

The Star-Ledger

County unveils technology showroom

Glitch in buying hybrid SUVs is a lesson learned for government

Sunday, June 25, 2006

BY DIANE C. WALSH

Star-Ledger Staff

Facing rising fuel costs, Middlesex County was looking forward to purchasing 18 new fuel efficient hybrid Ford Escapes.

But when the Ford dealer told county officials the manufacturers warranty would be voided if radios and overhead light bars were installed on the SUVs, the deal nearly fell through.

Freeholder H. James Polos said he had to have a five-way conference call with corporate bigwigs at Ford Motor Co. in Detroit before the problem was solved.

In the end, Polos said Ford agreed to new electrical protocols that will make it easy for public agencies to fit the SUVs with equipment needed by police, firefighters or, as in Middlesex County's case, park rangers

Polos said addressing the hybrid problem is one example of how the county can share its experience and knowledge on clean energy with local governments.

The freeholder, who is facing reelection in the fall, proposes that the county be a conduit, funneling information from the state Department of Environmental Protection and Board of Public Utilities to the 25 towns in Middlesex.

On Friday, Polos gathered state and local officials at the Rutgers Cooperation Extension headquarters at Davidson's Mill Pond Park in North Brunswick to launch the new "Middlesex County Showroom of Environmental Technology."

South Amboy Mayor John O'Leary said the showroom will be a "godsend" to the towns. He said his city is interested in buying a hybrid Ford Escape. But the city put off the purchase until the county resolved the kinks with Ford.

"We're not making a mistake," said O'Leary, who is also facing reelection this year. "We're going to buy the right hybrid with the right technology."

Polos said the county would provide easy access to technical information, equipment specifications, samples and guidance on available grants and funding.

"What better level of government than the county" to distribute the information, said Polos, who spearheaded Middlesex County's commitment to add hybrids to its fleet.

When the park rangers' new fleet of hybrids arrives in a few weeks, Middlesex County will have a total of 23 fuel efficient vehicles. The county also uses bio-diesel, an alternative fuel, in some of its heavy equipment. One of the county's hybrid Toyota Prius vehicles, as well as the prototype Ford Escape and a truck that uses biodiesel fuel were on display at the extension headquarters on Friday.

By setting up a showroom, Polos said local officials can “have an opportunity to learn, touch and feel this technology.” If they are interested in buying, the county can also help with bulk purchasing.

Jeanne Fox, president of the Board of Public Utilities, said the county will be getting a \$88,000 rebate check for its hybrids. The BPU offers the rebates to encourage towns and counties to try clean energy initiatives. Statewide there have been 114 hybrid vehicles purchased by local governments, Fox said.

She said Polos’ plan should be a model for other counties.

“It’s good for the community. It’s good for the environment and it’s good for taxpayers,” Fox said.

State Environmental Commissioner Lisa Jackson said it makes sense for the county to help the towns.

“The county is where we see regional thought and the ability to plug into the state,” Jackson said.

Polos said the county will organize seminars on specific technologies and schedule “trade shows” so vendors can present their technology and equipment to the towns. He said a “best practices” guide will be developed to assist the towns.

Diane C. Waish covers Middlesex County. She may be reached at dwaish@starledper.com or at (732) 404-8087.

2006 The Star Ledger ~ 2006 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.