

Ready, set, charge: Fast EV power stations to roll out soon

Chicago awards contract to install 280 electric vehicle charging stations in city, suburbs by end of this year

By Julie Wernau, Tribune reporter

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By the end of this year, Chicagoans will not only be able to purchase and drive electric vehicles, but also charge those vehicles in the time it takes to finish a cup of coffee.

The city of Chicago has awarded a \$1.9 million contract to a California firm to install 280 electric vehicle charging stations in Chicago and surrounding suburbs by the end of 2011.

The contract — paid for with equal state and federal dollars though a grant from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act — means the city has cleared a major hurdle on the road to widespread electric vehicle adoption.

Electric and plug-in vehicle manufacturers have said they will roll out their vehicles first to cities with an extensive charging infrastructure. Until now, Chicago had been largely overlooked by the nation's auto companies. Only Ford Motor Co. has announced Chicago among its initial rollout cities for electric vehicles, with the introduction of the Ford Focus Electric near the end of 2011.

The stations are important for widespread adoption because they eliminate what the industry terms "range anxiety," or a driver's fear of ending up stranded with nowhere to charge the vehicle.

"We are very much focused and talking to a number of car manufacturers, telling them that Chicago is going to be EV ready," said Joshua Milberg, first deputy commissioner of the city's Department of Environment. "We are in Ford's first wave of electric vehicles. We're working with Nissan, we're talking with General Motors. We're talking with Mitsubishi."

According to the contract, San Diego-based 350 Green LLC will install, own, operate and maintain 73 plazas where drivers will be able to plug in to either a quick-charging station, which is expected to be able to fully charge electric vehicles in under 30 minutes, or one of two 220-volt Level 2 charging stations, which charge vehicles in 3 to 8 hours.

The contract calls for the stations — branded "CharJit Express Plazas" — to be installed at O'Hare and Midway airports, in grocery store parking lots, Illinois Tollway plazas and in downtown parking garages.

350 Green is responsible for the upfront costs of the \$8.77 million project and will be reimbursed \$1.9 million from grant funds. The remaining \$6.86 million is the company's responsibility. The company did not answer questions about the extent to which funding is in place or who had invested in the project, and the contract did not provide those details.

No revenue will be shared with the city or state. In choosing locations, the company is seeking to partner with businesses, in a model that is similar to that of DVD-vendor Redbox.

David Kolata, executive director of Citizens Utility Board, said the contract will put Chicago on the map as the city with the largest number of quick-charging stations, a technology that only recently became available.

"That's sort of the advantage of being a second mover instead of a first mover," Kolata said, adding: "It's really an exciting opportunity, and if the plan rolls out like it's supposed to, it's really going to jump-start the electric vehicle market here in Illinois."

Approximately 90 percent of Chicago-area commutes are less than 40 miles, which makes it an ideal market for plug-in vehicle adoption. Most fully electric vehicles coming to market can go as far as 100 miles on a full charge.

An additional 61 Level 2 chargers will be installed for I-Go and Zipcar, which previously applied for funding for charging stations as part of the partnership. The car sharing services will get free access to those stations, and their members will have access to public charging stations at a discounted rate.

Several participants in the program, including 350 Green, declined to give further details. In an e-mailed statement, Mariana Gerzanych, CEO and founder of 350 Green, said the company is still working out where the charging stations will be located.

"They will be publicly available and convenient, enabling fast charging for people who don't have a dedicated charger at their home or work. This should expand the pool of potential EV owners and accelerate the adoption of EVs across the city," she said.

Gerzanych is a 32-year-old former ski instructor who speaks seven languages, according to her LinkedIn profile. Most recently, she was a statistical analyst with the U.S. Census Bureau. Her company is 2 years old.

350 Green has also won awards to electrify several other major cities, including San Diego, Portland, Seattle, Phoenix/Tucson, Nashville and San Francisco, according to its website.

A spokeswoman for 350 Green LLC said the firm will locate stations at high-traffic, retail locations — a model to be followed nationally.

The Illinois Commerce Commission's Initiative on Plug-In Electric Vehicles hasn't decided how consumers would pay to charge their vehicles. The first stations could be installed by spring.

The contract calls for 350 Green to offer two options: A monthly subscription (not to exceed \$75 per month) and per-use pricing.

Oliver Hazimeh, head of the global eMobility practice at PRTM, a global management consulting firm, said charging infrastructure is just one of several barriers to electric vehicle adoption that will need to be addressed if Chicago hopes for widespread electric vehicle adoption.

Seventy percent of electric vehicle users are expected to do most of their charging at home, he said, which means the city will need to adopt a streamlined process to help homeowners install those chargers.

"It requires an integrated, multiprong approach," Hazimeh said, "People were irked that the (automobile manufacturers) didn't choose Chicago for the initial rollouts. But I think Chicago's actually on a good path now. There's a lot of energy behind it and commitment."

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