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## Gwinnett E85 pump popular with flex-fuel crowd

By [GEORGE CHIDI](#)  
 The Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
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Lewis Woodruff almost looks forward to filling up the tank on his 1999 Dodge Caravan.

Almost.



George Chidi/AJC (ENLARGE)

Prices for E85 at the Safa Express BP were \$2.89 a gallon Monday.

Woodruff, a 52-year-old manufacturer's representative from Lawrenceville, bought the used minivan in September for a bit less than \$6,000, unaware that it was a flex-fuel vehicle.

When he went to change the oil filter a few weeks later, he learned his vehicle is designed to run on ethanol, he said.

"It was originally from Indiana," he said. The corn-growing state's easy ethanol availability may have made flex-fuel vehicles more popular there, he said. "I didn't even know it."

The E85 blend of ethanol sells for under \$3 a gallon. At 15,000 miles of driving a year, the difference between driving with E85 and regular gasoline represents about \$600 in annual savings at current prices.

But that discovery wasn't especially useful until last month.

The Safa Express BP station on Grayson Highway in Lawrenceville opened an E85 pump three weeks ago. The store sells the E85 ethanol blend for \$2.89 a gallon. Regular unleaded gasoline costs \$3.55 a gallon there, and close to that at most places.

Woodruff was the store's first ethanol customer, said Nayef Abuaisheh, the store owner.

The store's single pump is slammed in the morning, with a line of cars waiting to fuel up, he said. He's planning to add a second pump, and an electronic meter so government vehicles with flex-fuel engines can buy fuel there as well.

About five minutes from the new pump, dealers at one car lot are salivating.

Larry McNeil, a salesman at Nash Chevrolet on Scenic Highway in Lawrenceville, said he's hoping news of an ethanol pump in the neighborhood will help drive sales of flex-fuel vehicles.

About 40 percent of the cars on the lot can use E85 fuel, he said. "Consumers are now aware of the benefits," he said. "I've got a lot of business people looking for it."

Gwinnett County closed bidding on a proposed fuel contract for 1.6 million gallons of E10 and E85 ethanol blends Thursday. The county hasn't committed to using ethanol in its vehicles, but until recently ethanol was not a realistic option to explore, said Michael Lindsey, Gwinnett's director of fleet management.

"We could have looked at it a few years ago, but where could we get it?" he said. "I haven't been in a position to buy it, even if I wanted."

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Abuaisheh gets his supply from Texas-based Cleanfuel USA and a production facility in Doraville. The Lawrenceville station is only the second commercial ethanol pump in metro Atlanta. The first is in Smyrna.

Dozens more are slated to open by the end of the year around Atlanta, said Zane Miller, a consulting engineer who helps build ethanol pumps.

The fuel has its drawbacks, real and perceived, he said. The fuel is formulated around 105 octane to compensate for its relatively low combustion power in an engine, he said. Mileage drops a bit for some vehicles. And ethanol has recently come under fire for driving up food prices as corn growers shift crops to fuel production.

On the other hand, the fuel can be produced domestically. And some people are hoping to produce ethanol from pine trees in Georgia, allowing production — and jobs — to develop closer to home for the fuel, he said.

"It may not be the answer," he said, "but it looks like a good choice right now."

Miller lets consumers serve as the fuel's evangelists. Woodruff was eager to demonstrate ethanol's value to him, showing how his Caravan accelerated with ease with a quick trip up the street and back. The mileage drops slightly, but not the power, he said.

"It's not 60-cents-a-gallon different," Woodruff added, beaming.

The van is starting to look like a real bargain now, he said. Woodruff hasn't mentioned that to the fellow who sold it to him, though.

"I haven't ruined his day yet."

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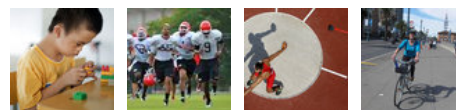
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