

Are electric vehicles answer to valley smog?

By Steven Mayer, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2011

Imagine thousands of electric cars gliding along Bakersfield's roads and highways, spitting out zero emissions and reducing traffic noise to a whisper.

It may be a tailpipe dream. Or it could be the wave of the future.

In recent weeks, two mass-market electric vehicles, a Nissan Leaf and a Chevrolet Volt, were delivered to private local owners.

Scott Park, a 43-year-old entrepreneur and family man, took delivery of his Leaf on Friday at Nissan of Bakersfield. Parks decided not to go before a crowd of TV cameras and reporters who had gathered for the event.

But in a news release, Park said 95 percent of his family's home energy needs come from a solar system. That means even the home-generated electricity his Leaf uses will be virtually emission-free.

It's the "first full electric vehicle that offered no trade-offs," Park said of the Leaf. "In other words, it's a real car."

Just as excited, and just as confident that he made the right choice, Bakersfield's new Volt owner Chris Bagdikian sang the praises of electric-powered cars in general and the Volt in particular.

Bagdikian, a former deputy editor with The Californian, also harnesses solar power at home.

"I looked at the Leaf," Bagdikian said. "And the Tesla was \$100,000.

"But this is a car you can drive," he said as he stood beside his silver Volt.

Nissan says the Leaf can travel up to 100 miles on a full charge. The Volt's electric range is shorter, about 40 miles, but it includes a small gasoline engine that will recharge the car's batteries, essentially giving it an unlimited range.

The price of the Leaf, depending on the model, starts at approximately \$33,000. The Volt lists at about \$41,000. But both buyers will benefit from a federal income tax credit of \$7,500, bringing the net cost down substantially.

"GM and its dealers are excited about the Volt," said Ted Nicholas, president and CEO of Three-Way Chevrolet-Cadillac in Bakersfield. "There are plans for two or three more models."

Nissan of Bakersfield already has electric charging stations in place at the dealership and Three-Way also has plans to install charging stations.

The bottom line for both plug-in vehicles appears to be a per-mile fuel cost that is significantly lower than average gas-powered vehicles. And if the cost of gasoline climbs to \$5 per gallon, as some analysts have predicted, the cost gap will widen.

But there's another factor both dealers are touting: the fact the San Joaquin Valley's topography and climate act like a bowl that is notorious for holding in smog producing pollutants, making the valley's air some of the worst in the nation.

Could the electric car save us from ourselves?

"This has our attention," said Jaime Holt, chief communications officer for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"We would like to see the electric vehicle have the infrastructure support so all EVs could be a valid choice for valley residents," she said.

To that end, the air district is looking at subsidizing the installation of quick-charging stations at key points to make longer travel more feasible. They are also offering a \$1,000 to \$3,000 incentive for valley residents who purchase a Leaf, Holt said.

The Volt has not been incentivized for a couple of reasons, she said. The gasoline reserve tank means the Volt is not 100 percent electric. And the buzz surrounding the Volt being awarded Motor Trend's Car of the Year -- along with current limited availability -- means sales probably wouldn't benefit from an added incentive at this time, she said.

It's true, she said, that electric cars cannot claim to be "emissions free" if they are powered from an energy grid supplied by power stations burning coal or gas. Nevertheless, electric vehicles still represent a net reduction in the ozone-forming emissions that are a problem here in the valley every summer.

Seventy to 80 percent of smog-forming gases in the valley come from mobile sources, including cars, Holt said, so reducing smog from the autos we drive every day can indeed make a healthy difference in the valley. But the emissions from cars and light trucks represent less than 20 percent of the total mobile emissions, while heavy-duty trucks emit some 40 percent of the primary smog-forming gas. Off-road construction, industrial and farm vehicles together also emit more than cars and light trucks.

While more work needs to be done to limit pollutants from those heavy vehicles, cutting emissions by driving electric cars and other low-emission vehicles -- and there are several other great choices besides EVs, Holt said -- can make a difference.

"We've regulated our business community (stationary sources) extensively," Holt said. "We need the public to play a more active role in reducing emissions."

Valley officials balk at paying for rail master plans

By John Ellis, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Monday, Jan. 17, 2011

A San Jose lawmaker wants Central Valley cities with high-speed rail stops to develop environmentally friendly master plans for areas around the stations -- at their own cost.

Valley officials are cool to the idea, which they view as another unfunded mandate being handed down from Sacramento.

"This is totally unneeded and unnecessary," said Steve Geil, president of the Fresno County Economic Development Corp. Fresno city spokesman Mike Lukens called it "a solution in search of a problem."

Introduced by Assembly Member Jim Beall Jr., a San Jose Democrat and strong high-speed rail proponent, the legislation proposes a pilot program starting in the Valley.

Part of the legislation states that "no reimbursement is required" from the state because local jurisdictions have "the authority to levy service charges, fees or assessments sufficient to pay for the program."

The bill also says cities with stops "shall collaborate" with the California Air Resources Board to develop incentives that simultaneously encourage development around the stations and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Beall, however, said the legislation is in its infancy and will be amended to address concerns. The goal, he said, is to help Valley municipalities spur development around high-speed rail stations -- not stick them with unfunded mandates.

The bill is "a work in progress," Beall said.

In December, high-speed rail officials chose a 65-mile span from near Borden, south of Madera, to Corcoran in Kings County, as the first piece to be built of what ultimately is planned as an 800-mile system linking California's major urban centers.

Later, rail officials voted to use a new federal cash infusion to extend the construction from Corcoran toward Bakersfield.

Stations are planned in Fresno, Merced and Bakersfield -- among other cities -- as well as a proposed station in Hanford.

Ultimately, Beall said he wants a bill that will give cities or local authorities the power to create infrastructure financing districts around stations to help finance transit-oriented projects.

He talked of ideas he wants to work into the bill such as creating a master plan for areas around the station and then undertaking a single environmental study that covers the entire area. It could help streamline the planning process and allow cities to build quickly around the stations, he said.

Another idea, Beall said, is giving local cities the power to tap an environmental mitigation fund associated with the high-speed rail project and use that money to deal with the loss of open space and agricultural lands. It's something that, for instance, might benefit Hanford.

He also talked of finding ways for cities and counties to count high-speed rail station areas as credits for reducing air pollution.

"It's about having the high-speed rail stations become driving forces for development," Beall said. "Creating identities around the stations. That's the intention of the bill."

Fresno officials said they're way ahead of Beall.

"We're already doing comprehensive planning in the downtown area and the surrounding neighborhoods," Fresno city spokesman Lukens said. "This only calls on us to do what we're already doing."

City officials are including the station area in its overall planning for the Fulton Mall, which has been under way for two years. The hope is that the two areas can be developed to make Fresno an attractive stop for those using the rail system.

Hanford, in the meantime, is "not all that excited about the high-speed rail" project in general -- and that includes locating a station there -- Mayor Dan Chin said.

Assembly Member David Valadao, R-Hanford, who is skeptical of the entire high-speed rail proposal, took no position at this early stage, but said he will "keep a close eye" on Beall's bill.

Fellow Assembly Member Henry T. Perea said "the intent is right in wanting to get ahead of the issue," but he said he wasn't sure legislation was the right way to tackle the issue. He's also skeptical of any state mandates.

"There's probably a better way to do it," Perea said.

His idea is to educate communities that will have stations and encourage them to work together to secure matching grants from the High-Speed Rail Authority or the state Transportation Commission.

"I think that it's important for the local community to be thinking about economic development plans for the area directly surrounding the station," he said. "This is a huge economic opportunity for all of us."

Beall, in the meantime, said he is looking for comments from local elected officials and economic development experts. He said he is planning to visit the region and talk with people about his ideas for economic development along the rail route and how the legislation can be most effective.

"We're going to try and make it work for Fresno and all the other communities of the Valley," Beall said.

County to enforce sludge ban

By James Burger, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2011

Kern County supervisors on Tuesday gave environmental health regulators their blessing to begin the six-month process involved in enforcing the Measure E ban on the land application of treated human and industrial waste.

But the possibility of a court challenge clouds the future of the long-embattled, voter-approved rule that blocks use of sewage sludge on farmland in unincorporated Kern County.

Kern County Public Health Director Matt Constantine said all businesses that receive sewage sludge, also known as biosolids, will be notified that they have six months to wrap up any operations that apply sludge to open ground.

Those businesses include the Green Acres and Honey Bucket farms, where the treated waste is used as fertilizer for non-edible agricultural crops, and composting operations such as Synagro near Taft, Constantine said.

Green Acres currently accepts much of the sewage sludge produced by the city of Los Angeles.

Tom Frantz of the Association of Irrigated Residents environmental group argued that composting facilities put sewage sludge on the ground and should also be forced to either enclose their operations or stop taking the sludge.

A representative for Synagro told supervisors that all of the company's compost mixing areas are lined so that the compost doesn't touch open ground and all sewage sludge is received inside a building on a lined surface.

Constantine said he is aware of five businesses that take in biosolids -- including Green Acres, Honey Bucket and Synagro.

He said all the composting facilities will be inspected to make sure they begin complying with the provisions of Measure E.

Measure E enforcement has been on hold since 2006 while its validity was hotly contested in federal court. A federal lawsuit filed by Southern California waste agencies was dismissed late last year but the plaintiffs could re-file on some issues in state court.

Kern County Counsel Theresa Goldner has asked Tulare County Superior Court to re-open a previous sludge case between Kern and Los Angeles County in an effort to resolve state law challenges that Kern expects Los Angeles to file against Measure E.

She said she expects some effort from Los Angeles to block the enforcement of Measure E before the end of the six-month grace period.

John Franklin and Frank Mateljan, spokesmen for the Los Angeles City Attorney's office, said there has been no determination of what Los Angeles will do in this case.

Attorneys are still weighing all the information and going over court documents, they said.