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Electric car 'sweet spot'

Chicoan finds 'time to join the future' is now due to incentives, options

By Jake Jacobson
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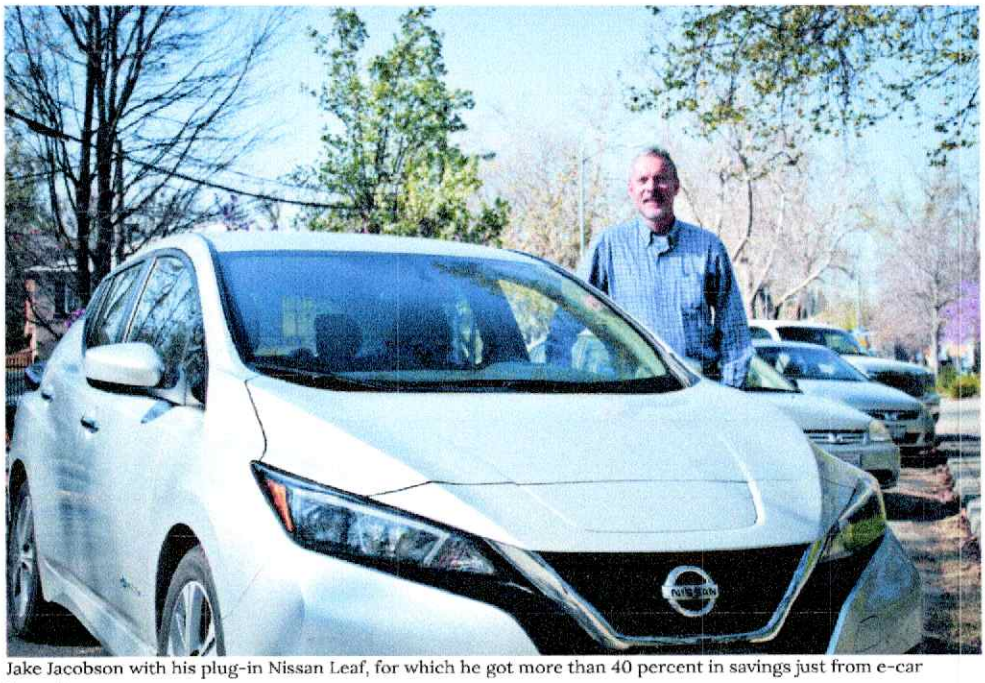

Jake Jacobson with his plug-in Nissan Leaf, for which he got more than 40 percent in savings just from e-car incentives.
PHOTO BY EVAN TUCHINSKY

About the author:
Jake Jacobson is a senior project director for The Nature Conservancy, working with ranchers and other rural landowners on real estate transactions and other land conservation projects.

My wife and I have lived in Chico 18 years. She has a 45-mile commute to Red Bluff, and mine is

4 miles. We take more road trips than most people, but most of our driving is local. With gas prices consistently above $3 per gallon, I wondered, could an electric car work for us?

I researched available vehicles, monetary incentives, and delved into the world of e-cars. It didn't take long to realize that not only could we go electric, we also could do it affordably. Last year, we purchased a Nissan Leaf.

So, why would anyone consider buying a car that has a range of only around 150 miles? Because it makes a ton of sense, due to economic incentives that created a "sweet spot" for e-car buyers, low vehicle maintenance costs and environmental benefits.

About 90 percent of our driving is for errands, visiting friends, playing pickleball, commuting and the like. All of this is well within the electric car's range. We have another vehicle for multiday trips, but if we want to use the e-car, we can; we just mix in 30-minute quick charges while having a meal or taking a break.

The ability to charge your electric ride on trips is rapidly increasing. Charging stations, some of them free, are popping up all over as electric vehicles increase in popularity. Many are located at hotels and restaurants.

I took advantage of a $7,500 federal tax credit for e-car buyers. That's not a marginal deduction; it's a dollar-for-dollar credit that lops $7,500 off your tax bill.

It won't be around forever: The full federal credit is limited to the first 200,000 U.S. vehicle sales for each manufacturer. For Tesla buyers, the credit is already gone, and credits for General Motors models are beginning to phase out.

I also received a state rebate of $2,500, a manufacturer's rebate of $3,000 and an $800 rebate from PG&E. Not including sales tax and licensing, I bought a brand-new $32,500 car for $18,700.

Tax credits and rebates are often put in place to reward behavior that benefits society and to encourage risk-taking.

While shopping for an electric vehicle, I discovered there is currently a sweet spot for plug-in car purchasers. Here's why: There are fewer risks and discomforts for an owner than there were a few years ago, but the incentives remain attractive.

I am benefiting from being a somewhat early adopter, but I don't consider myself a pioneer, like an e-car purchaser from, say, five or more years ago. I bought a proven, reliable vehicle that has been on the market for several years.

We took a big leap by going all-electric, but it's worth noting that plug-in hybrids are also eligible for tax credits and rebates. A plug-in hybrid is a gas/electric hybrid vehicle with a beefed-up electric component to enable less gas-powered driving.

To see what's available, and explore the incentives, go to plugstar.zappyride.com and click "Browse Cars." I think you'll be amazed at the variety of plug-in models that are available —everything from sports cars to SUVs. There are incentives available for leasing as well.

Happily, I learned the cost of maintaining an electric car is much less than a gas-powered vehicle. The maintenance section in my owner's manual is downright skimpy.

For years to come, most of the maintenance will simply be checking brakes, rotating tires and changing brake fluid. There are no oil changes, no spark plugs to replace, no fuel filter changes and so on. There is no exhaust system, no gas tank and way fewer moving parts.

The fact that I'll never put a drop of gasoline in the car also provides huge savings.

Not to come off as *too* Californian, but I also save a lot as a driver because we installed solar panels on our house a few years ago. We overbuilt the solar system not only to eliminate our monthly electric bills, but also to eventually charge an electric car or plug-in hybrid. So, our vehicle is essentially solar-powered, and the "fuel" is already paid for because of the previous solar investment.

Sun-powered transportation—how cool is that?

Don't get me started on forking over cash money at a gas station to buy fossil fuel; that's so 20th century! I work for a conservation organization, and I've had a lifelong passion for environmental issues, so I could harp on the environmental attributes ad nauseam.

To spare you, I'll simply say this: Like me, you've probably been stuck in complete gridlock and seen all the tailpipes pumping crap into our nasal passages, our lungs and our atmosphere. We're sitting at a standstill, not moving forward, yet the crap keeps spewing out while we gaze, bleary-eyed, into the haze. We're frustrated, mad, and we're not going anywhere.

Whether it's a temporary traffic jam, or the lack of political action on behalf of our health and the health of the planet, it's reasonable to ask, "What are we doing just sitting here as the smoke thickens around us?"

The transportation sector is a huge contributor of greenhouse gas emissions. Nearly all of us participate in that sector, but we don't have to leave that sort of legacy. Even if you're a climate change skeptic, it makes a lot of sense to drive an electric car. It's time to join the future.

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