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75th ANNIVERSARY

Lawson State launches program to train alternative fuel mechanics

BY JIMMY DEBUTTS | STAFF

Lawson State Community College President Perry Ward hopes a \$120,000 state grant will help the region become an alternative fuel vehicle training hub.

Lawson State's Bessemer campus is using an Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education grant to launch the state's first compressed natural gas technician training program. The grant, received Aug. 13, is the first step in developing a program that will train local workers for high-paying jobs and draw students from across the country, alternative energy advocates and university officials said.

Ward sees high-growth potential for the region as well as his college as students travel

to Bessemer to learn how to service cars fueled by compressed natural gas, or CNG. CNG is used to fuel some of Birmingham's buses and is being pitched as a cleaner and cheaper alternative to gasoline for the consumer car market.



Ward

Honda has a CNG-fueled Civic and several other major auto manufacturers plan their own CNG vehicles, according to Lawson State Business and Industry Liaison Tommy

Hobbs. He said adding a CNG training program will complement the Bessemer campus' existing auto body and diesel operations. Since it is early in the process, Hobbs didn't have an estimate of how many students would participate in Lawson State's first class or when that class might be offered.

As the first program in the state, Lawson State can become an industry leader, he said. There is potential to attract students to Alabama and future grants from the federal government, which has placed a priority on clean, alternative energy sources to decrease the nation's reliance on oil, Hobbs said.

The CNG equivalent of one gallon of gasoline currently sells for about \$1.37.

"This is one way we can continue to offer training opportunities to students they

couldn't find anywhere else," Hobbs said. "When people start purchasing CNG vehicles, we need to have people to service them."

Lawson State and Alagasco are discussing partnership possibilities, Hobbs said. The Birmingham-based natural gas supplier has provided vehicles to be used to train technicians how to convert standard engines to be fueled by natural gas, he said.

Training technicians to maintain and fix CNG-fueled vehicles is essential, according to Alabama Clean Fuels Coalition Executive Director Mark Bentley. Bentley said Lawson State can play a pivotal role in developing the needed work force to fill the approaching demand of CNG-fueled cars.

jdebotts@bizjournals.com | (205) 443-5628

www.lawsonstate.edu