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Shields shows support for growing ethanol use

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State Sen. Charlie Shields, R-St. Joseph, made three things clear Thursday: he's not an air-quality expert, not a corn scientist and not U.S. Sen. Jim Talent.

Nonetheless, he sees great promise in federal and state efforts to boost the use of such renewable fuels as ethanol, saying it could make St. Joseph an "alternative fuels capital of the Midwest," help the environment and reduce America's dependence on foreign oil by giving the country an advantage over such growing countries as India and China.

"If we can figure it out and they haven't figured it out, that really sets the stage," he said.

Mr. Shields met with local business and political leaders Thursday to tout Mr. Talent's federal efforts on ethanol, including more availability for 85 percent ethanol fuel and tax credits for its production. However, many of the questions that Mr. Shields fielded focused on a recent fuel standard enacted in Missouri, which will require most fuel to contain 10 percent ethanol by 2008.

Mr. Shields said as more ethanol plants come online to meet the 10 percent mandate, market forces also would drive gas stations to supply more E-85 at the pumps. Randy Reed, the dealership's owner, agreed, noting that sales of E-85 vehicles have risen along with gas prices.

"Stations are not stupid," he said.

Although Mr. Shields spoke in favor of Missouri's ethanol standard, he doubted that a similar mandate would come from the federal government any time soon. "It's a little tougher sell when you get toward the coast and they don't drive by corn fields on the way to work," he said.