

I-GO car users will soon be able to go all-electric

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I-GO is going electric. Starting next summer, the nonprofit car-sharing service will add 30 Mitsubishi i-MiEVs to its fleet, allowing Chicagoans to drive an all-electric car without having to buy one.

"I think it's the future -- moving toward using electricity instead of foreign oil," says Sharon Feigon, the chief executive officer of I-GO, which is affiliated with the Center for Neighborhood Technology.

All-electric cars need a place to plug in. The City of Chicago has issued a "request for proposals" seeking a company to install car-charging stations around the city, including 36 for I-GO.

A \$700,000 U.S. Department of Energy grant will pay for the cars and the stations.

A car-sharing service works like this: Members sign up online for a car for a certain number of hours, pick it up at a designated location, then return it when they're done with it. I-GO cars, which rent for around \$7 to \$9 an hour, are mostly used for grocery shopping. Gas and insurance are included. If gas is below a quarter of a tank, the driver has to fill it, using a gas card kept inside the glove box.

With an electric car, a user would have to plug it in at the end of a trip, instead of buying gas. The Mitsubishi i-MiEVs get about 100 miles to a charge and are fully charged after six hours, Feigon says.

Feigon says car-sharing and electric cars go well together because most car-sharing trips are short rides to the grocery store. Electric cars also fits I-GO's mission, which is to cut air pollution. I-GO's fleet is already half hybrid.

More than half of I-GO's 15,000 members either give up a car or postpone buying a car as a result of joining the program.

I-GO currently has cars in 35 Chicago neighborhoods and six suburbs. Next month, the company will add a car in Jefferson Park. Electric cars will allow I-GO to expand its service into more areas and won't replace cars I-GO already has, Feigon says.

"Our goal is to serve all Chicago neighborhoods," Feigon says.

The cars won't be available in the United States until next year, but I got to ride in an i-MiEV built for the Japanese market last week. The most striking thing about the ride was that the motor was almost silent. There was something like a gas indicator on the dashboard -- with an image of an electrical cord -- showing when the car is "full," as in fully charged, and when it's running out of juice. In the back of the car is a big lithium battery instead of a gas tank.

Feigon says one advantage of car-sharing, besides not having to buy and insure your own car, is that you can try different kinds of cars, like a hybrid, or get a van if you need one. You're not limited to just the car you buy.

"Owning," Feigon says, "is an old-fashioned concept."

Zipcar, a for-profit car-sharing service, also plans to add electric cars to its fleet but is still working out when to do it.