New York City made headlines last year when it invested in a fleet of Chevy Volt electric cars for its police department, assigning them to traffic control throughout the city. Our parking officers are also exploring where electric vehicles might fit in.

“New York City is where the future comes to audition” is a phrase historically used by New York City mayors and the unofficial motto of the New York City Department of Transportation’s (NYC-DOT’s) Bureau of Parking. From historical groundbreaking initiatives such as variable pricing and commercial vehicle parking windows, through our current enabling of credit payment capabilities at 86,000 on-street spaces and the testing of video and in-ground occupancy sensors in unmarked stalls, the bureau makes good on its motto.

We try new technologies and new things on a massive scale. Last fall, the “audition” included testing whether the all-electric eStar commercial vehicle was practical in our meter collection fleet (50 vans). If you’ve not yet seen one, eStar vehicles are trucks that can handle payloads of up to 5,100 pounds and cruise up to 100 miles on a charge. Designed and built by Navistar thanks to a $39 million federal grant, eStar trucks emit no carbon into the atmosphere, use no gas or oil, and are billed as being recyclable. They’re also very quiet, which makes them attractive in urban areas such as New York, where they can be used early in the morning or late at night without disturbing residents.

After initial review, we determined that the eStar could work for our parking division if properly customized. Carpenters from DOT’s bridge repair division completed these changes to meet bureau specifications. These changes included an ergonomic layout and an 80-canister payload.

Another customization was the vehicle’s smart charger, which was installed by DOT’s street light electricians. This allowed a completely drained battery pack to recharge in only eight hours using a 220V power source. While each full charge provides a range of 80 to 100 miles, we needed to test this in our operations.

Based on concerns regarding the eStar’s real world working range, we limited its initial deployment to assignments close to the meter collection facility. After a month without any fuel/charge range problems and some additional operator training, we expanded its territory. Because we didn’t yet fully understand the vehicle’s capabilities, we deployed escort vehicles for a while.

At the end of the day, our test period was deemed successful. The eStar is now part of the bureau of parking’s routine collection schedule, which involves collecting from 218 muni-meters (NYC speak for multi-space meters) or 4,277 spaces throughout all five boroughs.

While we’re happy with what we’ve seen so far, this audition isn’t yet complete. We still need to install air conditioning to see if this vehicle is the star it claims to be!