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City lauded for electric car stance

By Cortney Fielding Staff Writer

PASADENA - Don Ballek is starting to get over the heartbreak of losing his Northern California city's fleet of Nissan Hyperminis.

The Ukiah economic development coordinator said he thought about resisting their forfeiture - perhaps burying the five electric cars in the backyard - when the automaker came calling in July.

But Ballek and the Hyperminis didn't go underground. Instead, the city watched as a Nissan truck loaded the vehicles and set off north to pick up others in Arcata.

Ballek said he understood the imperfect cars had to go. "They were truly prototypes," he said. "The defrosters wouldn't work if you had anything else going."

Still, he said, "for a small town - wow, were they great."

Last week, Pasadena joined the host of California cities that have bid adieu to electric vehicles recalled by automakers.

After three weeks of negotiations and resistance that escalated when the city refused to release the Hyperminis on Aug. 8, Nissan collected its vehicles Wednesday evening.

Although ultimately losing in the effort to keep 11 green-and-white Hyperminis from a pair of metallic jaws, the city's campaign won't go unnoted in the annals of electric car history.

Pasadena is the first city in California to wage an organized campaign against removal of electric vehicles, said Chelsea Sexton, executive director of Plug In America.

While many municipalities, such as nearby Santa Monica, benefited from recent campaigns by the electric car advocates to keep Toyota and Ford hybrids, Pasadena took on a leadership role and presented a united front, she said.

In the latest round of Nissan recalls, Pasadena was alone in its aim to put up resistance.

"They were quite spirited," she said.

Pasadena leased the vehicles for five years. Nissan representatives said the company relied on special legal exemptions to operate the Japanese-made cars in the U.S., and those exemptions were set to expire.

Saying the cars were part of a temporary experiment that had outlived its intended lifespan, Nissan declined to renew the cars' lease agreements in December, and they had been stored in a Public Works yard since late July.

After learning of Pasadena's plight, Plug In America representatives showed up at a City Council meeting and offered their support, which the city accepted.

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Pasadena officials worked with advocates to draft a letter to Nissan stating their intentions to keep the cars. Over the next three weeks, the city stayed firm on its message and supported Plug In's efforts to get the word out.

Two weeks ago, tension escalated when the city blocked Nissan's attempt to take the vehicles. While the move was widely seen as an act of defiance, city officials said the failure to release was the result of a "procedural problem."

Mayor Bill Bogaard said he was proud of the city's actions and said it will use the momentum gained for other environmental programs such as recycling and building design.

"I'm glad we had a little skirmish," he said.

He said although the Hyperminis are a loss, it wasn't unexpected.

Reviewing the terms of the Nissan lease "provided a little smoke" and allowed the cars to stay in city possession a bit longer, but Bogaard, himself a lawyer, said he knew "we didn't have a legal leg to stand on."

In Ukiah, Ballek said he's having a hard time finding a replacement for his Hyperminis. He's looked into everything from electric golf carts to the electric scooter, Segways.

The city still has seven Honda Civic Hybrids, two Toyota Rav4's and one Ford Ranger electric truck.

The city has other options, said Ed Kjaer, who manages the largest fleet of zero-emission cars in the country at Southern California Edison.

Pasadena can look into the use of flex-fuel cars, check for opportunities to be involved in future plug-in demonstrations or technical development programs and even look to reduce the size of its existing gas fleet.

"There is no reason to hang heads and give up," he said.

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