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HOW WE SEE IT: Glad To See Colleges Going 'Green'

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NORTHWEST ARKANSAS — As Kermit once said, it's not easy being green.

But thanks to about \$2.5 million in federal stimulus money, more Arkansans are about to learn how.

Gov. Mike Beebe announced last week that the state's two largest community colleges - NorthWest Arkansas Community College and Pulaski Technical College - will split the aforementioned grant dollars to train workers for "green-energy" jobs. Energy auditing, home weatherization, and heating and cooling system maintenance are among the things students will learn in this program. In Northwest Arkansas, the program's classroom portion will be held at NWACC's satellite location in Fayetteville, while lab work will be done at the main campus in Bentonville.

This program has been talked about for months, but it became official with Beebe's announcement. Classes might start as early as this summer.

Some credit is due to Fayetteville Mayor Lioneld Jordan, who talked about bringing this sort of thing to his city during his campaign in 2008. Congratulations to him and all others involved in the effort.

We've been critical of the stimulus package recently, particularly regarding the paltry amount of cash awarded to the Bella Vista bypass project. The investment in green-job training centers, on the other hand, is a much more satisfying application of stimulus money. Not only does it represent a move toward a more energy-efficient society, but it promises to put Arkansans on the front of a rapidly growing industry. In other words, it's not just a handout; it's something that will teach people skills they can use for a lifetime.

The hope is that this training center will open job opportunities to hundreds of our residents - perhaps even thousands, depending on whether the program can achieve sustainability, which already is being discussed.

Of course, at this point, we can only speculate about the degree to which employment will be affected, and we ought not get too carried away. It's hard to refute, however, that the creation of these green training centers is a positive development.

During last month's Business Forecast 2010 in Rogers, economist Kathy Deck said that sustainability and green jobs would be the next driver of economic and population growth in our region. We would not disagree. Americans are gradually becoming more aware of the importance of energy efficiency. Even Wal-Mart is catching on; the world's largest retailer

announced last week that by 2015, it intends to eliminate 20 million metric tons of greenhouse gases from the products it sells, equal to what 3.8 million cars emit in a year. That's an ambitious goal, and one we hope Wal-Mart achieves.

It is exciting to see two of Northwest Arkansas' biggest institutions - NWACC and Wal-Mart - getting into the green movement. The economy, the environment, and regular Arkansans all stand to benefit.

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