

South Florida cities adding electric car charging stations to parking lots, garages

By Angel Streeter, South Florida Sun Sentinel

April 25, 2011 - If you've bought an electric car to save the environment or to avoid the sting of \$4 per gallon gas, several South Florida communities are making it easier for you to recharge your ride.

Cities are installing charging stations in public parking lots and garages, hoping to encourage use of the cars as communities work on becoming more "green." They're also anticipating an electric car boom.

"We believe over next few years we will see a lot more electric vehicles on the road," said Jeremy Earle, [Dania Beach](#) Community Redevelopment Agency executive director. "We want to encourage other municipalities to do the same thing. If they can put car charging stations around their city halls and their parking lots, I believe we can have one of the largest car-charging infrastructures in Florida."

Dania Beach has four electric car charging stations in an environmentally friendly parking garage opened last fall. [Delray Beach](#) plans to put in six charging stations in downtown parking lots. West Palm Beach will install two charging stations in June in a downtown parking garage. [Miami Beach](#) plans to install a charging station in a city parking garage as part of a pilot project. If successful, more could go in other city garages.

This comes as car manufacturers introduce electric vehicles to the U.S. market, most recently the Chevrolet Volt and Nissan Leaf. More are coming. Ford is coming out with an electric Focus later this year, and Toyota plans to introduce a plug-in hybrid next year. [Tesla Motors](#), which sells an electric sports car, plans to sell an electric sedan starting next year.

"All the major automakers have got electric cars in development and getting ready to go into production," said Charles Whalen, executive director of Plug In Florida, an electric car advocacy group.

In this year's State of the Union speech, [President Barack Obama](#) set a goal of having 1 million electric cars on the road by 2015. But whether Americans embrace the new cars, which cost \$8,000-\$10,000 more than similar gas-powered cars, depends on gas prices and the infrastructure to support their easy use.

"If gas prices continue with an upward spiral and don't fall back significantly, that's a big driver to buy these vehicles," said John O'Dell, a senior editor and green-car adviser for Edmunds.com.

Easy availability of charging stations could be a deciding factor for potential electric car owners. The cars are powered by batteries that are charged in an electrical outlet. Plug-in hybrids run on batteries, too, but have a back-up gas engine that kicks in when the batteries are drained. Depending on the vehicle, electric cars have a range of 25 to 240 miles.

"If there's no infrastructure, you may never sell these cars," O'Dell said.

So cities are putting in the charging stations as an enticement.

"It's more important to get people thinking about it," said Rich Reade, [Delray Beach](#) sustainability officer. "It educates. This is what helps change our environment."

Electric and plug-in hybrid cars can take from six to 10 hours to fully charge, and most owners usually will charge their cars at home. But advocates hope they'll use public charging stations for an hour or two of "opportunity charging" while they're shopping, running errands or eating in a restaurant.

"They're very important psychologically," said Whalen, a [Delray Beach](#) resident who is donating the charging stations their installation to the city. "They reduce range anxiety. People are going to be willing to drive pure-electric cars if they know they won't get stranded anywhere."

Charles Mellone, a [Boynton Beach](#) resident who converted his Nissan 240 FX from gas-powered to electric, said public charging would allow him to go more places. His car has a range of about 30 miles, which allows him to commute to his job in West Palm Beach.

He charges up at work, but there are few other places to recharge. A 110-volt household outlet can recharge an electric car, but it takes up to 14 hours. Some owners have dedicated 240-volt lines installed in their homes which, like charging stations, take about half the time.

While a special cable charges car from a household outlet, 240-volt systems have their own connections into the car's charging system.

"If you get stuck, it's not like you can get a gallon of gas," he said.

You can't yet buy a Volt or Leaf in Florida, so Whalen got his new Volt from California. Its list price is \$32,780.

"People in Florida [with the new electric cars] are the eager, early adopters," he said. "Some have gone to Texas, New Jersey, Virginia."

The new charging stations also help local cities show off their sustainability efforts.

"We want to be the greenest city in South Florida," said Penni Redford, [West Palm Beach](#) sustainability manager. The city used part of a \$1 million federal grant to buy five Nissan Leafs for its fleet and seven charging stations. Two of those charging stations will be installed for the public in the Clematis Street parking garage.

Miami Beach wants to make electric cars a part of daily life, improving air quality, making streets quieter and decreasing dependency on fossil fuels.

For now, West Palm Beach and [Delray Beach](#) will offer recharging for free. Other cities charge enough to cover the cost of electricity and make some money, too.

"They're not losing any money, and actually making a little money off it," said Andy Kinard, president of Car Charging Group of [Miami](#), which provides charging stations for cities and commercial properties.

The company provides and installs the stations and shares their revenue with the cities.

Whalen, of Plug In Florida, envisions covering the region with charging stations in public areas as well as at malls, hotels and restaurants. "We don't need charging stations everywhere," he said. "We just need them strategically placed. If we have stations 20 miles apart, we got the whole region covered."