marakby, director of electrification programs and engineering at Ford, which is among a few automakers rolling out plug-in electric vehicles by the end of 2010.

Over the next two years, Ford will introduce several electric vehicles, including the Transit Connect Electric small commercial van, Focus Electric passenger car and a plug-in hybrid. The Transit Connect Electric and Focus Electric will use no gasoline.

Marakby would like Chicago to open up more "Level 3" stations, which can deliver a full charge in less than two hours.

But the cost of the infrastructure for such stations is expensive: about \$50,000, compared with \$2,000 for a Level 2 charging station, which can take three times longer to charge a vehicle.

Through a U.S. Department of Energy Clean Cities grant, Chicago expects to begin installing about 100 charging stations by the end of this year. But no announcement has been made yet about where those stations will be or how many will be Level 3.

About 300 charging stations per month are being installed around the country, according to Ford.

"We really want electric vehicles in Chicago. We think Chicago will be a great place to have electric vehicles. We ask everyone — Ford, all the vehicle manufacturers — to please bring your vehicles here," said Joshua Milberg, first deputy commissioner of Chicago's Department of the Environment.

Meanwhile, the state has yet to work out how these charging stations will be categorized — as a competitive marketplace or a regulated monopoly. The Illinois Commerce Commission plans to address the regulation issue by spring.

Some see the charging stations as a service, in much the same way that hotel guests don't pay by the kilowatt-hour to charge their laptops, said Robert Garcia, manager of regulatory strategy at Commonwealth Edison. Others see the stations as suppliers of electricity, which is subject to greater regulation.

"ComEd doesn't have a particular opinion either way," said Michael McMahan, vice president for smart grid and technology at ComEd. "But it's not a good idea to have ambiguity."

Kevin Wright, president of the Illinois Competitive Energy Association, which represents alternative electricity suppliers, said his group has yet to take a position on the issue. "That's something that has to be sorted out."

Manny Flores, chairman for the Illinois Commerce Commission, said it is important that the regulatory body thoroughly research the issue before deciding how the charging stations will be regulated and how much they should charge. The ICC's top priority, he said, is the safety and reliability of the grid.

"You want to make sure that there's balance and fairness, and you want to make sure that, in particular, the consumer is protected," Flores said.

Without a clear policy in place in Illinois, private companies have begun to install charging stations around the Chicago area, charging by the "session" instead of by the kilowatt-hour, McMahan said.

For instance, InterPark began installing charging stations in its garages in August. A spokeswoman said so far they have 22 stations, including two at each of their 10 Loop facilities. In addition, a facility north of the river at Ohio and Rush streets, has two charging stations. Charges are free until the end of the year.

Even with a clear regulatory plan and an infrastructure in place, the road ahead for the new generation of these alternative-fuel vehicles could be bumpy for a variety of reasons.

Electric vehicles tend not to be good candidates for colder climates, which severely limit the battery charge. And a J.D. Power and Associates report this week said that consumers are unlikely to buy an electric vehicle if gasoline prices remain too low, automakers fail to address technological concerns and the cost of owning one doesn't become more palatable.

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