

Opinion

GUEST COLUMN

Georgia should lead South in vehicles running on natural gas

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By **Tim G. Echols**

When gas hits \$5 per gallon, I'll have to put a padlock on my garage to keep people from taking my CNG Honda Civic. My 1999 Civic GX runs exclusively on compressed natural gas — the same stuff that heats many homes in Georgia. I believe Georgia can lead the South in making CNG a realistic alternative fuel in both trucks and cars. When it happens, there are three great possibilities we can experience.

First, let's talk about money. CNG is cheap, relatively speaking. At the pump, natural gas is a little over \$2 for the equivalent of a gallon of gasoline. With a home fueling station, the price is closer to \$1.50.

And talk about convenient: Try fueling your car in your own garage. And unlike petroleum, the vast majority of our natural gas is drilled right here in North America. So instead of enriching Saudi Arabia or Venezuela, we are using an American resource. That alone should be sufficient motivation to try something new.

And while the price of petroleum is volatile because of OPEC, the U.S. Energy Information Administration expects natural gas prices to stay low until at least 2030. That should be great news for everyone — especially companies who put lots of miles on vehicles.

I recently had a conversation with an airport shuttle company that runs vans from the At-

lanta airport to Columbus, Macon and Chattanooga. They operate more than 70 E-350 Ford vans and use about 500,000 gallons of gas per year. Even at today's prices, saving \$1 per gallon puts a substantial dent in the additional costs for the more expensive CNG engines, even without the tax credits.

This kind of commercial application is CNG's best bet for success. These high-mileage urban fleets with central refueling like the shuttle company and others such as AT&T, UPS and Parking Spot have a very short cost recovery. We have thousands of taxicabs in Atlanta that drive nearly 100,000 miles each year. Many 18-wheelers may drive 120,000 miles per year and get only six miles per gallon, using almost 20,000 gallons of diesel fuel per year.

But with no place to fuel their vehicles with natural gas, this idea is only a pipe dream.

Fellow Public Service Commissioners Doug Everett and Bubba McDonald have been stoking the fire on this issue and looking at a number of plans. It is my hope that as a new Public Service commis-

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sioner, the PSC can soon play a significant role in making CNG a reality in Georgia.

Second, CNG is the cleanest fossil fuel out there. In Seattle, Waste Management upgraded trash trucks to run on CNG and found that they would reduce smog-causing NOx by 97 percent, toxic diesel particulate matter by 94 percent, and greenhouse gases by 20 percent. I am certainly no fan of Al Gore, but if we get cleaner air and save money at the same time, we should move in that direction.

In December, I made a trip to Southern California to look at its many applications of CNG. I found taxis, port authority vehicles, shuttle buses, trash trucks and commuter vehicles running on CNG with access to many fueling stations. These fueling pumps, which are as easy to use as a regular gasoline pump, are what we need in Georgia to jump-start usage of this great alternative fuel.

Third, CNG vehicles can drive in the HOV lane with only the driver. This benefit, meant to encourage the purchase of alternative fuel vehicles, is the best kept secret in Atlanta, and something that many frustrated commuters will take advantage of if fueling stations are built. That is what I do en route to the Capitol. Sitting in traffic impacts one's quality of life and robs drivers of the time they would like to have to do other things.

So what will it take to make

CNG a viable alternative for us here in Georgia? Atlanta Gas Light has submitted a plan to use available funds from the Universal Service Fund to install refueling equipment at public stations throughout Georgia while requiring no subsidies from rate payers. According to AGL's leadership, AGL is not intent on entering the CNG retail market, but simply wants to help spur investment by private companies in both CNG vehicles and new fueling stations.

We may need to consider finding incentives for private industry to build the infrastructure and be traditional wholesale providers. If AGL enters the market and sells CNG below market, Georgia might duplicate what has happened in Utah, which wound up with no private-market investment, obsolete equipment and no reinvestment into the infrastructure.

For you public policy wonks out there, what is the best role for AGL and what investment incentives will work best in this market? Since Congress allowed federal tax credits and subsidy programs to expire last December, should Georgia wait for the private market to develop once Congress acts to renew these incentives?

These are all good questions and something the PSC will be looking at over the coming weeks.

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