

2012 Ford Transit Connect Electric

2012 Ford Transit Connect Electric offers good performance, driving experience, but at a cost

By **MIKE HANLEY**
CARS.COM

Much of the attention surrounding electric vehicles has been focused on cars like the all-electric Nissan Leaf and range-extended Chevrolet Volt. Ford, meanwhile, has developed a model for those who need more hauling capability by equipping its Transit Connect van with an all-electric drivetrain through a partnership with Azure Dynamics. The Ford Transit Connect Electric is available to both fleet buyers and regular consumers.

The Transit Connect Electric is just as refined as the gas-only model and offers improved acceleration, but it comes with a steep starting price of \$57,400, about \$35,000 more than the base price of the regular van.

One of the most obvious impressions of the Transit Connect when I last drove it was that its 2.0-liter four-cylinder gas engine felt a little weak, especially on the highway, and that was without much in the way of cargo on board. The Transit Connect Electric, by comparison, offers more robust acceleration at midrange speeds and doesn't feel as burdened by the van's weight. Throttle tip-in from a standing start is seamless, and the Transit Connect Electric builds speed easily and quietly. The van's top speed is 75 mph.

Brake-pedal feel in alternative-fuel vehicles often isn't that great, but it's remarkably natural and linear in the Transit Connect Electric. Frankly, it's better than what many conventional gas-engine



models offer.

The Transit Connect Electric rides well, too. Like the gas-powered version, it uses a unibody platform that delivers a much more carlike driving experience than traditional domestic full-size vans like the Chevrolet Express. The Transit Connect Electric we drove in Chicago at a Ford event had some cargo in back, and the suspension yielded a comfortable yet composed ride on South Lake Shore Drive, Chicago's highway along the lakefront. The regular Transit Connect is rated to carry 1,600 pounds, which seems ambitious considering the four-cylinder's power, but the electric version is only rated to carry 1,045 pounds.

The interior looks much like the regular Transit Connect's, but it does have a unique instrument panel that includes a range meter and a battery charge indicator. I was expecting some correlation between the two, but with the range gauge showing 50 miles (out of a maximum of 80 miles,

according to Ford), the battery meter still showed a full charge. Like the regular Transit Connect, you start the van by turning the key in the ignition and put it in gear by moving the console selector from Park to Drive.

The 28 kilowatt-hour lithium-ion battery pack is under the cargo floor, so there's no loss of cargo space; there's still 129.6 cubic feet of cargo room behind the front seats. The Transit Connect Electric accepts the industry-standard charging plug and supports 120- and 240-volt service. With a 240-volt setup, it can take from six to eight hours to replenish the battery pack with the Transit Connect Electric's 3.3-kilowatt onboard charger.

Despite the stronger performance and familiar driving experience, the Transit Connect Electric's price tag remains a significant hurdle when trying to make a financial case for the electric van. If you ran a fleet where it could travel 50 miles a day, five days a week

every week of the year, you'd rack up 13,000 miles a year. Traveling the same distance in a gas-powered Transit Connect cargo van, which gets combined gas mileage of 23 mpg, would cost \$1,820 based on a \$3.22 national average for a gallon of regular.

When you count the \$7,500 federal tax credit the Transit Connect Electric qualifies for, it still costs \$27,865 more than a base Transit Connect. Even if the electricity to charge the Transit Connect Electric were free, it'd take around 15 years to recoup the additional upfront expense. California buyers may be eligible for a voucher worth up to \$15,000, which would reduce the payback time to about six years taking into account the state's higher \$3.53 average for a gallon of regular. That's a big drop, to be sure, but it may still be too long for consumers who have an eye on the bottom line.

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Last Wednesday Colin Brown, president and CEO of JM Family Enterprises – the parent company for Southeast Toyota and JM Lexus – honored four more community leaders and an outstanding student during the 20th anniversary celebration of the African American Achievers awards.

"This is a very special year for us as we celebrate 20 years of recognizing outstanding leaders in our community," Brown said.

Recipients of this year's awards were:

Edith C. Bush – Arts & Culture

Darryl Holsendolph – Business & Entrepreneurism

Dorothy Jackson Orr, Ed.D. – Community Service

Samuel Bruce McDonald – Education

Also receiving recognition this year was Jason Green a senior at Miramar High School who was selected as the winner of the Jerome Edmund Gray Youth Achiever Award, presented by the Jim Moran Foundation in partnership with Florida State University.

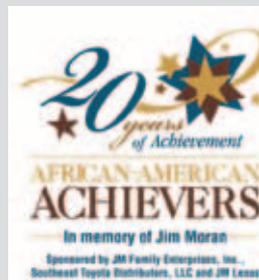
The four recipients of the African-American Achievers awards will each have \$10,000 donated to non-profit organizations of their choice in their honor.

But ask Irv Kiffin, a former professional basketball player and now head of the Lauderdale Parks and Recreation Department, and he'll tell you that the money pales in comparison to the recognition that comes with the award.

For Kiffin, the award helped introduce him to Jim Moran, who saw something in Kiffin and served as a mentor until his death in 2007.

A well-known philanthropist, Moran took Kiffin under his wing and through encouragement reinforced Kiffin's commitment to community

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service.

It's not uncommon, Kiffin will tell you, for those involved in community service to have occasional doubts about what they're doing.

"You start to wonder, does anybody really care?" he said.

Being recognized by JM Family and by Jim Moran, assured him that, yes indeed, someone does care.

Kiffin first met Moran during the African-American Achievers award ceremony in 2005, when Moran shook his hand and complimented him on his speech.

A few weeks later, Kiffin recalls, he got a phone call inviting him along with his wife, to join Moran and his wife for dinner.

Taken back by the invitation, Kiffin says he was nervous and unsure about what he would talk about.

"I didn't even have a Toyota," he says.

His concerns, however, quickly disappeared.

"Mr. Moran started the conversation by asking how he could help our program," Kiffin recalls. "From there we started developing a relationship."

It didn't take long for him to realize that Moran was motivated in his civic work by a genuine concern for others, Kiffin says.

"He struck me as a man who understood that we are on this planet for a purpose," Kiffin said. "He seemed to be a man who would help you get to where you were going."

Today, Kiffin continues to practice the lessons he learned from Moran, serving as chairman of the Oscar Thomas Foundation – which uses art to empower young people – as well as serving on the board of the Jim Moran Foundation.