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Cardi's installs state's first car-charging station

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A car is hooked up to demonstrate the state's first electric charging station, at Cardi's Furniture Superstore on Route 2 in West Warwick, on Wednesday.

The Providence Journal / Kathy Borchers

WEST WARWICK — Which comes first, plug-in electric cars or electric-charging stations?

Nicholas, Ron and Peter Cardi see a network of charging stations coming first and have installed the first one in the state at the Cardi's Furniture Superstore in West Warwick.

No matter that the only vehicle currently capable of using it is the pricey Tesla sports car which runs \$109,000 for the base model.

“What do you do? It's a chicken-and-egg thing,” said Peter Cardi Wednesday. He noted that while everyone is talking about plug-in electric cars, there are currently few on the roads.

The first moderately priced electric plug-ins, the Chevrolet Volt and the Nissan Leaf, are scheduled to arrive in

Rhode Island showrooms at the end of next year. Both cars are being rolled out in California in December.

“The point right now is to build this infrastructure ahead of the vehicles being available,” said Al Dahlberg, president of ProjectGetReady, a unit of the Rocky Mountain Institute. “If people know where the charge points are, [they will buy and] use their electric cars.”

He said electric cars are cleaner for the environment and lessen our reliance on foreign oil.

He said a network of charging stations would increase consumer awareness and relieve range anxiety. Consumers are nervous about driving far afield unless they can be sure of being able to recharge their vehicles on the road.

And while it takes a few hours to fill an electric vehicle using a household current of 120 volts (fine for overnight charging), charging stations that offer 200 or so volts, such as the unit at Cardi's, let alone the 480-volt fast chargers, offer much faster charge times. In addition, electric cars will be topped up rather than driven until empty.

Peter Arpin of Arpin Renewable Energy, Norman Cook of the Community College of Rhode Island and Dahlberg came up with the idea of getting charging stations installed and approached Cardi's about three months ago.

“We want to see the infrastructure built,” said Arpin. “We were thinking about plug-ins and got together with the Cardis. It's a very visible location, just off the highway.”

Dahlberg said ProjectGet-Ready's goal was to have 30 commitments to build charging stations by January, with at least that number installed by December 2011.

Made by Coulomb Technologies of Campbell, Calif., the ChargePoint is in the parking lot at the Cardi's store. It stands about four feet tall and resembles a mini gas pump.

And like a gas pump, the electricity is transmitted via a cable with a standardized nozzle that clicks into the car's fueling receptacle. On hand was a prototype Nissan Leaf, which is fueled through the hood.

Tina Freches, Internet manager at Inskip Nissan, said the dealership was mulling the installation of the state's second charger.

Nicholas Cardi noted that Mansions and Manors, a Jamestown real estate company, had expressed an interest in installing one. He added that Bob Tasca Jr., president of the Tasca Auto Group, had been down to inspect the station.

Ron Cardi said the installation cost about \$30,000, including the \$10,000 price of the unit with additional costs such as the legal fees associated with zoning issues. He said Cardi's will not charge a fee for the electricity for the time being. In time, a fee will be applied.

Peter Cardi said the local economy would benefit from the additional jobs needed to install and maintain a network of charging stations.

Dahlberg said he sees a need for about 10,000 charging stations around the state in the next few years.

“The whole picture is: How do you get to that place?” said Peter Cardi. “This is the start of it. If you build it, they will come.”

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