

Electric car advocates urge NJ to develop charging stations, incentives

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AMY NEWMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Assemblyman Tim Eustace charges his Nissan Leaf in the parking garage at Bergen Community College Tuesday.

New Jersey is not doing enough to jump-start the electric car industry as legislative efforts to build more charging stations and provide extra incentives for buyers have gone nowhere in Trenton, environmentalists said Tuesday.

Speaking at a new conference near a charging station at Bergen Community College in Paramus, a coalition of environmentalists, legislators and electric car enthusiasts said the state needs better infrastructure to support zero-emission cars, considering New Jersey still has some of the worst air quality in the nation. Vehicles account for about 30 percent of the emissions that form smog in New Jersey, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection.

“We still have a long way to go to make electric vehicles as commonplace as the minivan on the roads,” said Doug O’Malley, executive director of Environment New Jersey. “Right now, New Jersey is being left behind by our neighboring states.”

With some of the most popular electric car models getting only 80 to 90 miles on a full charge, one of the major pushes is a bill in the Senate, S1794, that would require charging stations in at least 5% of parking spots at all rest stops on the New Jersey Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway.

The turnpike authority and the state Board of Public Utilities would set costs and charge motorists who use the stations. The bill was moved out of committee last month. A companion bill was introduced in the Assembly this month.

There are only 16 public charging stations in the counties of Bergen and Passaic, according to the website plugshare.com.

“There are 200,000 of these vehicles in the nation, so we don’t need lots of charging spaces, but we need some charging spaces,” said state Assemblyman Tim Eustace, D-Maywood, who owns a Nissan Leaf.

Support for the current legislative action is unclear. In 2011, Democrats introduced five bills to jump-start the electric vehicle industry, including a \$5,000 income tax credit for electric car owners in New Jersey and requiring new shopping centers to provide electric charging stations.

Three bills -- two for tax credits and another requiring charging stations at state rest stops -- passed the Assembly along party lines, but never made it through the Senate. The others never made it out of the Assembly. Republicans and business leaders have said they want private businesses to opt into building charging stations rather than being forced to, as in the case of shopping center developers.

New Jersey does offer incentives including waiving the state sales tax on zero-emission vehicles. But environmentalists say the state has not gone far enough.

Although New Jersey is part of a multi-state effort to encourage lower emissions from cars, state officials have not signed onto an eight-state pact that would provide better infrastructure and incentives in hopes of getting 3.3 million electric vehicles on the road by 2025. That includes everything from reforming building codes to facilitate charging stations and purchasing zero-emission vehicles for state fleets to reducing toll rates and providing access to carpool lanes for electric vehicles.

Larry Ragonese, a spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Protection, said the state was a founding member of the Northeast Electric Vehicle Network and didn’t want to be “part of another group and another bureaucracy.”

“I think by and large we are on the same wavelength” with environmentalists, Ragonese said. “We think there’s a benefit to having less emissions, and we’ve moved forward in trying to make that happen.”

Gasoline station owners are wary of investing upwards of \$50,000 to build charging stations while not knowing if they will get a return on their investment, said Sal Risalvato, executive director of the 1,500-member New Jersey Gasoline, C-Store and Automotive Association.

“What we have is a chicken-and-egg situation,” he said. “There has not been enough of a market to entice entrepreneurs into investing in electric-charging stations. And without the charging stations, the market doesn’t grow.”

Meanwhile, the Assembly passed a bill last week that allows manufacturers of zero-emission vehicles to sell directly to customers. The state Motor Vehicle Commission effectively stopped Tesla from doing so this year.

The lack of charging stations hasn’t dampened the enthusiasm of Nissan Leaf owner Sal Cameli, whose license plate reads UBUYGAS. In the year since he bought the Leaf for \$26,500, Cameli said, he saved about \$2,000 not buying gas and spent \$370 to charge the car, mostly at his Roselle Park home. The Leaf works for Cameli because his daily commute is 52 miles -- about 30 miles below the Leaf’s range on a full charge.

“It’s not for everyone, but this car fits me perfectly,” he said.

Art Vatsky of Teaneck spent 54 weeks on a waiting list to lease his coveted Honda Fit. He picked it up on Friday.

“I want to be part of the solution, not the problem,” he said.