

St. Johns County jumps into natural gas economy as first CNG facility opens

By Jensen Werley
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A new compressed natural gas facility means more growth for Northeast Florida's efforts to become an alternative energy hub, with the first facility outside of Jacksonville making the effort truly regional.

St. Johns County entered a public/private partnership with Nopetro to provide a CNG fueling station within the St. Johns County Public Works facility, which opened today.



The Nopetro facility in St. Johns County

“It’s an environmentally viable and economically sustainable partnership,” said Neal Shinkre, director of public works for St. Johns County. “This is a case of vision meeting opportunity.”

Through the partnership, Nopetro invested \$3 million to build the facility, said Jorge Herrera, CEO of Nopetro. In turn, St. Johns committed to buy 100,000 gallons in its first year for county fleet vehicles such as public works and animal control. The county is also not charging Nopetro for the land it's using for two to three years, to give Nopetro a jumpstart in gaining service.

St. Johns County converted its fleet of 100 vehicles to compressed natural gas with the help of a \$737,000 grant from the North Florida Transportation Planning Organization and \$250,000 grant from the state.

"Our actual investment is almost nothing," Shinkre said.

That affordability is part of the reason St. Johns decided to make the leap in investing.

With the St. Johns County facility, Northeast Florida is another step in solidifying its stance as a natural gas hub. In the last year, several of facilities — such as those owned by Champion Brands, the Jacksonville Transportation Authority or an upcoming facility to be used by Crowley Maritime Corp. — have opened in Duval County.

"We are creating a great network," Shinkre said. "We applaud the efforts in Jacksonville. We can't stop at one facility. It takes us all to make things like this happen."