

Georgians are paving the way for electric vehicles

By Chuck Eaton

Electric vehicles have begun arriving in Georgia. Given the high gasoline prices, their arrival couldn't be timelier. But we can't allow our excitement over electric cars to turn Georgia's utilities into the next "green energy" government financing debacle.

Over the next 10 years, it's estimated that 5 to 10 percent of new cars on the road in Georgia will be fueled in whole, or in part, by electricity. Electric transportation is not for everyone, but it can meet the transportation needs of many Georgians while giving them an opportunity to save money on gas and contribute to our nation's energy independence. Another advantage is that commuters in electric vehicles are able to use traditional HOV lanes.

More importantly, money spent on electric cars domestically means less of our money will end up overseas in the hands of potential enemies.

Georgians, particularly in metro Atlanta, are faced with expensive federal environmental mandates. Developing electric transportation is one way we're making sure our state reduces its environmental impact so we remain competitive when trying to attract jobs.

We also recognize that unless we help consumers make the transition from gasoline-powered vehicles to electric vehicles cost-effective, many will not take that first step.

That's why last year the Georgia Public Service Commission approved a special time-of-use rate for Georgia Power's residential customers who own plug-in electric vehicles. Customers who sign up for this rate and charge their vehicles between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m. can save approximately 13 percent annually on their residential electric bill compared to the company's standard residential rate.

Several factors make this a winning program both for customers who own electric vehicles and for those who don't.

First, no government funds are being used to promote this efficiency measure. The electric vehicle rate simply allows Georgia Power to sell excess power at a lower price during overnight hours when customer demand is lowest.

Second, by shifting some demand from peak hours to off-peak hours, it helps delay Georgia Power's need to build new generation. It also increases the reliability of the electric grid during times of peak demand, such as on hot summer days.

Finally, giving citizens the choice to help reduce emissions, especially in metro Atlanta which has strict federal and state air quality standards, is a win-win for everyone. Not only does driving an electric vehicle reduce emissions, it also eliminates the need for overly strict federal government regulations that force metro commuters to pay more at the pump for the special "lower emissions" summer-blend gas.

The new rate promotes voluntary personal choices that have a positive effect on the environment. It's not a government-sponsored program that distorts market forces.

Our Commission approved plan allows Georgia Power to amortize their fixed costs during a low-demand timeframe, which benefits all consumers, while giving customers a financial incentive to efficiently use the electric grid.

Thanks to the actions of the Georgia Public Service Commission, working with Georgia Power, the future is bright for electric transportation in Georgia. When it comes time for me to purchase a new car, I will consider an electric or hybrid vehicle.

Chuck Eaton is a member of the Georgia Public Service Commission.