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PLUGGED IN: Mike McCabe, Reliant Energy technology manager, tries out the new vehicle charging station outside Houston's City Hall on Tuesday. With Reliant, the city is converting 10 of its hybrids into plug-in vehicles.

First charging stations are going up in town, in a bid to promote electric vehicles in oil country

CITY FEELING CHARGED UP

By **TOM FOWLER**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

THE heart of oil country may seem an odd place to plant the seeds for a green energy future, but the city of Houston and Reliant Energy started sowing on Tuesday.

A deal between the city and Reliant has the electric retailer converting 10 of the city's new Toyota Prius gasoline-electric hybrids into plug-in vehicles with greater fuel efficiency and the ability to recharge through a standard home power socket. Reliant is also installing 10 charging stations for the cars around the city, including seven that will be available to the public.

The project is designed to raise consumer awareness about plug-in electric cars and promote the city and state as a hub for future advances in the industry, said Jason Few, president of Reliant. The company also benefits through the possibility of more electricity sales, Few said, and more information on how customers will use public charging stations.

"We firmly believe there's a business model behind this," Few said. "The more we know about consumer habits, the better we can provide the infrastructure and the products and services to meet the needs of electric vehicle owners and drivers in Texas."

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CARS: City owns large hybrid fleet

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Houston Mayor Bill White said the project is a first step toward a future where electric vehicles are the norm.

"It won't happen in a day, it won't be coerced and it won't be mandated, but this I will predict: In the next decade one of the biggest changes you'll see in energy use in this country will be the adoption of plug-in hybrid vehicles," White said.

The deal is the latest in a recent surge of electric vehicle promotional efforts.

Last week a new group, Plug-In Texas, announced plans to promote state and federal policies to support the spread of plug-in electric vehicles through incentives, while Reliant and Nissan said Houston will be one of the first cities where the new all-electric Nissan LEAF will be sold when it's rolled out next year.

On Monday the new Electrification Coalition called for a national road map to create the infrastructure to support electric vehicles. On Tuesday the U.S. and China signed an agreement to develop joint standards for car battery and grid development, and General Motors said its electric Volt is on track for commercial production a year from now.



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NO FUELING: Gaetano Mannino, left, is president of Verdek-EV, which provided the charging stations. There will be seven stations in the city that will be open to the public.

The city of Houston already owns one of the largest fleets of gasoline-electric hybrid cars in the country, with 750 of its 12,500 vehicles powered by such systems.

The new Priuses were part of the city's ongoing car purchase plan, but the \$10,000-per-vehicle conversion and the charging stations are being covered by Reliant.

"Without Reliant we never would have done this project"

said James Tillman, the city's assistant director of finance. "We anticipate saving about \$1,400 per year per car, including fuel and maintenance costs. Even if we had to pay for the conversion ourselves, we likely would have broken even."

The standard Prius has a fuel-efficiency rating of about 48 miles per gallon on the highway and 45 mpg in the city. The plug-in conversion improves that performance

by installing a larger, more efficient lithium battery and adjusting the car's onboard computer so it doesn't engage the gasoline engine until the vehicle reaches a higher speed, said Paul Scott, co-founder of Plug-in America, an advocacy group.

The city won't charge for electricity at the seven publicly open charging stations, but drivers with plug-in hybrids will need to purchase a pass key from the city for \$10.

Tillman estimates if every public charging station were used every day for a year it would cost the city about \$1,040.

"We're just testing the market now to monitor our own charging habits and consumer habits," Tillman said.

Tillman said the city looked into using Ford Escape hybrids for the conversion, noting the city already has 176 Escapes in its hybrid fleet, but the upgrades would have cost about \$30,000 each and the batteries only had a 3-month warranty.

"A \$60,000 SUV for the city was kind of pushing it," he said.

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CITY'S HYBRIDS

Gasoline-electric hybrids in the city of Houston's fleet:

■ Toyota Prius: 484

■ Ford Escape: 176