

BTC moves Forward with Pilot Project for Mini-Refinery

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After years of discussion, Bellingham Technical College is moving forward with a project that could cement the school as a major training center for advanced manufacturing.

College officials want to build a \$1 million pilot plant that would essentially be a miniature refinery, giving students and industry professionals the chance to get hands-on experience of what it's like to work in a refinery or other advanced manufacturing setting.

Regional refineries - ConocoPhillips Ferndale Refinery, BP Cherry Point refinery, Shell Puget Sound Refinery and Tesoro Anacortes Refinery - are already on board with the project and have donated \$25,000 apiece. ConocoPhillips donated an additional \$10,000 earlier this year.

The idea for the plant, which will be a stand-alone structure near the Morse Center, came about in 2003 after industry representatives told college officials that it would be a useful feature to add to BTC's process and control technology and instrumentation programs. Only a handful of refinery-related pilot plants exist in the country, with none near the Northwest, said Mary Humphries, director of college advancement.

The pilot plant would distill a mixture of water and antifreeze, which simulates the oil refining process. Students in the process technology and instrumentation programs would run the plant for two weeks straight each quarter, working in shifts as they would at a refinery. During plant operations, the students would work on three focus areas: operations, maintenance and safety.

"The fact that students in the process technology program would get the hands-on experience they wouldn't get otherwise... enhances the whole training experience," said Jeffery Callendar, regional director of public affairs and communication for ConocoPhillips Ferndale Refinery. "(Students will) graduate from the process technology program with a great skill set."

Planning for the plant is complete, and the college has money earmarked for the operations and instruction, but it still needs about \$900,000 to actually build the pilot plant, Humphries said.

"Yes, it's tough in the economic climate but at the same time I think there's always opportunities," Humphries said, adding they hope to have the funding by the end of 2009. "I think this is a unique opportunity and... we can look at other funding sources beyond the immediate region."

College officials are looking to refineries all over the Northwest, including British Columbia, to help finance the project.

Industry and college professionals hope that adding the pilot plant to the school, which is already a state Center of Excellence for process and control technology, will increase the number of young people looking to the advanced manufacturing field. A worker shortage is expected in the industry due to baby boomers retiring in coming years.

"The plus is the industry is still investing in training and job development," Callendar said. "And we continue to put a lot of emphasis on education."