

# Few Sparks: GM's underwhelming electric car program

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For the first time since the late, lamented EV1 faded into oblivion in 2003, General Motors is back in the battery electric business, as it announces that it will roll out a plug-in version of the Spark minicar (it's also sold as the Beat on some markets) in the U.S. by 2013. Ho hum.

It's very hard to get excited about this announcement, because this is no make-or-break Volt program - GM is, instead, doing the bare minimum to get California [zero emission](#) credits, building an exceptionally cautious 2,000 cars on an entry-level program. If anyone buys 'em, great, but the company isn't risking much capital or prestige here. Obviously, the failure of the highly touted EV1 looms large.

The announcement on Wednesday was remarkably low-key. "The Spark EV offers customers living in urban areas who have predictable driving patterns or short commutes an all-electric option," said Jim Federico, a Chevrolet global vehicle chief engineer for EVs. If you meet those relatively narrow criteria, have we got a car for you.

Oddly enough, this CNBC story takes exactly the opposite tack from mine, claiming that the electric Spark is important because "it is further commitment to [electric cars](#) from a company that is not throwing i the towel on EVs," Phil LeBeau writes. Fair enough, but it's commitment of a fairly half-hearted type, and hardly a game-changing program like the Nissan Leaf. If that one doesn't work, Carlos Ghosn may have to find another line of work.

GM said it would incorporate information from the EV demonstration programs it has conducted in such exotic locales as Korea (the Cruze-based EV), India (the related Beat EV) and Shanghai (the Sail EV). The Spark's nanophosphate lithium-ion batteries will be from A123 Systems.

Ford seems more enthusiastic about its electric Focus program, but it too is making very conservative volume estimates. Chrysler isn't even trying - after announcing an electric version of the Fiat 500, it's said hardly anything about the car.

GM continues to see far more promise in plug-in hybrids than in battery electrics. The company has announced a luxury version of the Volt called the ELR, and it's toying with a crossover edition - shown in China as the MVP5. The Volt is the platform that keeps on giving; don't expect a similar GM family of battery cars, at least not yet.

According to Green Car Reports, the battery Spark isn't a 50-state car, as the Volt will by the end of the year. It will be targeted mostly at California, and possibly at the 13 states that follow its emission laws. Even without the ZEV laws, California would be the best market for an electric Chevy - it will probably have half or more of the EV volume in the early years.

If you're not familiar with the Spark, that's because it's currently sold only in Europe and Asia. It's coming to the U.S. as a gas car next year. The battery version will follow soon after, billed as a city car. That's an increasingly popular way of looking at EVs - as limited-range vehicles for in-city travel. The BMW i3 is known as the "megacity vehicle," and Toyota's 2012 Scion-based iQ electric (with just 50 miles per charge) is also for that market. Both Audi (the Urban Concept) and Volkswagen (Nils) showed city cars at the Frankfurt Motor Show.

My problem with the urban EV deal has to do with charging. Yes,

sub-100-mile range suggests a bopping around the neighborhood, not taking a lot of range-robbing highway trips. But plugging in will actually be much easier in the suburbs, where people have garages. The city-based EV charging network is still under consideration, with companies just starting to wire parking garages and commercial lots. Forget about curbside parking in dense, high-rise cities like New York.

Don't get me wrong, it's good that GM is finally fielding another battery EV. But this is dipping a toe in the water, not jumping in with both feet.

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