

Nopetro breaks ground

Natural gas fueling facility scheduled to open in August

By Dave Hodges

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The six-month countdown began Tuesday for the opening of what will be the first compressed natural gas fueling facility of its kind in Florida, giving fleet owners and motorists yet another energy option for their vehicles.

Flanked by shiny CNG-fueled school buses, Gov. Rick Scott joined school Superintendent Jackie Pons, Nopetro CEO Jorge Herrera and local officials to kick off construction of the project, the result of a public-private partnership of Leon County Schools and Nopetro, with natural gas from City of Tallahassee Utilities.

"This is what's great about Florida," Scott told the gathering, noting not only his \$1 billion commitment in new K-12 spending for schools in this year's budget, but the willingness of local school officials to partner with the private sector on an innovative plan.

"I hope this works out well, and for Jorge, I hope it's the first of many across Florida," Scott said.

Pons directed his staff five years ago to starting thinking about

Nopetro

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alternatives to a diesel-powered bus fleet as petroleum costs climbed and the district found itself facing budget pressures. Compressed natural gas turned out to be the option with the most promise, but it was Nopetro's willingness to develop and operate the facility that has made the project feasible, he said.

Commissioner of Agriculture Adam Putnam said the challenge in making greater use of alternative fuels is the infrastructure needed to make them available to users. "Trailblazers like this school district are building that bridge," he added.

Scheduled to open in August, the fueling facility will occupy 4 acres at the northeast corner of a 25-acre tract the school district owns and is developing for fleet operations. Motorists who own CNG cars or trucks will be able to use the facility, too.

The school district operates 14 CNG-powered buses and has plans to add up to 30 more of the vehicles, Pons said. The district has a CNG pump at the bus maintenance yard on Conner Boulevard.

In his remarks during the ground breaking, Pons stressed the importance of not only reducing the district's transportation costs, but demonstrating to the community and its youth the environmental impacts of alternative fuels usage.

"The most important thing is we will be protecting our environment and teaching our children about how to protect the environment," Pons said.

Herrera said a switch to natural gas reduces a motorist's fuel expenses by \$1.50 per gallon and reduces carbon pollution by 33 percent. The U.S. has more than a 100-year supply of natural gas.

"Natural gas is the solution to ending our nation's dependence on foreign oil," he said, noting California has some 300 CNG fueling centers and

that such companies as UPS, AT&T, Waste Management and Verizon are all making the switch to the fuel in their operations.

Besides cleaner emissions compared to diesel, CNG buses cost less to operate — about \$5,000 less per year per bus, according to the school district.

Nopetro, which is based in Tallahassee, competed for the contract to develop the fueling facility, build it and then operate it. The company has plans to build other CNG stations around Florida.

The city's role will be to supply the natural gas through its local distribution system. The city has a total of five CNG-powered vehicles and Leon County has one.

"This is a huge step," said City Commissioner Nancy Miller. "It's a big step for our community, but it's a big step for Florida.

"I am very proud of our school board for jumping on this and taking the initiative," Miller added. "We're right behind them."