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Charged up for business: Electric car firms plug into the buzz Nov 12 - 25, 2009

Keith Andrews knows firsthand the benefits associated with driving an electric car. The Grand Junction business executive commutes back and forth to work, swings by the grocery store and runs errands — all behind the wheel of vehicle that resembles a golf cart, but comes equipped with headlights, mirrors and, of course, a license plate.

The two-seater isn't built for speed, but efficiency. There's little noise and zero emissions. And Andrews estimates it costs about 2 cents a mile to operate the vehicle — the electricity it takes to recharge the batteries overnight.

"It's been real easy to use that," he says. No wonder the president of a company that manufactures electric cars has such high hopes for the venture. With increasing demand from consumers for products that reduce the use of fossil fuels and the corresponding emission of greenhouse gases believed to cause global warming, Andrews considers the timing particularly fortuitous. In fact, he compares electric cars to personal computers and cell phones when those products first came to market.

"We're excited to be in kind of a new business," says Andrews, president of Fairplay Electric Cars.

Larry Zarlingo, another long-time Grand Junction businessman who operates a golf and electric car dealership that offers Fairplay products, confirms that sales of electric cars have increased.

A federal income tax credit that lowers the cost of some models by more than half has helped, he says. But so has the low cost of operating such vehicles. Zarlingo drives an electric car himself in all but the coldest months of the year and figures he's cut the fuel costs associated with his business in half.

Andrews is one of the founders of Fairplay Electric Cars, a business he helped launch five years ago after a lengthy career in the automotive industry. The initial goal, he says, was to compete against what at the time were the big three manufacturers of golf cars.

Fairplay Cars uses parts manufactured in China and the United States and assembles vehicles in Southern California. The company maintains its headquarters as well as a research and development facility in Grand Junction. The company employs 14 in Grand Junction and another 22 in California.

In addition to golf cars, though, Fairplay Cars has diversified its product line with electric vehicles for commercial, industrial, recreational and resort uses. The company entered the electric car market with the EVE, an acronym for Electric Vehicle Engineering.

The EVE comes in a base model with a lower cost and more basic features. A deluxe model

includes custom aluminum wheels with upgraded seats, tires and trim. Both models meet the requirements for what's called a low-speed vehicle, including headlights, seat belts, side mirrors and turn signals. An electric motor powers the vehicle at speeds of up to 25 miles per hour. The vehicles travel up to 25 miles on a charge. [Back to Top](#)

Andrews says Colorado law allows licensed drivers to operate such vehicle on streets with a posted speed limit of 35 mph or less. With the exception of commutes among Fruita, Grand Junction and Palisade, the covers a substantial portion of the Grand Valley, he says.

While low-speed vehicles long have been popular in golf and retirement communities in Arizona and Florida, such vehicles are gaining popularity elsewhere and with a broader demographic, Andrews says.

A federal income tax credit for the purchase of qualified low-speed vehicles also has helped spur demand, Andrews says. A credit of between \$2,500 and \$7,500 is available for four-wheel vehicles purchased in

2009 that use rechargeable batteries with at least 4 kilowatt hours of capacity. The amount of the credit is determined by the capacity of the batteries. For the EVE, a credit of \$4,234.72 is available, bringing down the price of the vehicle to about \$2,300.

Fairplay Cars has geared up at its production facility in California as well as its headquarters in Grand Junction to deliver more cars to dealers across the country, Andrews says.

It's unclear whether or not the tax credit will extend beyond this year, Andrews says. But he expects demand to continue over the long term because of the lower operation costs and zero emissions associated with electric cars. Over time, more efficient motors and improved batteries will extend the performance and range of electric cars, he adds.

Fairplay Cars expects to introduce new models next year, including a four-seat vehicle as well as a recreational vehicle that will operate not only on streets, but also off-road, Andrews says

Overall, it's a good time to be in the electric car business, he says. "We're excited about being in the low-speed vehicle market."

So is Zarlingo, who sells electric golf cars and street-legal vehicles at Zarlingo's Electric Cars in Grand Junction.

Zarlingo opened the dealership about five years ago after working for more than 30 years in the automotive repair business. He sells a number of different brands, including Fairplay and EVE as well as Global Electric Motorcars (GEM).

Zarlingo confirms that the tax credit has bolstered sales and joins Andrews in hoping the credit is extended. "I certainly hope it takes off and it keeps going like it has."

But Zarlingo also sees a long-term demand for electric cars for customers looking for a less expensive and non-polluting way to get around town.

Zarlingo drives a GEM to commute back and forth to work, go on service calls and get parts. Considering it takes only about \$18 to \$20 worth of electricity a month to recharge the batteries, Zarlingo figures he's cut the fuel costs for his business in half.

But there's still another, less tangible benefit associated with electric cars, he says: "They're kind of fun to drive."