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Fuel Cell Partnership in West Sacramento hoping to lure drivers for a visit

Drivers can test new vehicles, take a tour

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In a matter of seconds, motorists fly past a set of sprawling buildings in West Sacramento where leading researchers from around the world are developing the future of automotive transportation.

This Saturday, the gearheads are hoping to lure drivers to ease off the gas pedal and exit the Capital City Freeway at Harbor Boulevard for a visit to the California Fuel Cell Partnership.

You're invited to test-drive one of its fuel-cell vehicles or simply take a tour. If you've never visited before, prepare yourself for a grease-free experience. The garages are immaculate. Even the metal pipes running up the walls shine.

Since there is no gas or oil (grease fittings and other lubricants suffice) in the garages, they smell like the outdoors when the bay doors are open.

"It smells different. It looks different. That surprises some people," noted Rob Riley, project manager for Ford Motor Co. at the partnership.

Also different: Diagnostic work done by the on-site technicians.

"I'll come in and see them working on a car, and they're standing 15 feet from it," Riley said. "That's because the car is communicating with their laptop via radio frequency. That's how they're getting all the information."

Riley and other partnership workers also oversee training sessions with local first responders. Because the complex systems in fuel-cell vehicles vary greatly from those in gas-fueled vehicles, CaFCP experts brief emergency personnel on what they can – or can't – do safely at a crash site.

"We've trained over 70 local firefighters," Riley said.

Typically, though, engineers and other workers do methodical research and maintain fuel-cell vehicles the partnership hopes one day will become the dominant mode of transportation. More than 30 carmakers, energy providers, fuel cell technology companies and government agencies collaborate at the 8-year-old partnership.

Research and field testing have been key since the partnership opened in 2000. CaFCP has helped develop smaller fuel-cell stacks that have enabled car designers to create more room inside the vehicles.

In Honda's new FCX Clarity four-passenger sedan, for example, a compact fuel cell stack fits between the two front seats. Honda is leasing the FCX Clarity to a select group of Southern Californians this summer.

The partnership also is involved in more general public education programs, including convincing people that

onboard hydrogen tanks are extremely sturdy and contain a fuel less volatile than gasoline.

In tests, carbon fiber-wrapped hydrogen tanks on the Chevrolet Equinox Fuel Cell, a sport-utility vehicle based on the gas-fueled Equinox, proved nearly impossible to puncture, said Julie Beamer, director of fuel cell commercialization for GM.

Still, some local motorists might need more convincing before climbing behind the wheel of a fuel cell vehicle.

A recent random sampling of Sacramento-area motorists produced mixed reviews about the vehicles' potential.

Sacramentan Connie Holmes, who has driven a gas-electric Toyota Prius for more than three years, said she looks "forward to a time when we can have more fuel choices for our cars, especially choices that don't pollute the environment."

"I would drive a car with hydrogen fuel if it has been thoroughly tested as safe ... and if I had access to (hydrogen) service stations," she said.

Martin Chavez, a Carmichael resident who drives a four-cylinder, gas-fueled Honda Civic, said he's not so sure about the hydrogen future: "I'm not ready. ... It's not just that there aren't enough (hydrogen) stations, but I worry about having all that hydrogen under pressure in the car, and how I would have the car repaired. ...

"Will there be enough mechanics who know how to fix a hydrogen car if it breaks down? And how much is that going to cost? I don't know. I'll wait and see."

Chavez is just the sort of person that the researchers hope will come to visit. They are trying to educate consumers and raise their facility's local profile.

Even some of their closest neighbors don't know what goes on there, as one passer-by proved March 10, when some of the nation's top automotive and air quality experts assembled to propose ideas to expedite formation of a national hydrogen-fueling network.

"Are they selling cars there today?" asked Cindy Johnson, who lives within five miles of the site.

While the partnership's work might not be completely understood or appreciated locally, it gets respect in high circles.

President Bush paid a visit in April 2006. And Paul Brubaker, head of the Research and Innovative Technology Administration for the U.S. Department of Transportation, attended the March 10 conference where he described the partnership as vital to the nation's future.

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