

Time for State to Get Moving on Electric Vehicles: NJ Spotlight Roundtable

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Ongoing dispute over who should pay for shift to clean energy and how big a role utilities should play



There was agreement that it is time New Jersey moves more aggressively on electric vehicles.

The state needs to accelerate its efforts to electrify the transportation sector, but who should pay for it and how big a role utilities should play in making that happen sparked a lot of debate at an NJ Spotlight roundtable this past Friday in Hamilton Township.

The issue aims to resolve how best to reduce global warming emissions from the single biggest source of carbon pollution within the state without adding new costs for utility customers, who are bearing most of the burden for the shift to clean energy.

Those questions are among those top legislators, clean-energy advocates and pro-electrification backers are wrestling with as they seek to amend a long-stalled bill ([S-2252](#)) that would provide a road map to build the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles and entice motorists to buy them with rebates.

“There is a lot of untapped potential in New Jersey,” said Mark Warner, a vice president of Gabel Associates, a Highland Park consulting firm, while acknowledging the state is lagging behind some of its neighbors in putting in place the incentives needed to jump-start the market.

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(NJSpotlight video by Steve Lubetkin/StateBroadcastNews.com)

While panelists at the roundtable, “What’s Next with Electric Vehicles,” disputed some of the tactics and strategy being used to kick off the transformation of the transportation sector, all agreed.

“If we are going to do anything about New Jersey’s contribution to climate change, we really have to focus on the transportation sector,” said Christine Sadovy, deputy chief of staff for the state Board of Public Utilities. The sector accounts for roughly 46% of in-state greenhouse gas emissions, she said.

Energy Master Plan

Electrifying the transportation sector is a top priority of an Energy Master Plan that the Murphy administration is finalizing, Sadovy said. By 2025, the administration wants to have 330,000 electric cars on the road in New Jersey, an increase of the estimated 30,000-plus EVs on the road today by a factor of 10.

The state also committed to following California Air Resources Board (CARB)’s mandates more than a decade ago, according to Jim Appleton, president of

the New Jersey Coalition of Automotive Retailers. Already, the state is lagging behind those requirements, he said.

In 2018, the mandates dictated New Jersey car dealers sell 24,000 electric plug-in cars, Appleton said. Only 5,600 were sold. This year, the CARB program ramped up the mandate to 36,000. “We’ll be lucky to get to 7,500,” Appleton said.

New Jersey will never reach the ever-increasing mandates, primarily because of two reasons: price and range anxiety — the fear among motorists they will run out of juice before finding a refueling station to recharge their cars, he said.

“It’s time for the government to put money where those mandates are,” Appleton said.

Not so fast, argued Rate Counsel director Stefanie Brand, who noted the people she represents are the ones paying for those rebates as well as subsidies for offshore wind, to increase the amount of solar energy in New Jersey, and investments to promote energy efficiency. “Each one is going to cost a lot of money,” Brand said.

She denounced the proposed rebates, a proposal aimed at giving electric car owners an incentive to help move the more expensive vehicles.

“We don’t give poor people a break on their rates,” Brand said. “It is incredibly regressive. You are asking poor people to subsidize rich people.”

Utilities’ role is ‘not zero’

The other issue that sparked differing views involved how much the state’s four electric utilities should play in transforming the transportation sector from one based on petroleum to one focused on electric vehicles.

“I’m not sure what is the right role for utilities, but I’m pretty certain it is not zero,” said Warner, citing the emphasis utilities put on ensuring



Mark Warner of Gabel Associates

reliability of the grid and integrating electric vehicles into the grid.

Brand agreed to a point, but questioned whether ratepayers ought to be paying for charging infrastructure when a robust private sector already is willing to do it.

John Dempsey, manager of transmission development and strategy for Public Service Electric & Gas, downplayed the utility's involvement in rolling out infrastructure to charge EVs. "We don't want to own every charger in our territory," he said. "It's not a core business of ours."

Doug O'Malley, director of Environment New Jersey, endorsed the goals of the current bill pending in the Legislature, but also argued the state needs to push NJ Transit into a more aggressive timetable for converting its bus fleet to electric vehicles.