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Automakers go for electric cars, but will drivers ?

Inside Ford Motor, it was called Project M- to build a prototype of a totally electric, battery-powered car in just six months.

When it was started last summer, the project was considered a tall order by the small team of executives and engineers assigned to it. After all, the auto industry can take years to develop vehicles.

But Ford was feeling pressure from competitors and decided it could not afford to fall behind in the rapidly expanding race to put electric cars in dealers' showrooms. (...).

Certainly, Ford and other car makers are betting billions of dollars on this new direction, at a time when they can ill afford it and when Detroit is facing government scrutiny after the \$17.4 billion bailout of General Motors and Chrysler by the U.S. government. (...).

These are risky bets. There are no guarantees that consumers – for all their stated concerns about global warming, dependence on foreign oil and unpredictable gasoline prices – will buy enough of them. They may balk, for example, at the limits on how far they can drive on a single charge. (...).

"I think the days of the gasoline engine are numbered, even if we don't know exactly what that number is," said Daniel Becker, head of the Safe Climate Campaign, which is part of the Center for Auto Safety consumer advocacy group in Washington.

The competition over electrics is picking up speed and players. Toyota, which has previously focused on hybrid models, will display a battery-powered concept car at the Detroit show. Nissan's chief executive, Carlos Ghosn, has promised to sell an electric car in the United States and Japan as early as next year.

So far, U.S. consumers have proved to be fickle in how much they care about fuel economy. When gasoline prices soared above \$4 a gallon last year, sales of the market-leading Prius hybrid surged so quickly that Toyota could not build them fast enough. But demand sagged when fuel prices dropped below \$ 2 a gallon.

International Herald Tribune, by Bill Vlasic,
January 11, 2009

Bailout : subvention
Balk at : reculer devant

1. Present this text
2. According to <http://detnews.com/article/20090202/AUTO01/902020354/Ford-s-electric-car-project-charges-ahead>, what is Project M ?