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Are Electric Cars Losing Their Charge?

By Nick Marnell



Norman Pease of Orinda stands by his Tesla Model X No. 65. Tesla is one company gaining traction, despite a decrease in electric car sales. Photo Andy Scheck

was limited to major U.S. cities -readily available in even the smallest towns. By the 1930s, electric cars had all but disappeared. Thanks in part to government mandates to curb carbon emissions, plug-in electric vehicles were reborn at the end of 20th century. Today, consumers have a choice of over two dozen plug-in electric models, with technologies at work to improve all aspects of driving them.

But could plug-in vehicles be headed for a repeat of the history of 100 years ago? U.S. sales of plug-in electric vehicles experienced their first annual drop in 2015, from 123,000 to 116,000, while overall auto sales set an all-time record of 17.5 million units. The Nissan LEAF, the world's top selling electric vehicle, dropped by nearly 17,000 worldwide last year, according to the Inside EV sales report. Does the public no longer believe that electric cars are worth it?

"You don't save as much as you think," said Steve Allen of Moraga, who puts 12,000 miles a year on his Tesla Model S. "The \$250 I saved in gas per month is now a \$150 increase to my PG&E bill."

The cars themselves are not cheaper, either, because of the extra cost for the lithium-ion battery pack, which runs as high as \$10,000. Federal and state tax credits help offset the higher sticker price.

Owners of gasoline-powered cars rarely drive far to find a filling station; not so for owners of electric cars. "People don't know how far they can drive," said Ravi Singh of Rheem Valley Automotive, voicing what drivers call "electric car range anxiety." For that reason, sales consultant Joseph Woo at Autocom Nissan of Concord said that an electric car like the LEAF makes a good second car, but not a great single car, "unless you use it for only work or school." Woo estimates the range of a Nissan LEAF at 85 miles.

A lack of electric charging stations contributes to drivers' range anxiety. According to PlugShare, a charging station database, Lamorinda has only two non-residential charging stations: a

Could the electric car be on the brink of fading consumer interest?

The electric car has battled the gasoline-powered car through one roadblock after another, from higher prices to cheap oil to a subsidized infrastructure. Today it faces those same challenges, plus limitations of the distance capability of a charged battery and radical government proposals that seek additional revenue to repair the roads and highways.

Electric cars came onto the scene in the late 19th century, about the same time as gasoline-powered cars, but quieter, easier to drive and they smelled better. Then along came Henry Ford, and thanks to mass production, gasoline cars dropped to one-third the price of electric ones by 1910. The U.S. developed roads to connect its cities, gasoline prices fell and gas stations popped up all over the country, making gasoline - unlike electricity, which

supercharger at Whole Foods Market and a public station at McDonald's on Mt. Diablo Boulevard in Lafayette. To help reduce this deficiency in Contra Costa County, the Board of Supervisors adopted an ordinance in December requiring new residential and non-residential buildings to allocate up to six percent of parking spaces for charging stations, nearly double the state requirement.

The drop in oil prices and improved gas mileage have boosted gasoline-powered auto sales, but since California roads are funded out of the state gas sales tax, less gasoline purchased equals less state revenue. Rumblings about a road usage charge to pare the deficit have caused concern, but a proposal to add a registration premium to zero-emission vehicles is perceived by many energy-conserving, emissions-reducing electric car owners as a slap in the face.

"There seems to be some interest in the community for doing that," said State Assemblywoman Catharine Baker, speaking of the registration premium. "But first and foremost, we must be better stewards of the money that Californians already pay to fund transportation."

One electric car maker, however, enjoys an Apple cult-like following, as its sales performance flies in the face of the overall EV data and the criticisms of the naysayers. What can explain the hundreds of customers camped in front of the Walnut Creek Tesla showroom last month to place a deposit on a blind prototype of a Tesla Model 3, promising a 215-mile range for \$35,000?

"I had nothing to lose," said Kathy Dickinson of Orinda, who pre-ordered a Model 3 online. "If I don't like it, I can always get back my \$1,000 deposit."

Tesla announced that it had accepted 325,000 reservations for the Model 3 in the first week of the product launch.

Norman Pease of Orinda owns Tesla Model X No. 65. "The car drives itself," he said. "It gives you instant power, it's quiet. You hardly have to use the brake pedal to generate energy." But atop his reasons for ownership came a sincere plea to the masses.

"You will be depriving yourself a lot of enjoyment by not driving an electric car," he said.

With such passion exuded by Tesla customers, who have loaned the company \$325 million to produce the Model 3, at least one electric car maker is poised to halt the U.S. sales slowdown and attempt to shock the world.

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