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Thursday, Feb 06, 2003

## CENTRE DAILY TIMES

## Opinion

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Posted on Wed, Feb. 05, 2003

### Looking for fossil-fuel alternatives

At least at first blush, one of the more reassuring lines in President Bush's State of the Union address last week was his pledge of \$1.7 billion for a five-year research and development program for hydrogen fuel-cell-powered automobiles.

Maybe, just maybe, the White House has the will to wean the nation off its long and increasingly dangerous addiction to fossil fuels.

If that is true, that is fantastic news for The Energy Institute at Penn State, which has declared today "Hydrogen Day."

The Institute has been conducting research into fuel cells and other alternative energy technologies that could, if translated into commercial use, significantly boost central Pennsylvania's economy, lower pollution and reduce the nation's need for imported oil.

A series of talks and exhibits today will showcase the Institute's progress and what could be accomplished with the promised investment from the federal government. Rep. John Peterson, R-Pleasantville, a longtime champion of research into new fuel technologies, will give a keynote address.

Bush's announcement, though it was only a paragraph in an address dominated by the prospect of war with Iraq, should get more attention than it has received, not only from the public but from the Bush administration itself.

The challenge of developing a hydrogen-powered car, and the potential fruits of success, make this one of the most important public-private research endeavors in decades.

"With a new national commitment, our scientists and engineers will overcome obstacles to taking these cars from laboratory to showrooms, so that the first car driven by a child born today could be powered by hydrogen, and (be) pollution-free," Bush said in his address.

Hydrogen fuel has been used to power vehicles in some fashion for 100 years. But there are solid reasons why even the most optimistic experts believe fuel-cell vehicles won't be commonplace for at least a decade.

Researchers will have to figure out how to safely transport and store the extremely cold and highly volatile liquid hydrogen. The cells themselves are large and heavy, and won't propel a car anywhere near the 300 miles an average car can travel on a tank of gas. A refueling infrastructure on the scale of the nation's 108,000 existing gas stations will have to be built from scratch.

Powering a car with fuel cells is 10 times more expensive than gasoline. Finally, while the fuel cells themselves are nonpolluting, the process of manufacturing the cells and generating the hydrogen isn't.

Also, to put the federal government's financial commitment into perspective, that \$1.7 billion in the president's 2004 budget works out to about \$340 million a year, less than the \$400 million General Motors spends on average to get one of its car models from the drawing board into the showroom. That's why some Democrats in Congress are lining up behind a proposal that would more than triple what the administration has proposed.

A criticism of the Bush administration proposal that should be taken especially seriously is that the bet on fuel cells is not being properly hedged with shorter-term investments that will help the nation make incremental progress in cleaning up its air and lowering its oil imports.

U.S. auto companies are not only behind the Japanese on the marketing of gasoline-electric hybrid cars, but they are behind Germany's BMW, which says it has a gasoline-hydrogen hybrid ready to market and only needs a commitment to establish hydrogen fueling stations.

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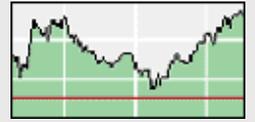
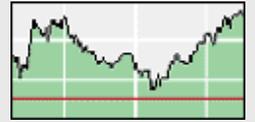
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While the spotlight on fuel-cell research at Penn State and elsewhere is welcome, that must not take the focus off the changes industry and government can make today for a cleaner and more secure energy future.

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