

EV technology plugs into the Last Frontier

[Linda F. Hersey](#) | Oct 3, 2021 Updated 13 hrs ago

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An electric vehicle plugs into the fast-charging EV station, developed by FreeWire Technologies of California. The station can accommodate two vehicles at a time. ALL PHOTOS COURESTY OF Jorden Perez, Kachemak Communications
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AJ's OldTown Steakhouse & Tavern, a roadside restaurant for wayfarers, just made history in America's adoption of electric vehicles, including in far-flung places like remote Alaska.

An ultra-fast EV charging station opened Sept. 23 at the Homer restaurant, which is more accustomed to promoting prime rib, truffle fries and cocktails.

“We’re very proud to be part of the beginning of Alaska’s electric highway,” said Adrienne Sweeney, the co-owner of AJ’s steakhouse.

Now AJ’s boasts the convenience of quick-charging plug-in technology in its parking lot for an enthusiastic group of registered EV owners in the Last Frontier, which number 1,500 and are growing.

FreeWire Technologies of California, which developed the EV charging station, partnered with AJ’s, which had received a grant from the Alaska Energy Authority for a fast-charger project. The restaurant also had to make an investment in the project in addition to receiving the grant money. The authority provided a list of pre-qualified vendors.

The installation is part of a grander plan by the authority to facilitate a corridor of fast-charging stations from the Kenai Peninsula to Fairbanks. “Eventually, they will be like gas stations,” Alaska Energy Authority director Curtis Thayer said of the technology. “We need the EV charging stations like we need gas stations.”

In addition to Homer, fast-charging stations are planned at roadside host sites along a 515-mile stretch. Locations are in Seward, Soldotna, Cooper Landing, Anchorage, Chugiak, Trapper Creek and Healy. A charging station in Cantwell opened Aug. 28.

FreeWire is working with hosts in Soldotna and Cooper Landing. Other commercial vendors, including Siemens and ChargePoint, will install fast chargers at the rest of the sites.

The goal is to have the network of fast-charging EV stations fully operational by summer 2022.

Suddenly, AJ's Steakhouse & Tavern is no longer just a local institution serving tiny Homer (population 5,709) and summer visitors but an Alaska destination for EV owners.

"EV drivers have been coming by all morning. They are very excited about this," said Rob Anderson, director of business development at FreeWire about a recent ribbon-cutting to commemorate the installation.

Officials from FreeWire and the energy authority were on hand for the celebration, along with a mobile audience of EV drivers cruising by the steakhouse for the event.

"Drivers are showing up from different areas around the state. Typically, if you visit Homer you have to wait seven hours for your vehicle to charge. Now they can turn their car around in 45 minutes," Anderson said.

That's just about enough time for a sit-down meal at AJ's, which is counting on visits by EV owners to recharge business.

A Covid diagnosis in August idled the restaurant until everyone could be tested. Now the restaurant is navigating a new route to economic recovery.

"We had several vehicles use the station at the grand opening," said Sweeney, who co-owns AJ's steakhouse with her husband, Alex.

“My great-grandmother had the first gas station in Homer, and she and her husband had the first car,” she said. “It’s nice to see this happen. They never could have envisioned it.”

10-minute charge, 100 miles

Plugging into the charging station is free for now at AJ’s. Plans are for drivers to pay a fee for the power supply, after some initial data is collected by the restaurant owners.

Charging an EV can take an entire day or overnight with conventional plug-in technology. But 10 minutes plugged into FreeWire’s fast charger can power an EV for 100 miles.

FreeWire uses battery storage and existing low-voltage power sources to deliver ultra-fast charging for EVs while keeping electricity costs down for host sites, like AJ’s Steakhouse & Tavern.

“If you were plugged directly into the grid, there would be incredibly high demand charges,” Anderson said. “Because we are charging directly from the battery instead, we are able to eliminate those high costs.”

FreeWire is introducing its battery-integrated technology in rural communities like Homer, where the electricity is provided by a series of low-power microgrids. The goal is to demonstrate the durability of its fast-charging stations in an extreme environment.

FreeWire’s fast EV chargers in Alaska have a thermal management system that has been tested to perform at 30 degrees below zero, Anderson said.

The company has similar projects around the globe. BP energy company is an investor in FreeWire, deploying the EV fast chargers at gas stations in the United Kingdom. FreeWire's fast chargers also are in Nevada at a solar-powered site with no utility infrastructure.

Reducing barriers to EV adoption

The installation of fast-charging stations is part of the Alaska Energy Authority's goal to reduce barriers to EV adoption across the state.

"Building this fast-charging corridor in Alaska helps support EV growth throughout the state," said Curtis Thayer, executive director of the Alaska Energy Authority.

In June, the authority provided nearly \$1 million in grants to support the installation of both conventional chargers and fast chargers at the nine sites. Plans are to locate a fast-charging station every 50 to 100 miles along the route.

Funds come from Alaska's share of a national court settlement with Volkswagen in a case over vehicle emissions.

Dimitri Shein, executive director of the Alaska Electric Vehicle Association, a statewide group of EV owners, said members are eager for the network to fully come online.

At the same time, he questioned the authority's decision to set up a roadside corridor of charging stations operated by different vendors. FreeWire is just one of the vendors that will supply technology.

He said that EV drivers may have to install different apps to use the various charging stations along the route. "There may be different ways to process payments, and if a

station goes down, they will be maintained differently, with different response times,” Shein said.

But Thayer said: “This was never intended to be a one-size-fits all process. We want the individual site host to identify the companies they want to work with.

“The site hosts also have invested in the installations. It’s not just this grant money. They offered up their properties and are paying for some of the costs,” Thayer said.

The authority also has the opportunity to see how the various vendors perform. The authority can collect the data to better understand system use.

Tech companies are in a high-stakes race to be the first to dominate the emerging market for ultra-fast EV charging stations in the U.S., including in Alaska. Tesla is deploying battery-integrated technology for one or more fast charging stations in Alaska communities.

The Alaska Energy Authority has plans to continue partnering with private companies to help fund expansion of fast-charging EV stations.

The authority is looking at seeding installations in Tok, Glennallen and Delta Junction, as well as possible ventures in southeast Alaska.

“We would like to see the corridor grow as long as there is funding and interest,” Thayer said.

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