

## Robert Rector: Carmaker pulls plug as another charges ahead

San Gabriel Valley Tribune

IT is noble and admirable that electric car enthusiasts, a group usually comprised of idealistic actors with a lot of time of their hands, are rallying to save the city of Pasadena's fleet of zero-emission vehicles.

In case you have missed this unfolding eco-drama, Nissan Motors is trying to retrieve 11 Hyperminis that they leased to the city. Nissan declined to renew the leases after they expired in December and subsequently asked they be returned

And although the city denies taking an activist role in this spat, officials have done everything short of throwing their bodies in front of tow trucks to prevent their fleet from being returned and ground up like so much shoulder clod. Or recycled, if you prefer.

For their part, Nissan says the vehicles were part of a temporary research program that was extended well beyond its intended lifetime and must be returned.

A company official said that the manufacturer of the cars' batteries would no longer be making them, and Nissan's relocation from Gardena to Nashville, Tenn., would preclude its ability to maintain the cars.

"It's not just what you see on the surface: `Bad Nissan, they're just taking these cars back,'" the official said.

Pardon me if this sounds like the same song, different lyrics. General Motors leased more than 800 of its all-electric EV1 cars out of about 1,100 manufactured in the late 1990s with the provision that after the 3-year leases were up, the cars reverted to the company. Despite unfulfilled waiting lists and positive feedback from the lessees, GM stated that it could not sell enough of the cars to make the EV1 profitable. The company then proceeded to trash the entire fleet.

Do we see a pattern here?

In the meantime, the Pasadena cause has been taken up by a group called Plug In America, co-founded by, what else, an actor. They are promising Nissan "positive press" if they let Pasadena keep the Hyperminis.

While I'm not convinced that "positive press" is the kind of incentive to turns heads in a company with global revenues in excess of \$80 billion, one can hope that his kind of activism indicates that the day may soon dawn when consumers demand, and get, an alternative to the fossil-fuel burning behemoths of today.

The bad news is that Nissan is considering entering into an alliance with Renault and General Motors, creating a mega-conglomerate that would damn near rule the world. How do you make your voice heard in an operation of that size?

Perhaps that voice will come from the Silicon Valley, where Tesla Motors has revived interest in the electric car with a new, sexy \$100,000 roadster.

Sounds expensive. But since hydrogen cars are costing a cool million at this time, maybe it's not a bad deal.

The Tesla is nobody's golf cart. Powered by 900 pounds of lithium-ion batteries and an electric motor, it can go 0-60 in 4 seconds with a top speed of 130 mph and has a range of 250 miles.

Its first 100 cars, due to be delivered in 2007, are already sold to, guess who, actors for the most part.

The company has raised \$60 million and identifies backers such as Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page, former eBay executive Jeff Skoll and Jim Marver of VantagePoint Venture Partners. PayPal co-founder Elon Musk is Tesla's chairman. The company was founded in 2003 by Martin Eberhard and Marc Tarpenning, Tesla's vice president of engineering.

And yes, they hope to build bigger and cheaper cars in the near future. Its sexy project, Musk says, will allow the company to sell a four-door sedan, to be built in the United States, with a price of less than \$50,000, by 2008.

Is this the car of the future? Only time will tell. But we can hope that cars like the Tesla, and the actors who own them, will change the way we drive today.

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