

## WHEELS

# When Electric Cars Rule the Road, They'll Need Spots to Power Up

A wireless infrastructure company is betting it can figure out how to locate and install charging stations for a growing wave of new vehicles.



Mark LaNeve, president of Charge Enterprises, at the company's headquarters in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. Credit...Jarod Lew for The New York Times

**By Jamie Lincoln Kitman**

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“The sexy stuff is the vehicles themselves. Obviously.”

So says Mark LaNeve, a longtime auto executive who, after a brief retirement, threw his lot in with Charge Enterprises. With the trickle of electric vehicles hitting American roads poised to become a steadier flow this year, his company is betting on the business that will help charge those vehicles. It is offering a nationwide soup-to-nuts service that provides siting, planning, permitting and construction of E.V. charging stations.

“Tesla’s been dominant, but now everybody else is getting into the fray,” said Mr. LaNeve, who is 62 and based in Detroit. “And there’s a lot of excitement around the new [Hummer](#), [Mustang Mach-E](#), [Ford Lightning](#), the [Silverado](#) and [Rivians](#). People are starting to pay attention to the chargers, too. But no one pays any attention to this: You’ve got to install this stuff. You’ve got to engineer it, and we think it’s a huge business if done right and done at scale.”

Mr. LaNeve made his bones in an industry powered by fossil fuels. A onetime C-suite sales and marketing star at Cadillac and Ford and, for three years, Volvo’s North American chief executive, he joined Charge last year. The company, based in New York, has expanded its initial focus — building out wireless communications infrastructure — with its E.V. push.

“I basically ran sales and marketing at General Motors and Ford — Big Three, Fortune 100 companies — and enjoyed it immensely,” Mr. LaNeve, now Charge’s president, said during a recent interview. “Got to do things I never dreamed of, frankly. But about four years ago, we had a Tesla in the fleet at Ford. As a kind of a traditional war horse in the auto industry, I didn’t want to like it. I’m like, ‘What’s going on here?’ And I had it for about three days and, I’ve got to tell you, I freaking loved it. And I told everybody there, ‘Guys, this is the future.’”

Rick Wagoner, the former G.M. chairman who is on the board of ChargePoint Holdings, which operates charging stations nationally, introduced Mr. LaNeve to Andrew Fox, one of Charge’s founders and its chief executive. Mr. LaNeve sensed an opportunity.

The \$7.5 billion allocated for charging stations in the [bipartisan infrastructure bill](#) passed by Congress last year, he said, only increased his optimism.

With carmakers and state and federal government entities increasingly looking to combat carbon emissions with electric vehicles, one of the major sticking points to their widespread adoption remains the nation’s undersized and spotty charging infrastructure. That concern was reflected in the infrastructure bill’s call for [500,000 additional E.V. chargers](#).

According to the Energy Department, there are 51,000 (overnight or workday) Level 2 chargers in service in the United States, and only 7,045 [Level 3 fast chargers](#), of which 1,400 are part of Tesla's supercharging network. ([Level 1 charging](#) for the current and future generations of E.V.s is painfully slow.)

Mr. Fox, who founded the company in 2003 with Craig Denson and Kenneth Orr, compared the current moment in E.V. charging to one that faced cellphone makers 35-plus years ago. "Just as cellphone utilization was starting out — when utilization was relatively low and they were still a novelty item — over the next 30 years we believe that the infrastructure for E.V. charging is going to mimic the range coverage that you have now with the cellphone industry," he said.

Samuel Abuelsamid, principal analyst with Guidehouse Insights, an advisory firm specializing in infrastructure, concurs with that assessment. "There's certainly a big, addressable market for this type of service," he said. "This whole area is something that's going to be critically important, as you've got all these automakers making huge plans to build and hopefully sell millions of E.V.s in the next five to 10 years."

While many current E.V. owners tend to be affluent and can arrange to do most of their charging off street and overnight in their own [garages with slower Level 2 chargers](#), Mr. Abuelsamid noted, "the vast majority of Americans don't ever buy a new vehicle in their lifetime — about three and a half times as many used vehicles are sold every year as new."

"As you grow the E.V. market, more of them move into the used vehicle market," he continued. "A lot of these customers are not going to be able to charge at home. They will need public charging infrastructure. So you need to build that out. And companies like Charge are going to be important — helping to figure out where can you locate chargers, especially for DC fast charging, where you need quite a bit of electrical capacity going into the location."

Securing regulatory approvals and reliable local contractors is also necessary, he said.

Deciding to piggyback charging onto Charge's cellular communications business was a crucial move, said Mr. Fox, 49.

"E.V. charging is a separate infrastructure, but we didn't want to vaporize a ton of investor dollars to build this business," he said. "And so we've acquired companies that were providing infrastructure services for telecommunication, because it turns out maybe it's not the exact same worker, but it's the same type of work, running cables."

Reporting earnings of \$357 million in the first three quarters of 2021, Charge now trades over the counter (as CRGE) but is uplisting to Nasdaq. In January, Charge also added EV Group Holdings, which focuses on real estate assets for commercial fleet operators needing charging depots, to its portfolio.

Like Mr. LaNeve, who grew up as the son and grandson of steelworkers in Beaver Falls, Pa., Mr. Fox, raised in Queens, credits blue-collar roots — his father was a union electrician — for his approach to business.

“We want to service and pull the whole country into E.V.,” he said. “And so we’ve got this unglamorous work to do.”

Mr. Fox and Mr. LaNeve anticipate that eight million to 10 million chargers will be installed across the country over the next 15 or so years. They foresee a constantly changing parade of new technologies and a broad array of places where charging stations might be located, including hotels, supermarkets, health clubs and office buildings.

“There’s going to be a lot of interesting partners and models” that emerge, Mr. LaNeve said. “But if you think about a gas station,” he said, “it’s got 10 pumps. When do they make a move that two of those become fast chargers?”

The executives readily concede that many of today’s charging stations are inadequate, with inconvenient siting, broken equipment and frequent outages.

“As a Tesla owner myself, I can tell you that there’s a lot of friction” at non-Tesla charging stations, Mr. Fox said. “It’s like if you were trying to use a cellphone to go cross-country 30 years ago. You got expensive charges for roaming, you got dropped calls.”

The company acknowledges E.V. critics’ oft-repeated concern that the U.S. energy grid will struggle to power a nation of electrified vehicles, but it is confident that solutions will emerge.

“Renewables will help, but I think that the other big part of this is, is just the sheer volume of wasted energy in our current system,” Mr. Fox said. “If we could solve for that problem, we’ll have plenty of power in the grid. This is a political point, but it’s not like we’re going to turn it all on tomorrow; it will happen gradually over the next 25, 30 years.” Advances in battery storage technology are particularly important, he said.

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Again harking back to their humble beginnings, they have further ambitions.

“The premise around what we’re doing,” Mr. Fox said, “is creating high-quality jobs. You can’t outsource the work that we’re doing to a foreign country. It has to be done locally. And so we can make our stakeholders’ lives better. We’re creating really great jobs domestically for people who may want to have a trade and may not want to go to college. And I love creating those jobs where someone doesn’t have to work three of those jobs to feed their family.”

He said he wanted his company to provide the “gold standard” in the charging industry. “If it has to be done right with professionals, then there’s only going to be a certain type of a caliber of customer that’s going to want that. And so there’s always going to be work for other guys at the bottom.”

He continued, “We’re not in a race to the bottom in terms of the kind of services that we’re providing in the E.V. space.”