

## **Toyota endowment will fund advanced vocational center**

by Chris Kieffer/NEMS Daily Journal

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PONTOTOC - Students from three Northeast Mississippi counties will soon be taking highly skilled classes covering a variety of professional careers.

A new \$35 million facility to be built near the Toyota plant in Wellspring will house The Center for Professional Futures.

The center, which could open as soon as the the fall of 2013, will be used by students of the eight school districts in Pontotoc, Union and Lee counties.

It will offer a variety of professional career academics in such areas as computer graphics and animation, pre-engineering, architecture, legal studies, advanced manufacturing and health science technology.

The project was announced Thursday afternoon by the CREATE Foundation and the members of the Toyota Education Endowment Fund Advisory Committee.

"It is a game changer," said David Rumbarger, president and CEO of the Community Development Foundation and a member of the advisory committee. "It will be something this region will be marked by in the future."

When Toyota announced it would manufacture cars at a new facility in Wellspring, it promised to provide a \$50 million endowment to be used by the eight school districts in the three counties that worked together to attract the auto manufacturer.

That money will be provided in \$5 million installments over 10 years, starting next month.

Money from the endowment fund will be used to pay the operating expenses for the center. Funds to construct the \$35 million facility will be sought from federal and state governments and from foundations.

This is the second project to use money from the Toyota endowment. In January, a plan was announced to use \$278,000 to fund curriculum audits in all eight districts.

Students would take introductory classes at their home school before applying to attend the center for more advanced training as sophomores, juniors or seniors.

"There are adults in their 50s and 60s who have gone to work every day at a job they are not passionate about," said Mississippi first lady Marsha Barbour, who was at Thursday's announcement.

"This center will encourage kids who have a passion for something to do it for their career."

The project was studied by the six-member Toyota Education Endowment Fund Advisory Committee, composed of a representative from each of the three counties, from Toyota and from CREATE, plus Mississippi Superintendent Tom Burnham.

That committee is still working out such issues as scheduling, transportation, the number of students that can be served and aligning the center with the curricula of the high schools it serves.

The center will be governed by a yet-to-be-announced board of directors that will be representative of its population.

"We can offer things to students from all eight school districts that we could never do individually," said Tupelo Superintendent Randy Shaver. "This is the finest model I've seen of working together across school districts and across county lines."

Rumbarger said the goal would be to break ground on the facility one year from now. He said that the center will allow students to develop specialized skills and to get an early start at trying different careers and finding one that excites them.

Members of the committee extensively studied a special high school in Frisco, Texas, that uses multiple academies to teach students advanced skills in areas like health, law and computers.

"What I came back with was how engaged the kids there were in what they were doing," said David Copenhaver, the vice president of administration at Toyota Mississippi and a member of the advisory committee.