Chevrolet Volt Named 'Car Of The Year'

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DETROIT (AP) — The 2011 Chevrolet Volt got another marketing jolt Monday, when it received the North American Car of the Year.

The car that runs on electricity for 40 miles before a backup gas engine kicks in beat out the Nissan Leaf, another electric, and Hyundai Sonata in the annual ceremony on the first day of media previews for the Detroit auto show.

The Ford Explorer won the truck of the year, the third year in a row the Dearborn-based automaker nabbed the honor. Truck finalists were the Dodge Durango, the Explorer and Jeep Grand Cherokee.

Forty-nine auto journalists from the U.S. and Canada made the picks. The vehicles are judged on innovation, design, safety, handling, driver satisfaction and value.

It's the latest in a string of accolades for the Volt, which went on sale in limited markets in December and costs $40,280. It was named the Green Car of the Year at the Los Angeles Auto Show in November and Motor Trend and Automobile Magazine named the Volt the 2011 car of the year the same month.

General Motors Co. Vice Chairman Tom Stephens said the Volt "represents the soul" of the new GM, on the rebound after enduring a government-led bankruptcy in 2009. GM sold between 250 and 350 Chevy Volts in December and Nissan's sales totaled less than 10 Leaf sedans in the past two weeks. Production for both is slowly ramping up.

It will be well into 2012 before both the Volt and Leaf, which costs $32,780, are available nationwide. Early demand is strong: About 50,000 people already are on waiting lists.

The Volts are being assembled in Detroit. GM predicts it will sell 10,000 of them in 2011 and between 35,000 and 45,000 in 2012. By way of comparison, Chevrolet sold 187,250 Malibu sedans in the first 11 months of 2010 with sticker prices that start at $21,975.

Stephens said the Volt is not a "science experiment" — but "meant to be a high-volume vehicle" as the industry makes early moves beyond petroleum as a primary fuel source.

Mark Fields, Ford's president of the Americas, said the company reinvented the SUV with the Explorer, basing it on car underpinnings and improving its fuel economy over the old model. Customers, he said, wanted a rugged vehicle that can also handle suburbia.

Awards are often used by automakers in advertising.

Last year's winners were both Ford vehicles: the Fusion Hybrid midsize sedan and Ford Transit Connect. This is the 18th year for the picks.

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AP Auto Writer Tom Krisher contributed to this report.

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