DWP, Edison to Invest in Electric Car

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Seeking to slash Southern California air pollution at its greatest source, two big Los Angeles utilities on Thursday agreed to invest $7 million to develop an electric car and get thousands of them on the road within five years.

In an agreement with the start-up Swedish concern Clean Air Transport, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and Southern California Edison Co. agreed to jointly fund the project that is intended to bring 1,000 electric vehicles to Los Angeles by 1992 and 10,000 by 1995.

"Someone has to be the spark plug to make this happen," said Eldon Cotton, DWP assistant general manager for power. A regional air quality plan requires 70% of all vehicles to be electric--or otherwise non-polluting--by 2010.

"It is essential that we move ahead on clean air," said Los Angeles City Councilman Marvin Braude, who spearheaded the effort to underwrite electric car development. "We must find alternative fuels (to oil)--and electric power is the fuel of choice."

The car--dubbed the LA 301--would carry four passengers, have a range of 150 miles and a top speed of 70 m.p.h. and accelerate from zero to 30 m.p.h. in nine seconds. As designed, the car would have a molded plastic body and a galvanized steel frame. It would be available in passenger sedan and quarter-ton mini-van models.

Officials said the vehicles would initially retail for about $25,000, but the price could come down with large-scale production. "They're fun to ride. It's exciting and they are vibrationless," said Braude about his test drive in a prototype.

"The steps taken today will assure development of a commercial electric vehicle," said Cotton. "It's a real solution to a problem we all share."

The DWP estimates that 70% to 80% of Los Angeles-area air pollution is caused by emissions from the 8 million cars and trucks that operate daily in the basin. Clean Air Transport officials said that electric vehicles create only 3% as much pollution as comparable gas-fueled autos--even factoring in the pollution created in making electricity for battery recharging.

DWP officials acknowledge that they hope the introduction of electric cars will help persuade the South Coast Air Quality Management District to ease pollution restrictions being placed on DWP and Edison power plants.

"We hope this will mitigate" concerns over power plant pollution, said Jerry Enzenauer, electric transportation program manager for the DWP. But, he added, "The AQMD has not yet accepted that this will work."

The $7-million electric car investment by the two local utilities is a small fraction of the several hundred million dollars that they estimate it would cost to retrofit power plants to meet AQMD guidelines by the end of the century.

Electric cars have long been considered one solution to pollution in the Los Angeles Basin, but as yet no company has developed a commercially viable vehicle.

Clean Air Transport beat out 18 U.S. and international competitors to win the DWP/Edison award. Braude and DWP officials said the promise of quick delivery of vehicles is what gave Clean Air Transport the edge over other bidders.

The firm was founded about two years ago by a group of British, American and Swedish investors for the sole purpose of creating an electrically powered vehicle. Most of the engineers that have joined its team have worked for large European car manufacturers such as Saab, officials said.

Although Clean Air Transport has not built a car before, Braude said Los Angeles officials have confidence in the firm and sought an entrepreneurial outfit that could move quicker than the larger, more established automobile manufacturers.

"They had the best chance for success early on, and that is important," said Braude.

Clean Air Transport executives would not say how much they have invested in the project, but DWP officials said it is "substantial."

The privately held company, which is working in conjunction with the British design firm of International Automotive Design, has completed 10 months of design work and plans to start production by late 1992. Initially, the car will be produced in England. But Clean Air Transport Managing Director Henry Munkevik said all or some manufacturing could eventually be shifted to Los Angeles, where most of the cars are likely to be sold.

The design of the LA 301 is based on a 1983 experimental car--the Whisper--that was funded by the Danish government. Only 30 of those cars were produced and, like virtually all electric car prototypes, they were never marketed.

With Mideast tensions rising and concerns over oil prices and supplies mounting, auto analysts say there will be increasing pressure to produce commercially viable electric vehicles.

General Motors, which did not submit a proposal for the Los Angeles award, has an electric vehicle in development. But officials, citing competitive concerns, refused to disclose when it would be available for sale. Ford and Chrysler also have prototypes in the works.