

Business

Electricity fuels this car-share program

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The nation's first all-electric car-sharing and rental program, dubbed Altcar, was launched Tuesday at the Maryland Science Center with the unveiling of five bright green subcompact vehicles.



One of the Maryland Science Center's all-electric Altcars heads out into traffic Tuesday. Visitors can test-drive one of the cars through Aug. 1.

Visitors to the science center can test-drive the Maya 300, a lithium-ion battery-operated car developed by Canadian clean-energy company Electrovaya, through Aug. 1.

After that the fleet will grow to 10 cars that will be available for rental for \$14.50 per hour with a minimum two-hour rental or for as low as \$7.50 per hour for Altcar members.

Developed for use in cities, the four-door hatchback vehicles take six to eight hours to charge using a standard 110-volt outlet. They are available in two battery capacities — one that can drive 60 miles on a single charge and one that can drive 120 miles.

The difference is in the number of battery cells, with the smaller model using 88 of the 1½-pound cells and the larger model using twice that amount, said Sankar Das Gupta, chairman and CEO of Electrovaya. The science center's fleet will have both battery capacities available.

ExxonMobil Corp. developed the film that separates the anode and cathode of the battery and allows the car to operate at higher temperatures with more power.

The car offers standard safety features found in gasoline-operated vehicles, such as air bags and antilock brakes, as well as technology to shut down the vehicle in the event of overheating and to prevent short circuits.

However, electric cars have caused concern because of how quiet they are, posing a danger to blind pedestrians.

"We have a task force that is in place as we speak to deal with just that," said Del. James E. Malone Jr., D-Baltimore and Howard counties.

In its second year, the Maryland Quiet Vehicles and Pedestrian Safety Task Force is looking at ways to make electric cars safe for pedestrians on a national level, said Malone.

Gupta offered his own solution to the problem, saying, "Maybe we should have ring tones on these cars."

The battery life of the Maya 300, which runs at speeds of 35 to 40 miles per hour, is unknown, Gupta said. While he expects the battery to last several years, the demo and rental program at the science center will eventually provide the answer. The battery is 40 to 50 percent of the car's cost, he said.

Available only for fleet purchase, when the Maya 300 comes to market in about a year, the 60-mile-per-charge model will cost less than \$25,000 and the 120-mile model will cost less than \$35,000, Gupta said.

Electricity prices in Baltimore City have fluctuated since the 2006 removal of the state-imposed rate caps, with summer electricity rates at 12.7 cents per kilowatt hour, compared to the May 2007 rate of 9.2 cents.

Luis MacDonald, president of CleanCities.com, the electric vehicle and fleet leasing service that will manage the car-sharing program at the science center, said the program will introduce the idea of use versus ownership in an urban transportation mode.

Electrovaya does not use any toxic materials or produce any emissions in manufacturing the batteries used in the car, Gupta said, adding that when the car battery weakens and needs to be replaced, it can have a second life storing wind or solar energy.

The science center on Tuesday also unveiled a new energy-efficiency exhibit sponsored by ExxonMobil. The exhibit will remain in the science center for a long time, said Van Reiner, president and CEO of the museum.

The Altcar program and exhibit demonstrate the values of the science center, "bringing emergent technology to the public and demonstrating it in a way that is practical," he said.

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