

TCC Rolls Out Flashy Auto Center

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Vehicles from the major auto manufactures and local dealers were on hand to help showcase the Regional Automotive Center's technology. (Michael Schwartz Photo)

The ribbon-cutting ceremony dedicating the grand opening of Tidewater Community College's Regional Automotive Center in Chesapeake wasn't a typical ribbon-cutting.

There were no extremely oversized scissors; rather a brand-new Acura sedan blared its horn and drove through a checkered flag ribbon.

Distinguished speakers sang the \$10.1 million, 30,000-square-foot facility's praises from a podium that stood at the end of a makeshift roadway.

The mayor made jokes, a benefactor presented a check and compared money to manure, and the impressive high-tech facility received the attention it deserved as a large crowd toured the premises.

The center boasts 15 instructional bays that would be the envy of any grease monkey, ceiling-mounted cameras that monitor the students tinkering through a fully wireless system, computerized alignment machines, a dynamometer, an auto showroom, nine classrooms and a curriculum that includes specialized manufacturer programs, from Chrysler, Honda and Toyota.

"Does it sound like a dealership?" asked TCC President Deborah DiCroce.

That's what the school was going for.

The center, which sits on 6 acres of the 115-acre Oakbrooke Business & Technology Center, is "yet another manifestation of Tidewater Community College," said DiCroce, in its mission toward becoming a "regional academic village for the 21st century."

Chesapeake Mayor Alan Krasnoff said the facility is an important anchor to the Oakbrooke site.

“This place is going to be filled with enterprising and the things that make Chesapeake drive forward,” Krasnoff said. “That wasn’t a pun.”

To his dismay only a few in the early morning crowd laughed. “Oh come on,” Krasnoff joked.

Part of that driving force could include future expansion in Chesapeake for TCC. Its Chesapeake campus is the fastest-growing of the four campuses and plans for a \$60 million, 65,000-square-foot facility are in the works, DiCroce said at the event.

The big announcement came when Scott Smith, president of the Hampton Roads Automobile Dealers Association, took to the podium with an envelope containing a check for \$20,000, the first of five annual installments of a \$100,000 total gift the organization is giving the facility with the ultimate goal of having the center someday bear the HRADA name.

Money, Smith said, is like manure in that “it’s not worth anything unless its spread around to help young things grow.”

The young things they hope to grow are new workers for the automotive industry. Smith said the auto industry is going through a paradigm shift in which auto dealers no longer rely on vehicle sales for profitability but rather the parts and service departments. And that area of the auto industry has a pending labor shortage that isn’t a laughing matter. Estimates show by 2011 there will be a shortage of 40,000 to 50,000 auto technicians in the U.S., he said.

Walter “Bud” Brueggeman, head of TCC’s automotive technology program, said the school has had the programs for some time but now it has a facility that has “taken us out of the old days and into the new.”

Having auto industry partners that include domestic and foreign is necessary, Brueggeman said, particularly given the stature that foreign automakers have in the U.S. There was a time when such a school would have focused solely on the behemoth market share of General Motors, but these days, “if you are going to get technicians trained, it has to be Toyota,” Brueggeman said.

Unlike many other industries that face an aging workforce, the auto industry is confronted with a changing workforce tasked with keeping pace with technology, Brueggeman said.

“A car is a box with four wheels and 30 computers.”