

Saturday, August 28, 2004

School buses going 'green'

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Portland public schools will replace three buses in their 32-bus fleet with cleaner vehicles that burn compressed natural gas, beginning in the fall of 2005.

The school department won a \$100,000 federal grant through Maine Clean Communities to help purchase the buses, which cost about \$100,000 apiece. The Maine Department of Education will cover 70 percent of the remaining cost.

"There is money out there from the federal government and we'd like to take advantage of it as much as we can," said Kevin Mallory, transportation director for Portland public schools.

The natural-gas-burning buses will be the first such school buses in the state. They decrease soot emissions by about 90 percent compared to traditional diesel engines, according to Maine Clean Communities.

The buses will look no different from the standard buses in use today. They will be designed to national standards, seating as many as 90 passengers.

The buses will serve elementary through high schools, beginning with the still-unnamed "green" school under construction on Munjoy Hill. The district has not determined which schools will get the other two vehicles.

"Hopefully, with any kind of luck and no tax cap, we'll have the second two in service by the end of 2006," Mallory said.

Proponents say the cost of compressed natural gas is comparable to that of diesel, but the engines require fewer oil changes and have longer-lasting exhaust systems.

And by reducing soot from diesel emissions, alternative fuels can help to reduce respiratory ailments such as asthma.

The school bus delivery will coincide with Metro's initiative to bring 21 natural-gas-burning buses into its fleet over the next three to five years.

The transit authority will fuel and service its own vehicles and the school buses at a \$1 million natural gas facility - funded mostly by the Federal Transit Administration - to be completed on Metro's lot on Valley Street by May 2005.

Metro has secured funding for as many as 10 city buses, to be built by Orion Bus Industries at a cost of about \$345,000 each. Eighty percent of the funding will come from the Federal Transit Administration and the rest will come from state and local budgets.

Portland's first natural-gas-burning city buses are scheduled to be on the streets by October 2005, with the rest to arrive by 2007.

"Anything that improves quality of life in southern Maine, that provides cleaner air, is a win for everybody," said Peter Hefler, the transit district's general manager.

Compressed natural gas has become a popular alternative fuel used by cities and school districts to cut down on diesel emissions, particularly soot.

The U.S. Department of Energy's Web site lists municipalities in Pennsylvania, Maryland, California, New Jersey and Washington with compressed-natural-gas technology in their public transit fleets.

According to the site, school districts in New Jersey, Utah, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania and Maryland have added the alternative fuel buses.

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