

Two Futures In One: Alternate Fuels and Community Education

by Steve Propes – The Long Beach Beachcomber

October 23, 2009 -- With the reported heavy competition between Long Beach and the City of Downey for the Tesla manufacturing plant that promises up to 1,400 jobs, the phrase “be careful what you wish for” in the area of alternate fuels comes to mind.

The manufacture of brand new technology has caused some to wonder how and where the mechanics and technicians needed to service and repair innovative electrical and alternate fuel vehicles will be trained.

Despite the fact that the training for this evolving industry has been centered in the Midwest, executive director of the Southland Motor Car Dealers Association (SMCDA) Todd Leutheuser has shepherded what he terms a “private public partnership” with Cerritos College in Norwalk.

It not only is an innovative program for those involved in the alternate fuels future, it’s also a way of getting a four-year degree through a two-year institution making it cutting-edge in both areas. According to Leutheuser, “SMCDA is a 77-year-old trade association offering dealers education, representation and public relations about dealer services and representing a majority of new car dealers in the Southern part of L.A., which extends from the ocean to LAX and about to Whittier.”

“Before 1996, we were the Long Beach New Car Dealers Association. We have about 60 members. Last year there were 75 dealerships, but we only lost five” out of a total of 70 dealerships in the region.

In about 1999, because “the state was imposing new standards, high school automotive education was drying up and educational needs were increasing,” Leutheuser and Cerritos College decided to form what Leutheuser termed “a synergistic effort. If there are limited locations for this type of training, this could be a hub for all of Southern California.”

According to Cerritos College Instructional Dean of Technology Division Steve Berklite, when voters approved a bond issue for the college, the school approved \$4 million for the project. “Southland and Greater L.A. Dealer’s Association each put in \$500,000 in this building and smaller vendors put in \$200,000” and construction of the 80,000 square feet Hybrid and Alternative Fuels Training Center on three acres began.

Scheduled to open in March 2010, according to Berklite, an additional “half-acre remodel of the existing site will be finished in 2011.”

But there’s more. By virtue of a relationship with Northwood University (NU) in Midland, Michigan, a 50-year-old school which Leutheuser described as “the gold standard and the only college in U.S. that offers a BA degree in auto retail management,” Cerritos became the only community college in the state to offer a four-year degree, the bachelor in business administration (BBA) with a major in management or a BBA with a major in auto retail management.”

The program is designed for students in the 25-year-old range, who have work experience, but true freshmen can also qualify through the interview process. There are similar programs underway in Seattle and San Diego, which has “an aggressive management program,” but it is unique in the California community college universe.

After getting an Associated of Arts (AA), “in order to get the BBA, students take their 3rd year courses at Cerritos and 4th year all NU courses taught by NU.”

“All instruction takes place on the Cerritos College campuses. It’s a hybrid, unique in California. The idea is to get the community access to four-year programs at a reasonable cost and to keep adult learners in the educational system and taking courses,” said Leutheuser.

Currently, “on the four-year track, there are well over 150, pushing 200, students. This fall we have 69 enrollments. I hope we have 300 enrollments and up to 400 within a year. Right now, 36 students in the 4th year classes. In a year from now, we will have 100 students taking 400 classes.”

“Timing was a big factor,” Leutheuser admitted, “but all the reasons we put this on the map in 2000 are still here today. We still have alternative fuel vehicles coming on the scene, natural gas, bio diesel and all electric. It looks like electric will be the new technology, though clean diesel will become much bigger. “

Now hybrids are a bigger percentage in this area than in the country. Clean air standards and emissions requirements for 2016 will mandate significant changes for the future.”

Berklite agreed, stating “as to fuel sources, the key is we’re ahead of the curve when it comes to people needed to work on new technologies, which currently make a small percentage of the market. Is it going to grow? Absolutely. The only question is, ‘is it going to be a battery, hydrogen or hybrid’.”

“The limits are the range because of lead acid batteries,” said Berklite. “We have two 100 percent electric EV Cooper Minis in our fleet. On 2/3rds of a gallon of gas, it goes 100 miles. It just goes 100 miles.”

GM puts out the Volt, for which “the battery costs \$100,000. The Volt is an electric car that uses a gas engine to drive a generator to power a car, but the Volt is good for 40 miles on one charge, that’s it.” That makes it good for one typical commute, then it must be re-charged for several hours for the return commute or to go out to lunch, with another recharge likely necessary.

“Cerritos College has the best automotive tech program in the state,” Leutheuser stated. “It grew because of the 30 years of professionalism the college developed.”