Illinois has a chance to drive economy with clean-car jobs

By Howard A. Learner
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Rising gas prices are taking a big bite out of everyone’s wallets. Not surprisingly, SUV gas-guzzler sales are down, hybrid car sales are up and GM and Ford bond ratings have been downgraded to “junk.”

Recent polling by Harris Interactive and the Civil Society Institute makes clear that people want cars that run cleaner and get better gas mileage.

This is not dreamy pocketbook environmentalism and patriotism. Innovative new car technologies achieve more miles per gallon and produce less pollution. That can pump up Illinois’ economy, create new jobs, improve our public health and environment and protect our national security.

Right now, the supply can’t keep up with public demand for the cleaner Toyota Prius and Honda Insight and Civic hybrids and, lately, for Ford’s new hybrid Escape SUV. Two more hybrid SUVs, from Toyota and Lexus, are coming. Other technological improvements, such as automated manual transmission, air conditioning system changes and various engine modifications, reduce harmful air pollutants, including carbon dioxide, which causes global warming problems.

Toyota just announced a new hybrid Camry manufacturing plant in Kentucky, while all three car manufacturing plants in Illinois still build standard models. Our state’s economic development officials should be repositioning Illinois as a leader, building the cars of the future for the jobs of the future, rather than the cars of the past.

Illinois’ economy loses big from high gas prices when cars get the current average 22 mpg instead of hybrid cars’ 40-plus mpg. Billions of dollars drain out of Illinois’ economy to Texas and the Middle East. With gas recently nearing $2.50 a gallon, you can almost hear H. Ross Perot’s famous “sucking sound” when you fill up your tank.

What if Illinois, like eight other states, adopts policies that encourage new clean car technologies and increase the overall average mpg 25% to just 27 mpg? According to an analysis by Professor Geoffrey Hewings of the University of Illinois’ Regional Economics Applications Laboratory, our gas pump savings would inject $3.4 billion into Illinois’ economy each year (and that’s based on a gas price of only $2 a gallon) and create 21,000 net new jobs statewide.

Cleaner cars that get more miles per gallon are a win-win-win solution for Illinois’ economy, new jobs and a healthier environment. The national security benefits from less reliance on Mideast oil are also obvious, and consumers want better gas mileage with their new cars. Let’s adopt pro-technology policies to make Illinois the Midwest’s leader in driving and manufacturing the cars of the future.

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