

# TECHNOLOGY

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## Port, partners woo hybrid car industry

Enthusiasts say new breed of vehicles get great fuel mileage, improve air quality and could produce manufacturing jobs for the Valley

by Mari Herrerias

Imagine a Wenatchee where the price of gasoline doesn't send driver wallets into hiding.

It isn't a dream, according to Ron Johnston-Rodriguez.

Johnston-Rodriguez, the Port of Chelan County's economic development director, said an initiative is taking place to transform the Wenatchee area into a community less dependent on gasoline with better air quality as a result. Johnston-Rodriguez together with representatives from Wenatchee Valley College, Washington State University and Chelan County Public Utility District see a future in the hybrid car industry and part of that future thriving in the Wenatchee area.

Hybrid cars, which use a smaller combustible engine, use less gasoline due to a larger battery that allows the car to run a portion of time on electricity. How that relates to Wenatchee is a vision called the Advanced Vehicle Initiative outlined by the port and its partners, specifically Blake Murray and Marcia Henkle from the college, David

Granatstein, sustainable agriculture specialist from WSU Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources, Laura Jaecks from the Port's Confluence Technology Center and Jim White, senior energy services engineer for the Chelan PUD.

When these people are in a room, ideas on biofuels and reusable fuels, plug-in hybrids, solar energy and hydrogen powered cars are thrown around in enthusiastic discussion. The timing for this type of visioning is right, Johnston-Rodriguez and his partners said.

The formula? Gasoline prices are at an all-time high and change almost every day, plus Chelan County just happens to be one of the cheapest producers of that other energy resource — electricity.

The timing equals unique opportunities for economic and community development.

Johnston-Rodriguez said planning for the initiative goes back to a 2005 summer trip to the University of California-Davis campus and a visit with Professor Andrew Frank, director



PHOTO COURTESY RON JOHNSTON-RODRIGUEZ

Blake Murray, Wenatchee Valley College's automotive technology program director, traveled to California with other officials from the Port of Chelan County, the Chelan County PUD and the WSU Center for Sustainable Agriculture to find out more about the hybrid car industry growing in the Wenatchee area.

of the National Center of Hybrid Excellence with Granatstein and Murray. The trip also led the initiative team to other experts and activists in the hybrid car industry. The result, Johnston-Rodriguez said was a better

vision that Wenatchee could indeed take a lead in the state in the hybrid car industry.

For example, a hybrid car engine component manufacturing company could move a facet of the industry to the Wenatchee area. Another possibility is existing companies, such as Pacific Aerospace and Electronics and US Castings who could manufacture the components, too, Granatstein said.

Another example is luring a hybrid car manufacturer, particularly plug-in models that use more electricity than the original hybrid, to use Wenatchee as a center for testing and demonstrating electric vehicles and alternative fuels — with the region's cheap electricity being part of the attraction, as well as the four-season terrain.

The visioning, however, needs an important ingredient before moving

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### Hybrid vs. plug-in: What's the difference?

A hybrid car uses multiple energy sources to provide power for its propulsion systems — gasoline and electric batteries for energy. The batteries are small and recharge while driving.

Most manufacturers have hybrid models on the market.

According to Pat Armstrong, general sales manager at Town Toyota, 500 Third St. SE, East Wenatchee, Toyota's hybrid, Prius, sells from the low-\$20,000 range to the upper-\$20,000 range. Armstrong said the car is in limited production and the East Wenatchee dealership can hardly keep even one available on the lot for test drives. Most of the hybrids that come in are preordered. Thus far this year, Town Toyota has sold 64 Prius vehicles.

Plug-in hybrids are a different animal. The batteries are larger and can be plugged in and charged up at any electrical outlet, and can be outfitted with tanks that can burn alternative fuels.

Using larger batteries allows the car to drive up to an hour on electricity only, using gas or other fuels only if the ride is longer. According to Ron Johnston-Rodriguez, economic development director of the Port of Chelan County, this makes the plug-in model perfect for the average commuter and even more fuel efficient than the traditional hybrid.

Johnston-Rodriguez said the plug-in hybrids are not being manufactured now. He knows of one business and one nonprofit, however, that are starting to manufacture kits that can transform a hybrid into a plug-in, but those are not available yet.

Components for hybrid and the plug-in hybrid kits could be manufactured here in the Wenatchee area. Johnston-Rodriguez said it could happen through existing manufacturing companies or a new company opening up a plant to make a specific component.

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# Hybrid initiative includes port, college and PUD

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forward, Johnston-Rodriguez said — a local cache of certified mechanics who can fix hybrid cars and install plug-in components to existing hybrids. This starts with what Johnston-Rodriguez described as the key player in the initiative — Wenatchee Valley College and the development of a curriculum.

According to Blake, who heads WVC's automotive technology department, the college has the ground work with an existing mechanical certification program. Now, the college is working with South Seattle Community College to create a new hybrid mechanics program. The result, a group of certified mechanics who understand hybrid and plug-in technology, could be enough to lure the manufacturing and alternative fuel businesses to the region, Johnston-Rodriguez said.

The collaboration between the two colleges is unique, Granatstein said. But it makes sense when the two areas are compared — Wenatchee with its four seasons and cheap electricity, and Seattle with an existing design industry.

Currently, the colleges are looking for state funding to help with the curriculum and program development. According to Henkle, it always helps when two colleges partner for funding. The funds could go to a number of program needs, Henkle said curriculum development, new equipment and part-time faculty are a few of the areas that will need funding.

"I think we're in the planning stages and we need to get a prototype car," Henkle said. "I'll be meeting with officials from South Seattle Community College soon and we might see something taking place for 2006 to 2007."

To get the community to understand the vision and the technology, the Port will host the third in a series of seminars that started in May with a visit from UC-Davis' Frank and a presentation on plug-in hybrid cars.

The Nov. 15 meeting at the Confluence Technology Center will include an announcement of additional details on the initiative and how the port and its partners want to continue to position the area as a center for advanced vehicles. Johnston-Rodriguez said there will be live demonstrations of different vehicles from traditional hybrids and plug-in hybrids and maybe a hybrid car that burns hydrogen as fuel. Frank will return as a keynote speaker. To register and get information go to [www.ncw-ctc.com](http://www.ncw-ctc.com), the Confluence Technology Center Web site.

The vision, Johnston-Rodriguez said, is still in developmental stages, but becomes clearer when the PUD's White explains it in electric terms from the perspective of the consumer.

Currently, gasoline is at \$3 a gallon and electricity costs about 25 cents a kilowatt. A plug-in hybrid using mostly electricity and at times gasoline could cost the consumer 20 cents per gallon of gasoline at our electricity rate.

To Johnston-Rodriguez and the other initiative team members, the numbers described by White bolster the group's support of its vision and objectives. If nothing else results from the work except the development of a new hybrid and plug-in automotive training program at the college, Johnston-Rodriguez said he would be satisfied.

"Hybrid and plug-in hybrids will represent a growing percentage of vehicles that are going to be on the road," Johnston-Rodriguez said. "Some forecasts say that plug-in hybrids will be commercially available in three years. Once that begins you need people to maintain the initial prototypes and eventually fix these cars. We think we would be equipping students here with those skills and even students from outside our area."

If the plug-in model takes off, White said local consumers might ask if the PUD can produce enough electricity without resorting to burning coal. Right now, the Chelan County PUD sells almost half of its electricity to other communities.

But White pointed out solar energy could be another alternative electricity producer. A roof or a carport covered in solar panels would be enough to produce the electricity needed to run a plug-in for in-town driving each day, White said.

Now the vision needs funding. With assistance from Jaecks and the college, the port is applying for foundation support and federal dollars to support the initiative.

## The hybrid vision

The Advanced Vehicle Initiative, which was started by the Port of Chelan County in September 2005, brings together Wenatchee Valley College, Washington State University and the Chelan County Public Utility District. The partners want to create a skilled workforce to work on hybrid vehicles, create a cluster economy based on hybrid and plug-in car manufacturing, and see these cars used in municipal and county fleets.

The vision outlined in an initiative draft includes local residents using plug-in hybrids, having a plug-in hybrid mechanic workforce, a bio-diesel processing plant making alternative fuels, a burgeoning tourist economy using solar powered boats or plug-in buses, a local plug-in car design and software company, and the creation of a company that leases plug-in cars to taxi businesses, municipal entities and rental car companies, such as Link, the U.S. Post Office, the school districts and Enterprise Rent A Car.

According to the initiative draft, the result can be Wenatchee emerging as a leader in plug-in and hybrid car development and use. The region would become a center for innovation, testing, training, demonstrations, maintenance and manufacturing activities for these cars and fuels.

"Plug-in hybrids cost a lot of money and right now we really need one car to communicate our plan," Johnston-Rodriguez said. "The time to embrace hybrid technology is here. Every time people pay for gas they wonder if this is going to change. It may not, but there is an alternative."

## Solar power conference Oct. 17-19

As the Port of Chelan County and its partners — Wenatchee Valley College, Washington State University and the Chelan County Public Utility District — embark on a mission to bring hybrid and plug-in hybrid car technology to Wenatchee, another group is pushing solar power technologies.

According to Jim White, the Chelan County PUD's senior energy services engineer, the Eighth Annual NW Solar Summit will take place in Wenatchee Oct. 17-19 at the Confluence Technology Station at Olds Station.

The conference will feature an update and guidelines for implementing the

Washington State Renewable Production Incentive program. Multiple manufacturers also will conduct certification trainings for standing seam solar roofing, Outback inverter systems, SMA inverters and Xantrex inverters.

The conference will include a solar tour highlighting some of the 39 solar installations in Chelan County.

The two-day conference costs \$280 for members of the general public; \$180 for NW Solar Center members. That includes lunch and dinner. The tour is \$25.

For information on the conference, call White at 661-4829.

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