Valley gets charged up about new Volts

Dealer touts electric vehicles as they make their way to Oregon

By Greg Stiles
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ASHLAND — The way Town and Country Chevrolet General Manager Derek DeBoer sees it, Chevy Volt gas tank drivers won't have to make a choice between reaching their destination or running the air conditioner.

Between its electric charge and 9-gallon gas tank, the Volt has a range of 375 miles. The gasoline option reduces the likelihood that running the air conditioner will leave you powerless on a longer trip.

"The Volt has eliminated range anxiety," DeBoer said. "You don't have to worry about when you will run out of batteries. It switches seamlessly to gas."

While the lower-priced Nissan Leaf might be the common driver's entry into fully electrical transportation, the Volt's creators mixed the now with the not yet.

The Volt wasn't ticketed for the Northwest market until this summer, but creative dealers — like their horse-trading ancestors — have introduced a handful of units into the Oregon Territory two months ahead of schedule.

Town and Country in Ashland and Guaranty Discount Chevrolet of Junction City were quick out of the gate. The Volt sold last week by Town & Country might have been the first off the lot. That's because dealers have to have a demo on hand before they can sell one.

DeBoer lives near Tou Velle State Park on the Rogue River and said he has driven between home and work without using a drop of petroleum. Heading into the weekend, between the dealership's staff and test drives, the Volt in residence had piled up nearly 850 miles using 1.7 gallons.

On a Mail Tribune test drive, the Volt burst up Nob Hill without hesitation and the air conditioning held its own as well. While a reporter resisted the temptation to see how fast electricity travels when it's propelling a car, there's no debating its ability to surpass Oregon's speed limit.

Multiple computer screens make the Star Wars generation, if not the Wii generation, feel like Harrison Ford tooling around in the Millennium Falcon.

The Volt is pricey, with a sticker ranging between $40,000 and $50,000, but a $7,500 tax credit softens the blow. Plugged into a basic household outlet, it takes eight hours to recharge the battery. Dedicated 220-volt charging stations cost about $2,500 to install. The all-electric Nissan Leaf's sticker price is about $34,000, but also comes with up to a $7,500 tax credit.

While green, gas-efficient options muscle their way into virtually every driving conversation these days, the financial obstacle remains for many would-be EV owners.

"The Volt is a lower-range luxury vehicle, equivalent to a Cadillac, BMW or Mercedes," DeBoer said.

"In America, we want everything and part of that is being green. It's new technology so it's not affordable for everybody."

Eventually, he said, the simple scale of economy will bring the price down.

Art James, project director in the Oregon Department of Transportation's Innovative Partnerships office and a Leaf proponent, discovered the hazards of early-adopters.

James' role includes getting as many recharging stations online as soon as possible. He said he found out the hard way that even rain can highly reduce the Leaf's range when windshield wipers are required. But that doesn't mean it's not suited for Oregon's rainy — or Southern Oregon's hot — weather.

"I don't see it as a matter of geography," James said. "There are a variety of technologies and platforms coming out. The individual users' driving patterns are going to determine what they do and the market will determine the acceptance.

"If you look at the population of Jackson County, for instance, and looked at average miles driven by all vehicles on a daily basis, you would probably find out it's somewhere about 20 miles. An all-electric car would fit many of their purposes... ."

Melissa Brandao, the founder of the electric vehicle monitoring system REDCloud, said she anticipates only an incremental shift to the electric vehicles partly because of current limitations.

"The benefit for the consumer is to have the extended range the Volt has," Brandao said. "The Leaf is purely electrical with no other propulsion. It's ideal if I'm just driving around Ashland, picking up the kids or going to the grocery store or going back and forth to local places. But I wouldn't think of it as something to go to Grants Pass with."

Brandao predicted families with multiple automobiles in the driveway will want to fill different needs.

"There's a need to start looking at one vehicle for use as an around-town vehicle and one that goes longer distances or for weekends," she said. "The way in which we're going to adopt electric vehicles more quickly is to take the approach where both cars won't necessarily have the same function for the family any more."