Electric delivery vehicle pilot testing update

Christopher Jackson

As this month's edition of *The Postal Record* reaches you, I want to start off by wishing everyone and their families a belated merry Christmas and a prosperous and happy new year. With the start of the new year, I think it's a good time to update the membership on new vehicle models the Postal Service is considering for the delivery fleet.

Testing of the Next Generation Delivery Vehicle (NGDV) continues, with the first vehicle scheduled to be produced in October 2023. Deployment of the NGDV to delivery units is to begin soon after the first vehicle is produced. However, as I've mentioned in past articles, the Postal Service is currently in need of delivery vehicles to fill the gap created by a reduction of older models in the fleet. To help supplement the delivery fleet between today and the deployment of the NGDV, the Postal Service has continued to consider the use of commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) vehicles. The Dodge Promaster and the right-hand drive Mercedes Metris are examples of COTS vehicles that the Postal Service has acquired to fill this void.

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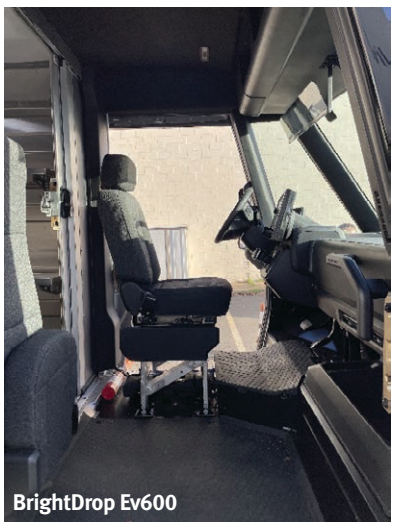
In my November 2022 article, I discussed a notification received from the Postal Service detailing its plan to conduct two pilot tests using battery electric vehicles (BEVs) for mail delivery. The BrightDrop Ev600 pilot test was conducted at the Falls Church Post Office in Fairfax, VA, and the Ford E-Transit pilot test was conducted at the Vienna Post Office in Vienna, VA.

Both of the vehicles tested are left-hand drive models and are similar in size to current delivery vehicles. The BrightDrop model is a little smaller than the current 2-ton truck while the E-Transit is about the size of a Promaster van. Both vehicles require a key fob to unlock the doors and start the engine. Both vehicles also are equipped with many of the safety features found on modern passenger vehicles. These include driver's-side airbags, front and rear cameras, blind spot warning lights located in the side mirrors, and sensors to notify the driver when they are in danger of striking an object. They also are equipped with a display monitor in the cab area that communicates information to the driver and contains the climate controls. They also have a drive mode referred to as One Pedal Drive. The One Pedal Drive mode utilizes regenerative braking, which causes the vehicles to start slowing down whenever the driver is not pressing on the acceleration pedal. This feature, common to most BEVs, helps to recharge the battery, which extends the effective range of the vehicle.

Some features unique to the BrightDrop Ev600 are heated side-view mirrors containing blind-spot warning lights and a retractable passenger-side jump seat on the right side of the cabin. The cargo area of the BrightDrop contains two levels of shelving with three shelves along each side of both levels for a total of 12 shelves available for use. The shelves are raised and lowered manually and gas pistons keep them in the stowed position. There are six to eight fixed metal anchor points along the floor of the cargo area to assist with transporting equipment. This vehicle also comes with an additional drive feature called Delivery Mode that, when activated, unlocks all doors for 15 seconds and honks the horn twice. A representative from the producer of the vehicle comes to the work unit to connect and disconnect the vehicle from its charging station daily. The charge port on the BrightDrop is located in the rear of the vehicle on the



BrightDrop Ev600


BrightDrop Ev600

left-hand side, similar to the fueling location on a gas-powered vehicle.

Members of my staff visited the Falls Church Post Office recently to observe the testing of the BrightDrop Ev600. As part of the visit, a member of my staff had an opportunity to test drive the vehicle and had the impression that the vehicle could be a good option to replace 2-ton trucks in those areas where a 2-ton truck could not be driven; however, the BrightDrop Ev600 might be too large to serve as a replacement for the Promaster. On a positive note from the test drive, the front crash warning feature was sensitive enough to detect a carrier who walked in front of the vehicle.

During this visit, my staff spoke with a carrier who had been using the BrightDrop for the past month. This carrier stated that the vehicle handled like a 2-ton, although he uses it in the same way he would use a Promaster. The carrier did not report any issues with the functioning of the vehicle or the life of the battery.


E-Transit

The Ford E-Transit's cargo area also contains two fixed levels of shelving with two shelves along one side and four on the other (providing a total of six shelves available for use), two electrical outlets, and a side board on the outside of the cargo sliding door to help dismount the vehicle. During the E-Transit pilot testing, carriers are tasked with charging the vehicle themselves by plugging the vehicle into the charging station when they return to the office in the afternoon. The charge port is located in the front grille area above the license plate holder.


E-Transit

My staff and I visited the Vienna Post Office to observe the Ford E-Transit pilot program as well. During our visit, we spoke with the carriers involved in the test to get their feedback about the vehicle. These carriers stated that they had no issues with the battery life and at most used only about 20 to 25 percent of the battery life daily. Among the negatives the carriers reported were problems dismounting and mounting the vehicle using the side board as it gets slippery when wet, difficulty fitting 775 tubs on the top shelves in the cargo area, and constant bending required to reach the bottom shelves in the cargo area because they are so low to the floor.


E-Transit

I want to thank the city carriers in the Falls Church and Vienna post offices for their helpful insight about their experience on the battery electric vehicles. I will update the membership once we have an opportunity to meet with the Postal Service to discuss their findings from these pilot tests.