

City purchases its first hybrid vehicles

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By [Adam Behsudi](#)
News-Post Staff

Frederick police inquired as far as Florida and Texas when they shopped around for hybrid vehicles. After a couple of months, they found four of the coveted Toyota Prius models at a local dealer.

Their extensive search for high-demand, gas-saving cars highlights the challenge local governments face when trying to go green on the road.

The vehicles, purchased from Darcars Toyota of Frederick, are the City of Frederick's first hybrids. The city wasn't able to purchase them until they reached the end of a seven-week wait list.

Each car cost \$23,870, about \$300 below the manufacturer's suggested retail price, said Joe Taylor, the dealer's Internet and fleet sales manager.

The city had to waive its requirement that any purchase of \$30,000 or more be put out to bid. The requirement was waived because of the model's scarcity.

City police will use the cars for administrative duties, victim services and travel to training events.

The Prius is a car rarely available for purchase through fleet pricing, which can be more than \$500 less than the base price of \$24,170, Taylor said.

"It's probably the hardest car to get in the country," he said.

High gas prices have driven demand for the near-50 mpg Prius, making governments and large companies pay the same price as



Photo by Bill Green

Lt. Clark Pennington, left, and Cpl. Sam Bowman inspect one of the City of Frederick's first Toyota Prius hybrid cars, which will be used for administrative duties, victim services and travel to training events.

regular consumers.

Toyota has devoted production of the Prius to the consumer and not large buyers, Taylor said.

City police decided the Prius would be the best hybrid despite cheaper, less-popular models available through Maryland state-purchasing contracts.

"The Prius looked like it would give us the highest fuel economy," said Lt. Clark Pennington.

Waiting up to six months for a vehicle that might never have become available at the fleet price prevented the city from piggybacking on state purchasing contracts in Florida and Texas that carried the Prius, Pennington said.

Having the most popular hybrid model on the market doesn't give Toyota a reason to provide the vehicle at a discount to large buyers, said Matt Kittell, research director at the Center for a New American Dream. The Takoma Park organization runs the Responsible Purchasing Network, which gives guidance to large companies and governments for purchasing environmentally sustainable products on a large scale. But that's not preventing cities, counties and states from purchasing less popular models, he said.

"Our main recommendation to institutional purchasers on the vehicle front is hybrids are not always the best option," he said. "Start by looking for the most fuel-efficient vehicle in that case."

Frederick County considers the hybrid option with each vehicle it replaces. The county owns five Ford Escape hybrids and two Honda Civic hybrids.

County fleet manager Patrick Hannah said he purchases hybrids through existing state contracts, but said the cars are often unavailable because they sell out months before new models are presented.

He said he also has to find more money. The hybrid Civic offered through the state contract is more than \$6,000 more than the base price of a regular, four-door Civic.

"It takes years to recover that additional cost through fuel savings," he said. "But in the end you've used less fuel and that's the goal."