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Market has 1st car-charging station

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With a few hundred dollars and three or four hours of work, the Good Earth Market brought a service to Billings no one else offers.

During the April 22 Earth Day celebration, the market, at 3024 Second Ave. N., unveiled the first official electric car charging station in town. It was a simple ceremony - a paper bag was pulled off a parking sign that reads "Electric cars only, charge while you shop," and an electric car was plugged into the outlet a few yards past the sign - but those involved hope it spurs something bigger.

"I think that if we're going to have more people move toward that kind of a vehicle, either a plug-in hybrid or a pure electrical, we're going to have to have an infrastructure for it," said Rick Jones, whose electric Zenn was the first car to use the station. "I commend the Good Earth Market for being the first in Billings."

Perry McNeese, Good Earth Market's general manager, said the idea for the charging station started at a discussion that took place during an alternative-transportation event at the market last August. A few of his regular customers are also part of a handful of electric car owners in the Billings area and asked him about the possibility.

"The more I thought about it, the more I thought, 'Why don't we do that?' " he said.

So McNeese partitioned off a parking spot in the southeast corner of the market's parking lot, put about \$120 toward a standard 110-volt outlet - the most common type used for electric vehicles - and no more than four hours worth of electrical work to install it.

There aren't many electric cars in Billings, so there isn't much of a line at the charging station. But part of the reason for its installation was also to start a trend of similar services in Billings.

"If there are some more places who will let them charge, a grass-roots network that we knew we would have a place to plug in, then more people would be likely to use an electric

vehicle," Jones said. "That's one of the concerns, that your range is limited."

Since the range of most electric vehicles is limited to 30 to 50 miles per charge, it's tough to spend a day in one running errands, but more charging areas around town could change that, he said.

McNeese said he also hopes to get people in Yellowstone County to consider purchasing an electric car. The nearest dealer of electric cars is Eco Auto Inc. in Bozeman, but gas-electric hybrids are available in Billings, and both are always hot tickets at fairs, festivals and celebrations.

"The electric cars draw a lot of attention," McNeese said. "There's a lot of public interest in the electric vehicle."

The benefits, he said, are many. For starters, it takes 35 to 75 cents worth of electricity to charge one. With one gallon of gas at about \$2.10 in Billings, that's quite a difference, McNeese said, and they're quieter and create less pollution.

"They make more noise when you step on the brake than when you step on the gas," he said. "There's no carbon footprint, so to speak, and they're less expensive to buy, usually in the \$12,000 to \$15,000 range. I'm not sure what the downside is."