Opinion

Drive an EV: What An Ordinary Citizen Can Do to Fight Climate Change

By Ariane Erickson

Despite the views of our current president and his administration, global warming is real. Scientists have proven that it is caused by human activity, and we need to change our behavior in order to curtail the worst effects, including extreme heat waves, wildfires, and sea level rise. But what can an ordinary citizen do to lower the emissions that are causing climate change?

Transportation accounts for approximately 30% of a typical East Palo Alto household's carbon. Gasoline-powered cars burn fossil fuels, releasing heat-trapping carbon dioxide (CO2) into our air—not to mention many other pollutants. Conversely, electric vehicles release zero CO2 at the tailpipe.

Over here in the Bay Area, the electricity used to power EVs is largely derived from carbon neutral energy sources. Thus, switching to electric vehicles can bring a household's car emissions down to zero. Eliminating this emissions source is one of the biggest ways that any individual can personally fight climate change, right here, right now. Score one for the environment!

But what about consumers? What's in it for us? Aren't EVs expensive? The sheer number of Tassels sweeping down Willow Road, and University Avenue on their daily commutes into Silicon Valley leads many modest-income Peninsula residents to believe that electric vehicles are only for the rich. This assumption is soundly untrue. Most automobile manufacturers are now producing competitively-priced electric vehicles, and government agencies are providing strong financial incentives to "early adopters" and low-to-moderate income consumers.

Here's how you can lease or own an electric vehicle for less than your family's monthly cable bill.

Federal tax credit: Consumers who purchase an electric vehicle are eligible for a tax credit of up to $7,500. This means that, if you purchase an EV this year, you can reduce your tax bill by $7,500 when you complete your 2017 taxes. This is equal to paying $7,500 less for the vehicle itself, but the discount comes as a reduction in taxes, rather than at the time of sale. (Note: the credit applies only to the amount of your tax liability. If you do not owe taxes, you do not get the credit.)

State rebate: To meet Governor Brown's ambitious goal of 1.5 million zero emission vehicles on California roads by 2025, California is giving rebates up to $2,500 for the purchase or lease of electric vehicles, and an additional $2,000 rebate to low-income consumers. What's more, PG&E is giving its customers (even those who have switched to Peninsula Clean Energy) an additional $500 for purchasing or leasing an electric vehicle.

Here's an example of how affordable an EV becomes using the above incentives. A recent local dealer offered a 36 month lease on a Kia Soul EV with $2,500 cash due at signing (down payment, first month's lease, and various fees) and $99 plus tax per month. These lease figures include the $7,500 federal tax credit, so the consumer can't apply for the credit separately. However, they could apply for the $2,500 state rebate by completing the online application, and would then receive a check in the mail for $2,500 in approximately six weeks. This means getting a refund for the entire cash due amount! And, if the lessee qualifies as a low-income earner, they get an additional $2,000, for a total of $4,500, which not only eliminates the down payment, but effectively lowers their monthly continued on page 12.