

Vehicle charging stations as a resident perk: What you need to know

Whereas hybrid automobiles and all-electric vehicles began as kind of a novelty, they are a growing and meaningful segment of the nation's auto fleet now, with a stronger concentration in high-density locales that typically favor multifamily residential dwellings. If your apartment complex or condo association is considering supporting electric vehicle use by installing charging stations, there are a handful of things to evaluate before jumping in.

The first is how the stations will be allocated. Since parking spaces are typically assigned in apartment and condo garages or parking lots, and unit turnover means a change in vehicles with each new tenant, placing charging stations in certain spaces based on current residents' individual needs might not be an efficient method. Some complexes have carved out a few spots away from numbered spaces that are fueling-only parking places, meaning they are to be used only while a car is being recharged.

The rechargers are typically installed by a vendor, which for a fee will also maintain the units. They can be activated by user(s) through various methods, including smart phones or tablets, and a credit card payment system can be attached, as well. If your complex decides to provide the service as an amenity, you'll have to consider how the vendor contract and electrical utility bills will be paid—by users, by all residents, under a membership plan, etc. As with all vendor-supplied items provided by your management or association, you will bear some responsibility for the units, so be careful how your contract is worded.

Theft of or damage to the units by vandals, drivers and events deemed your liability could result in a substantial property loss, so review contracts with your vendor and your insurance agent to make sure you are not unknowingly taking on undue exposure to losses. Additionally, some of the stations have been known to damage certain vehicle makes, and the two different types of chargers out there—one to CHAdeMO standards and one to SAE standards are incompatible. While it might seem the provider, manufacturer and user should have that all ironed out, when they don't the owner of a vehicle damaged at one of your rechargers could turn to you for compensation. Make sure your general liability policy provides appropriate coverage, including defense costs.

Some stations are "fast chargers," meaning they can refuel a car in 30 minutes. Whatever type of charger you choose, you'll have to establish a use policy so that frustrations over abandoned vehicles doesn't mount. You'll also need other policies for safety since these appliances are often juiced with enough voltage to serve more than one vehicle at once. They usually have a connection sensing mechanism that disconnects power flow when not charging a vehicle, but if that sensor malfunctions, you could have a high-current appliance creating a safety hazard in a public place.

If you don't offer a community recharging station or EV-fueling spots, you might find individual residents getting creative. In one high-end Chicago complex, a resident requested the board's permission to install his own recharger in the parking lot. Naturally, other residents balked at the "eyesore." There were also questions on who would maintain or remove the unit if that individual moved out and who would be liable for any damages it might cause (through fire, shorts, etc.), even though the owner intended to have the appliance metered and billed entirely to him. You might even find several hundred feet of extension cord winding from a vehicle through an apartment window to access an outlet.

For a nice set of guidelines on electric vehicle charging stations, see this California study: http://www.pevcollaborative.org/sites/all/themes/pev/files/docs/MUD_Guidelines4web.pdf. And remember to keep your insurance agent apprised of all additions to your amenities, changes in your leases or amendments to your governing documents regarding vehicle-charging stations.

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