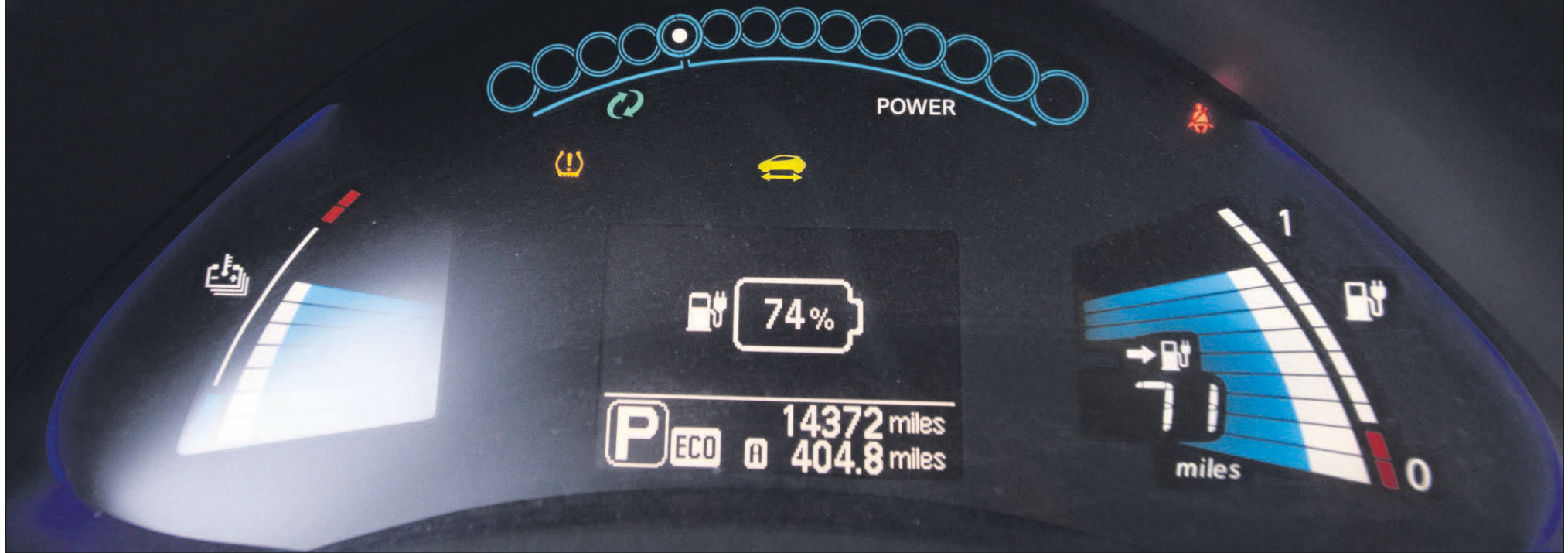


LIFESTYLES

WEEKEND, JUNE 13-14, 2015

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Staff photo by E.J. Harris

The fuel gauge on the Nissan Leaf reads like more like a cellphone power display than that of a traditional automobile.

Unplugging from the pump

Electric car owners make the investment in Eastern Oregon

By **GEORGE PAVLEN**
East Oregonian

It took a little convincing at first, but Jordan McDonald was able to persuade his wife, McKennon, to replace her old Toyota Corolla with a 100-percent electric Nissan Leaf in December 2013.

"I kind of forced her into it," Jordan said, with a chuckle. "It was for the fuel and maintenance savings, really."

Six months later, the Pendleton couple invested in their second electric vehicle, a hybrid Chevy Volt, which McKennon drives regularly to Helix and back for work. The car has enough range to make the 35-mile round trip entirely on electricity before switching over to its combined gasoline engine.

As for the Leaf, Jordan said he can usually get between 80-90 miles on each charge — great for shorter commutes, but a bit more stressful on excursions to, say, Portland, a solid 210 miles away.

Without the same abundance of public charging stations as found along the Interstate 5 corridor, electric cars remain a relatively subdued industry in Eastern Oregon where major population centers are spread far apart. But developers are working to expand that network, with a high-power station installed last year in Arlington and Thursday's ribbon cutting for the new Tesla Supercharger at Wildhorse Resort & Casino on the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Until there's more public charging infrastructure locally, Jordan said the Leaf is relegated to commuter duty.

"You can drive to Hermiston and back without charging. Those are safe trips to make," he said. "Walla Walla is really on the edge of its range."

'Range anxiety'

The Oregon Department of Transportation has already spent big bucks to overcome "range anxiety" on the west side of the state.

Art James, senior project executive for the department's Office of Innovative Partnerships, said they secured a \$910,000 state grant to install 10 fast-charge stations from Cottage Grove to Ashland in 2012, connecting with the Portland, Salem and Eugene metro areas to complete Oregon's portion of what is known as the West Coast Electric Highway.

ODOT landed another \$3.34 million from the U.S. Department of Transportation to install 34 charging stations along the coast, into central Oregon at Madras and Redmond and on Interstate 84 to The Dalles. The last of those stations were finished in April.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Jordan and McKennon McDonald made the decision to buy an all-electric Nissan Leaf in 2013. They later bought a second electric car, a Chevy Volt hybrid.



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LEFT: The McDonalds have a 240 volt home charging station for their Nissan Leaf in their garage. **RIGHT:** A Tesla Model S charges on one of the new Tesla super charger stations during a ribbon cutting ceremony Thursday at Wildhorse Resort & Casino in Mission.

Now, James said that momentum is slowing down. ODOT's former chief electric vehicle officer, Ashley Horvat, left in April to take a job at PlugShare, a California-based company that runs a map to find charging stations across the country.

There are no immediate plans for ODOT to expand charging stations into Eastern Oregon, James said, though that

could change based on funding and interest in the vehicles.

"It sort of tracks by the number of registered electric vehicles," James said. "You get over to Eastern Oregon, and almost all of the counties have zero or fewer than 20 vehicles registered."

According to ODOT, Umatilla County has 21-50 registered electric vehicles. No other Eastern Oregon county

has more than 20.

Peter Mitchell, manager and economic development officer at the Port of Arlington, describes it as a chicken-and-egg problem. He asks how residents are going to make the investment in an electric car if they have nowhere to charge it.

Mitchell helped recruit EV4, a company out of Portland, to build a quick-charge station serving travelers on I-84 through

Arlington. He said the corridor should be treated the same as I-5 to entice drivers from Portland to Boise and in between.

"I think we've got a good run on it," Mitchell said. "Having these stations every 50 miles is kind of a minimum to service that industry. And it's coming."

Worth the buy-in?

Until then, drivers like the McDonalds keep tabs on places to charge their cars by using the PlugShare smartphone app, which includes not only Superchargers but local RV parks, motels, businesses and even homes where people can plug into a 240-volt outlet for a small price.

Jordan, who co-owns the local Internet service provider Wtechlink, also bought and installed a home charger that can power up the Leaf in as little as three hours. McKennon, a Helix schoolteacher and Pendleton city councilwoman, also makes sure to charge the Volt nightly to keep the car's gasoline use at a minimum.

So far, they say the savings at the pump far outweigh the small increase in their electricity bills. The cars also require less maintenance, apart from brakes and tires.

"I think so far they've proven to be a good investment for what we're doing right now in our lives," McKennon said. "This makes the most sense for us."

Like the McDonalds, Frank Erickson — a retired Pendleton doctor — has an all-electric Leaf for in-town driving. He also has a regular gasoline Subaru for security on long-distance trips.

"It's nice to pass the gas station, but you have to make the leap," Erickson said. "I think it's the wave of the future."

Pat Campbell, of Vancouver, Washington, said he's managed to drive his Leaf to Pendleton, though it took some pre-trip planning and a stop in Boardman to charge at the Driftwood RV Park. He figures he saves \$150 per month on gas, versus just a \$20 increase in his electricity bills.

"I think the charging system is basically like an economic development tool," Campbell said. "For a shopping center or motel, it really attracts business."

Erickson agrees, and said he hopes some forward-thinking chambers of commerce will start latching on to the development — especially as more efficient batteries and newer model Teslas become more affordable (a new Tesla Model S currently fetches approximately \$71,000 in price).

"That will break it open," Erickson said. "If you can make it affordable at a quality like a Tesla Model S or Model X, you'd have a lot of acceptance. I think that day is coming."

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Staff photo by E.J. Harris

A Nissan Leaf takes more than three hours to fully charge on a home charger. The Leaf takes only 30 minutes to fully recharge at a supercharger station.