

“Hybrid Future in Sight”  
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Toyota City, Japan – Gov. Joe Manchin and Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-WV, discussed hybrid engines and fuel cell technology in a meeting with Toyota executives Wednesday. “I want to see the research and engine production done in West Virginia,” Rockefeller said in an interview before the meeting. “If we get advanced engines, we will see a wide cluster of suppliers [in Putnam County].”

Hybrid cars – which use a gasoline engine and an electric motor combination for power and have been proased for being more environmentally friendly and energy efficient – are extremely popular in North America, Toyota executives said during a luncheon for members of the West Virginia delegation and top level Toyota executives. “We’re very much over-whelmed by the positive reaction from America,” said Senior Managing Director and Board Member Yoshimi Inaba. Toyota Motor Manufacturing North America announced last month that the company’s first North American hybrid production would be at its Georgetown, Ky., plant when production of a Camry hybrid beings in late 2006.

Customers hunting for hybrids can buy the four-door Prius and Lexus RX 400h luxury sport utility vehicle in the U.S. The Highlander hybrid mid-size SUV goes on sale this month and the 2007 Lexus GS 450h hybrid luxury sedan is targeted for sale in the spring. Delegation members took a bus to Toyota’s Tsutsumi assembly plant where employees produce five types of medium-size cars, including the Prius. The facility employs 6,650 people who crank out about 40,000 cars a month. The process of assembling each car involves stamping out body parts like doors, hoods and roofs from steel coils; assembling the body; painting the car; putting about 11,000 parts, like engines and transmissions from other Toyota factories into the car; and finally inspecting each car to make sure it will ensure customer satisfaction.

Conveyor belts slowly move the cars in their various production stages along two production lines that snake through the large assembly plant. About 250 people add something to each car as it meanders its way down the line. Toyota’s board members may pick the sight for its seventh assembly plant in North America at the annual shareholders meeting later this month. News and financial publications have said Toyota will open the plant in Ontario, near an existing factory. Toyota’s newest assembly plant in San Antonio is expected to start producing 150,000 Tundra full-size trucks by the end of 2006. The 2,000-employee facility will sit on a 22,000-acre site.

Many people consider landing an assembly plant the crème de la crème of automotive economic development. But, such a facility requires flat, available land. “the great curse we have is four percent flat land,” Rockefeller said. The state’s geographic limitations lend it

more to smaller, research and engine-producing facilities. West Virginia doesn't really have any 1,000- to 1,500-acre sites right now, said the state development office's executive director Steve Spence. But, if a company had a project in mind the office would definitely try to piece land together, he said. Delegation members also got to catch a glimpse of the automotive future while Manchin and Rockefeller were in their private meeting with the Toyota executives. A 40-minute tour introduced the group to concept vehicles like fuel cell cars that use hydrogen and oxygen to create the car's power and a leaf-shaped contraption that drivers sit in and control with a joystick. The West Virginians also test drove hybrid cars after the assembly plant tour. "I thought it accelerated really well and drove really well," said Larry Puccio, Manchin's chief of staff. Puccio typically drives a Dodge Durango and Jaguar X-Type, and test drove a Prius.