GM may have electric car breakthrough (Update)

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A small battery company backed by General Motors is working on breakthrough technology that could power an electric car 100 (160 kilometers) or even 200 miles (320 kilometers) on a single charge in the next two-to-four years, GM's CEO said Thursday.

Speaking at an employee meeting, CEO Dan Akerson said the company, Newark, California-based Envia Systems, has made a huge breakthrough in the amount of energy a lithium-ion battery can hold. GM is sure that the battery will be able to take a car 100 miles (160 kilometers) within a couple of years, he said. It could be double that with some luck, he said.

"I think we've got better than a 50-50 chance," Akerson said, "to develop a car that will go to 200 miles on a charge," he said. "That would be a game changer."

GM's current electric car, the Chevrolet Volt, goes about 35 miles on a charge and has a small gas motor that generates power to keep the car going after that. Few competitors have electric cars with more than 100 miles (160 kilometers) of range. Tesla Motors' Model S can go up to 300 miles (480 kilometers), but it has a much larger battery and can cost more than twice as much as a Volt. Nissan's Leaf and Ford's Focus electric cars both claim ranges of around 100 miles (120 kilometers), but that can vary with temperature, terrain and speed.

Envia said earlier this year that its next-generation rechargeable lithium-ion cell hit a record high for energy density. The company said the new

battery could slash the price of electric vehicles by cutting the battery cost in half.

GM Ventures LLC, the automaker's investment arm, put $7 million into Envia in January of 2011.

The GM meeting, which was broadcast on a conference call to employees, lasted about an hour. A participant allowed a reporter from The Associated Press to listen.

"These little companies come out of nowhere, and they surprise you," Akerson said in response to a question about GM's strategy on gas-electric hybrid vehicles.

Akerson said the company is looking at hybrids, all-electric cars, hydrogen fuel cell vehicles and natural gas vehicles, as well as developing more efficient petroleum-powered engines.

"We can't put all of our chips on one bet," he said. "We've got to look at them all."