

No guarantee charging stations will save energy

Editorial
July 10, 2014

Green cars and energy are all the rage today. We're all for it — if the taxpayers aren't forced to pay for dubious projects through subsidies.

That's why we're not keen on a new \$497,357 Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure grant Riverside County just received from the California Energy Commission (CEC). The grant will be spread over three years and used to install 45 stations. It's part of a \$5 million statewide program to set up 475 stations. However, according to the U.S. Department of Energy, the state already has 5,749 charging stations.

County taxpayers won't directly pay for the local program. But the statewide program of which it is a part is funded by energy fees and taxes collected by the CEC.

According to the county website, Riverside scored in the top five of 39 applicants and had the highest score of Southern California applicants. Application criteria included public access for workplace, corridor and destination charging. The county said the goal is to contribute to a "state-wide infrastructure that will enable" electric-car drivers to travel freely across California.

The county itself is working to switch to alternative-energy vehicles, Verne Lauritzen told us; he's the chief of staff to Supervisor Jeff Stone. Of 4,216 main-fleet vehicles, the county owns 415 hybrids, four compound natural gas and no electric vehicles. However, the county has plans to lease three Nissan Leaf electric cars and could lease or buy more in the future.

"The county is trying to promote efficiency and diversity in energy usage," Lauritzen said. "Obviously, if all your eggs are in one basket you're in trouble." Switching to alternative energy sources will be accomplished "little by little," he said.

The charging stations also will benefit county employees, including Mr. Stone. The Press-Enterprise reported he drives a Coda electric car to work and a Honda Civic fueled by compressed natural gas for longer trips. "My family is now liberated from dependence on foreign oil from countries that are not our allies," he told the Board of Supervisors in 2012.

Our problem is that there's no clear indication these programs will actually save money and energy. Mr. Lauritzen said it's "kind of hard to guess" how much the new stations will be used.

“This is really a measurement problem more than anything else,” Randal O’Toole told us; he’s a senior fellow in transportation studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. He said the argument in favor of the subsidies for the electric cars is that they don’t pollute. But the electricity to run them comes from generating plants that usually do pollute.

Under a 2011 state law, California is moving toward 33 percent electricity generation from such renewable sources as wind, solar and geothermal. But according to data from the CEC, electricity from coal and petroleum coke plants — considered especially dirty — amounted to 8 percent in 2012. That number is declining but will not be near zero until 2027. Forty-three percent of electricity generation still comes from natural-gas plants, a number expected to decline only slightly, especially after the 2013 decommissioning of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station.

The bottom line: there is no pollution-free energy, only tradeoffs. And though it’s understandable the county would go for a subsidy, the state should move toward markets, not government planners, in deciding which types of vehicles are most desirable.