

Jindal touts auto training facility



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Advocate staff photo by HEATHER MCCLELLAND -- Gov. Bobby Jindal announced Wednesday funding for a Baton Rouge Community College automotive training facility in Smiley Heights. Behind Jindal, from left to right, are Baton Rouge state Sens. Dan Claitor, a Republican, and Sharon Weston Broome, a Democrat. Baton Rouge Mayor Kip Holden is to the right.

by mark ballard

Capitol news bureau

Gov. Bobby Jindal committed Wednesday to \$13.9 million to build an automobile training facility as part of the Baton Rouge Community College's new campus in Smiley Heights.

Administration officials are preparing the paperwork and the state Bond Commission will be asked to approve the funding, Jindal said during the announcement ceremony on the BRCC campus.

Jindal said recent studies showed that Louisiana has more than 2,700 unfilled jobs for auto mechanics and technicians. That number is expected to grow 17 percent by 2020, he said.

“Without question, this is a growth industry, but we aren’t filling the positions

available right now,” Jindal said.

Other studies show that the Baton Rouge auto industry would need about 250 automotive technology graduates annually, Jindal said.

Baton Rouge Community College Chancellor Andrea Lewis Miller said the new facility would help meet the state’s workforce needs while expanding opportunities for students.

Although BRCC would run the school, the venture is envisioned as a private-public partnership with expensive teaching equipment donated by local industry. The state is putting up \$13.9 million, but private donors and grants are expected to donate about \$10 million more in equipment and cars for use in the classrooms.

Matt McKay, of AllStar Automotive Group, said modern cars are highly technical machinery and fixing them requires more training than in the past.

The 60,000-square-foot auto training facility, to be called the Center for Excellence in Auto Technology, will be located on BRCC’s new East Campus in the Smiley Heights neighborhood of Baton Rouge. Construction on the campus and the auto training facility is estimated to begin at the end of 2014 and be completed by late 2015.

Mayor Kip Holden said, “I promise you this, when this facility is finished, people from all across the country, and indeed the world, will be coming to see what we’re doing in Louisiana.”

Holden said the facility would anchor the new 200-acre BRCC East Campus, which is a prime part of efforts to develop the Smiley Heights neighborhood.

Smiley Heights is northeast of BRCC near Florida Boulevard, in a neighborhood bounded by Greenwell Springs Road and roughly between North Ardenwood Drive and North Lobdell Boulevard.

Smiley Heights is a mixed-use development, which will consist of a residential neighborhood, retail establishments and a charter school. The development is estimated to create 3,500 new households and 20,000 new jobs in the Baton Rouge metro area by 2030.

Jindal explained to the crowd that local legislators and elected officials have more demands and needs than state government can meet.

“I ask them to prioritize,” Jindal said. “What are your most important projects?”

The legislators, businessmen and elected officials here, Jindal said turning to the

group standing behind him during announcement, represent districts with different interests all over the Baton Rouge area.

“When they put together their list, they thought very, very hard about what is good for the entire region. This was one of their top priorities,” Jindal said.

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