

Quirky Vehicle to receive federal sponsorship

by Jason Lomborg, Technical Editor



The startup, Aptera, was recently denied a DOE loan for its [Aptera 2e](#) [1] electric vehicle. Their three-wheeled, *ahem*, “curiosity,” didn’t match the [loan criteria](#) [2], but the incident raises an important question—should the government sponsor products in the private sector?

GM’s stigma can be traced to many factors, not the least of which is its unofficial title—“Government Motors.” Consumers are wary of a company that’s 60% government owned. So understandably, the Advanced Technology Vehicles Manufacturing Loan Program (ATVMLP), a \$25 billion direct loan program funded by Congress (for the purposes of retooling older plants and equipment to “produce energy-efficient vehicles”), is not without controversy. The Aptera 2e, which looks like a small airplane, is quirky, to say the least. One specific factor excludes it from ATVMLP funding—under the program, a passenger automobile is defined as “any 4-wheeled vehicle.” The Aptera 2e has three wheels. Paul Wilbur, Aptera's chief executive, claims the three-wheeled design is critical to "maximizing the vehicle's aerodynamics." But under the ATVMLP, the Aptera 2e is excluded.

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It runs on pure electric, gets 100 miles per charge, and looks like a tricycle.
It's the Aptera 2e.

However, the House recently approved a provision that would expand the criteria to include "any fully enclosed vehicle designed to carry two adults and that averages at least 75 miles a gallon." Aptera claims their three-wheeled wonder gets 100 miles per charge. Subsequently, the DOE has been ordered to renew Aptera's request.

Clearly, this is federal intrusion into the private sector. But putting that aside for the moment, just how marketable is the Aptera 2e? As mentioned, the 2e gets 100 miles per charge. It accelerates from 0 to 60 mph (0 to 97 km/h) in less than 10 seconds with a top speed over 85 mph (137 km/h). The 2e is expected to consume 96 watt-hours/mi, and according to Aptera, a full charge takes about eight hours on a standard 110 v socket. These are respectable stats.

Will the general public bite? The 2e is an all-electric vehicle—that, alone, limits the target audience. Without any supporting infrastructure, the 2e is generally tethered to a 100-mile radius. Daily commutes notwithstanding, most consumers want a vehicle that can go beyond 100 miles, should the need arise. \$25,000-\$40,000 (the MSRP) may be a tad pricey for a dedicated "commuter vehicle."

And lets face it—a car that resembles a tricycle is a tough sell. Even Earth2Tech, an erstwhile supporter of ATV development, sounds a note of [caution](#) [3]—"It's hard not to root for the startup's outsider market position, but it strikes me as an unduly risky bet with public dollars to back this first-gen model, given that so many companies are seeking funds for green vehicles with a better shot at mass market adoption than the 2e."

Should government expand its reach into the private sector by sponsoring advanced technology vehicles? More importantly, should it sponsor vehicles with limited mainstream potential? The return on taxpayers' investment seems nil.

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[1] <http://www.aptera.com/index.php>

[2] <http://www.atvmloan.energy.gov/keydocs/finalrule.pdf>

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