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Savannah explores electric car future

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By Mary Landers

Savannah's new Whole Foods store has something in common with the Savannah/Hilton Head International Airport, and the Whitaker Street garage.

Each location hosts one or more electric vehicle charging stations.

On Friday, Public Service Commissioner Tim Echols and Savannah Mayor Edna Jackson hosted an "Electric Car Brainteam" to discuss how to deploy more electric vehicle chargers and cars throughout the Savannah area.

Electric cars have been gaining popularity in Georgia, with an estimated 1,400 in Atlanta and "less than a couple hundred" in Savannah. The sales surge in Georgia is in part due to a \$5,000 state income tax credit available to buyers. Combined with a \$7,500 federal tax credit, the cars such as the Nissan Leaf with a sticker price of \$28,800 become more affordable.

Fuel costs are estimated at the equivalent of \$1 a gallon and unlikely to fluctuate much thanks to the stability of electricity prices, said Don Francis, executive director of Clean Cities Atlanta.

That price drops to the equivalent of 55 cents a gallon for Georgia Power customers who sign up for the Plug In Electric Vehicle Rate that offers a reduced rate for charging a car overnight when demand is at its lowest.

"The PSC approved a special rate for Georgia Power customers who charge their electric cars overnight at home," said Echols. "This special rate rewards the electric car owner with a super off-peak rate that applies not only to the car, but the entire house."

Echols said charging cars overnight uses the cheapest power on the system (currently 5 cents per kilowatt hour) and allows the customer to use that power during the day, which is usually the most expensive power.

"Electric cars not only are more efficient and cleaner to operate," Echols said. "They also represent a distributed network of battery storage that allows us to store cheap overnight energy in the car's battery."

Most drivers, 70 percent, drive less than 20 miles a day, said Cornelius Willingham, Nissan's electric vehicle operations manager for the Southeast. That makes the 75-mile range of the Nissan Leaf workable.

"Electric cars don't work for everyone," said Echols. "But for some people, it makes a lot of sense. We want to find those people."

In a tourist city such as Savannah, more charging stations can grow the city's green image and be an incentive for electric car drivers to visit.

"People drive here from all over the Southeast," Francis said. "If they're coming in an electric vehicle they'll want to recharge their car."

Smart phone apps are available to locate electric vehicle chargers, said Francis who drives a Nissan Leaf.

Already, retailers such as Walgreens and Cracker Barrel are installing the stations to attract customers and develop brand loyalty. Some workplaces offer them too, notably Georgia Power at several of its Savannah locations.

Both Grainger Nissan and Vaden Nissan in Savannah host charging stations. As at the airport, it's not just Nissan Leaf drivers who take advantage of the facility. All three report Tesla drivers plugging in, too.

At the brainstorming session Friday were representatives of the Savannah Mall and Enmark; both commercial ventures are considering installing charging stations. So is Tybee Island, said City Manager Diane Schleicher. The mayor of Metter, Billy Trapnell, was also in attendance to hear about making his city a charging "oasis" along the Interstate 16 corridor.

"I really think Savannah can be a city where, when you think of Savannah, you think of the electric car network," Echols said.