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Tulsa Area Clean Cities organizes pitch for electric vehicles



A Chevrolet Volt is seen on display Wednesday at Samson Plaza downtown. MIKE SIMONS / Tulsa World

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The much-hyped Chevrolet Volt made its first downtown appearance Wednesday, but local groups are working to make cars like the Volt and other electric-powered vehicles a common sight in Oklahoma.

Tulsa Area Clean Cities, an arm of the Indian Nations Council of Governments, gathered officials of Chevrolet and alternative-fuel producers to make a pitch to local governments and companies.

Representatives of the city of Tulsa, Samson Resources Co. and Oklahoma Natural Gas Co. attended the meeting, where the feasibility of incorporating electric, natural gas and bio-diesel vehicles into their fleets was explored.

Although the options are slim now for electric vehicles, many vehicles powered by natural gas have gotten major boosts from industry and government fleets.

"Tulsa got an F from the American Cancer Society in air quality," said Meredith Webber, energy programs coordinator with INCOG. "That's why we want to expose people to these innovations."

The Chevrolet Volt was launched in late 2010 by General Motors Co. It has a gasoline-assisted battery-powered motor, which means it drives about 35 miles before switching to a gasoline-powered generator for further travel.

The Volt was on display Wednesday at Samson Plaza, near Third and Main streets.

Scott Conway, a fleet account executive with GM, said the vehicle will be released in Oklahoma in the fourth quarter, but quantities will be limited.

Meanwhile, Nissan is rolling out its all-electric Leaf vehicle, which gets about 100 miles on a charge. Just like the Volt, the Leaf hasn't reached Oklahoma showrooms yet, but industry officials see company and government fleet operations as ripe ground for electric-powered cars.

"You can run a Volt 35 miles for about \$1.50 worth of electricity," Conway said. "Try comparing that to gasoline at nearly \$4 a gallon."

Conway said GM is approaching alternative-fuel vehicles from multiple directions. The company has a line of compressed natural gas and liquid natural gas vehicles, which have much lower emissions and operating costs than petroleum-fuel cars.

"We know that there isn't just one solution," Conway said.

Webber, who is organizing similar meetings statewide, said there are more public charging stations coming online, including one set to open next month at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater. The Kum & Go convenience chain is also considering installing quick-charge stations, which can recharge the batteries of some vehicles to 80 percent in 20 minutes.

Guy Mannino, who works with charging station maker Coulomb Technologies, said cities such as Houston are installing charging stations on streets with hopes of turning the fuel "pumps" into revenue streams.

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