TRANSIT TALK

News and Info Bulletin of the Edmonton Trolley Coalition

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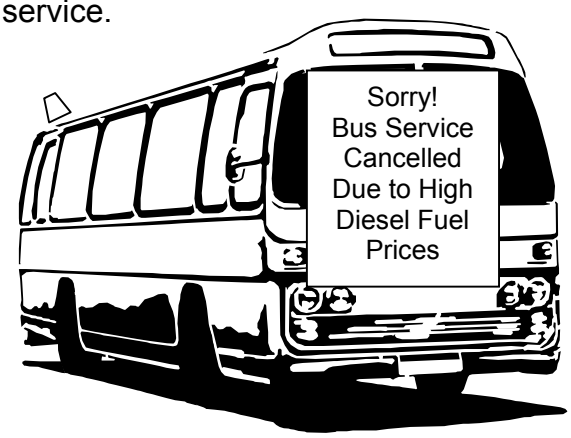
In this Issue:

Rising Diesel Prices take bite out of Transit Service

With world oil prices hitting upwards of the $50 per barrel mark in recent months, the transit industry's heavy dependence on diesel fuel is showing its drawbacks. Large transit agencies like Chicago's CTA and Philadelphia's SEPTA have been grappling for some time with budgetary problems related to the general underfunding of public transit. But that underfunding is now more apparent than ever with U.S. diesel fuel prices rising to over $2.20 per gallon in early October from figures that previously hovered under the $2.00 mark.

Authorities in Penn State's Mon Valley near Pittsburg foresee escalating diesel costs resulting in cuts to transit service across North America, particularly in smaller centers with a limited funding base. Nancy Basile, executive director of the Mon Valley Transit Authority told reporters on October 8th that filling the agency's underground diesel fuel tank that supplies their buses cost about $6,000 in 2003. Now, barely a year later, that same fill costs $10,987.50. "I do not want to cut service", said Basile, explaining how public transit is important to the region's economy. But somehow, transit authorities must cover the difference, and the only alternative to fare hikes for diesel dependent systems is cutting service.

In Providence, Rhode Island, the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) is already showing a $1.9 million operating deficit due mostly to rising diesel prices. RIPTA authorities have proposed to cut about $2 million worth of services over the next six months and terminate the provision of transit service to some parts of the state outside of Providence. Public hearings commenced in September to secure public input on the proposed service cutbacks.



Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority in St. Petersburg, Florida already went over budget last year when petroleum prices rose by some 46 cents per gallon. Each increase of 0.01 per

gallon means another $20,000 per year to the PSTA, according to executive director Roger Sweeney. Fare increases are not under consideration at this time, but the PSTA did not implement the new routes and route extensions planned for this year.

Dayton, Ohio, while also grappling with rising diesel costs, is counting itself fortunate to have a significant portion of its bus fleet running on electricity. As forecast in a study by Booz, Allen and Hamilton a decade ago, electricity prices rise at a much slower rate than petroleum fuels, as power prices in the Ohio heartland are largely dependent on coal prices. U of A professor emeritus Dr. John Bakker warned of the impacts of rising diesel costs on transit service back in March 2004, in a letter to the *Edmonton Journal*. "Sound public policy would be to electrify whatever can be electrified now, starting with urban transit," wrote Bakker.

(Sources: Stephen Scalzo, Valley Independent, St. Petersburg Times, www.turnto10.com/news, Edmonton Journal)

The Wisdom behind
Edmonton City Council's Recent Trolley Directives

Following many months of debate in public forums and before the Transportation and Public Works Committee, Edmonton City Council voted 8 to 5 on July 27th to continue trolley operations pending a review in 2008. The decision encompasses several specific directives:

1) That Edmonton Transit continue to operate trolleys until 2008.
2) That Administration arrange to have a demonstration of low floor trolley and hybrid buses to be utilized within the system for information gathering.
3) That expansion of the trolley fleet to Northgate be considered in the 2006 budget.
4) That a report be provided to Council in 2008 regarding continuation of trolleys based on service levels, environmental concerns in light of the demonstration of low floor trolley and hybrid buses and other options.
5) That Administration continue to look at ways to maximize the cost-benefit of trolleys.

While city administrators claimed savings would result over a ten year period by abandoning the trolley system and tearing down the trolley infrastructure, most Council members who had studied the issue or taken part in the debates seemed to find these arguments either unconvincing or insufficient. A number of points in favour of retaining trolleys were raised at the various debates prior to decision day, but from remarks made by Councillors on July 20th and 27th, the following seemed to resonate with those who supported retention of the trolley system:

☞ diesel bus noise is a problem, particularly in high density core neighborhoods that the city is seeking to revitalize—quality of life has a value in Edmonton

☞ dramatic reductions in diesel tailpipe emissions will not occur until 2007; abandoning trolleys now on the basis of future environmental claims about diesel buses is premature

☞ diesel prices have not been going down, but there were recent drops in electricity rates

☞ new low floor trolleys are available but were not tested; alternative technologies were also not tested

☞ there had been significant recent investment in the trolley system, totaling over $12 million, and including a brand new power substation in Rossdale

☞ if dollars would no longer be invested to maintain the trolley system, those same dollars would be spent to tear it down, hence there were no real savings

☞ administrators had apparently sought a private meeting with the editorial staff of a city newspaper to secure publication of articles in favour of abandoning trolleys

☞ the trolley system had apparently not been used maximally as stipulated by Council's previous directive: the number of trolleys in use at peak times had been reduced from 53 to 37, and the number of scheduled annual trolley kilometers had been reduced from 4 million to 2 million

☞ other cities have made extensions to their trolley systems very recently

☞ trolley buses run successfully in many large urban centers under much more trying conditions than in Edmonton

☞ authorities from other cities had apparently expressed concerns that Edmonton's proposal to abandon trolleys would turn out to be a mistake

On close examination of this issue, it is very apparent why a majority of Councillors felt it was in the best interests of the City of Edmonton to continue with an electric trolley bus system as part of the ETS mainstream transit service. The very recent experience of transit authorities in the United States with soaring diesel fuel prices only serves to reinforce that maintaining a diversified fleet is the best way to secure the flexibility needed to manage change in today's world.

ETC Editorial

by Bob Clark

New Technology for Transit?

More and more we are having the idea thrust upon us that some breakthrough in transit technology is going to lead to an era of cost savings, pollution reduction or whatever, rendering today's technology as redundant as the buggy whip.

While champions of new transit modes no longer tout the impractical monorails and maglevs, the tendency is to baffle our decision-makers with vague promises of hydrogen fuel cells and hybrid vehicles coming within the next year or two. To date, the only thing that hydrogen power has produced is rising prices on the stock market for the section of the auto industry that have propagandized their use. Just like there is "no free lunch", there is no abundant supply of free hydrogen on our earth. And until someone finds some, this technology will not emerge from the experimental stage. The so-called hybrid vehicles—using a diesel engine coupled to an electric drive—are little more than a ruse to keep the same diesel engine manufacturers in business, making the same health destroying products, and using the same sales methods to maintain city transit in an on-going state of ineffectuality.

Those who are in charge of our decision-making are often led astray by such propagandists (the Kings New Clothes syndrome), and lose the vision of substantial long-term investment and improvement, such as LRT, a mode proven to attract people out of their cars. If they can be made to believe a cheap method of improvement is on its way, they naturally will seek to justify the status quo, go to the lowest common denominator, the diesel bus, and leave transit right where it is – a means of last resort for the poor and disadvantaged.

Fire at Fuel Cell Plant sounds Alarm Bells

Fuel cells, discovered back in the 1830's, have been heralded by some as the way of the future. The cells use hydrogen gas and convert it to electricity, which can then be used to run lights and appliances or, in the case of vehicles, propel an electric motor. Much recent research has involved transit buses.

Although fuel cells have come along way in terms of research and development, the one obstacle usually identified as standing in the way of widespread implementation is the fact that a ready-made supply of hydrogen gas does not exist. Hydrogen has to be made, and the process of doing so is costly and not terribly energy efficient. But an August 6th incident at a fuel cell plant in Burnaby, B.C. brings another obstacle to light, namely that of concerns over public safety, in particular if hydrogen fuel cells are ever to be used in public transport applications.

The incident at Ballard Power Systems occurred when a tanker truck carrying compressed hydrogen caught fire as it was preparing to offload its fuel supply into the Ballard storage facility. At noon the next day, a one square kilometre area around the facility still remained closed to public access as emergency crews, flown in from south of the border, worked to bring the situation under control.

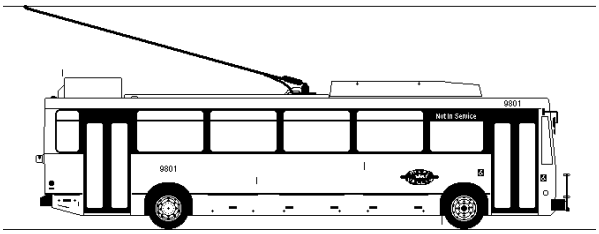
Hydrogen is known for its volatility. In 1937, a hydrogen powered vessel, the airship Hindenburg, caught fire over Lakehurst, New Jersey, resulting in 36 deaths. The incident brought an end to the consideration of hydrogen as a transport fuel for some fifty years.

(Source: Transit Vancouver News)

The fiery crash of the Hindenburg on May 6, 1937 ended the use of hydrogen as a transport fuel for fifty years. Can we really be sure it is safe to run transit buses on hydrogen?

Modern Low Floor Electric Trolley Buses offer:

- ZERO in-street emissions
- LOWEST noise levels of any transit vehicle
- FREEDOM from total dependence on world oil markets
- Reduced vehicle MAINTENANCE
- EASY ACCESS for persons with mobility challenges
- Route STABILITY
- QUALITY of life for our core communities
- Better customer attraction and increased RIDERSHIP



Vancouver has 228 new Canadian-built Low Floor Trolley Buses on order ! Shouldn't we?

Concerns about public transit? Here's how to have your voice heard:

Your **City Councillor** or the **Mayor** are available to hear your concerns.

You may also contact the **Citizens Action Centre** at 496-8200, by fax at 496-8210 or by electronic mail at cacentre@edmonton.ca.

Edmonton Transit System Concerns and Commendations handles concerns about operators, routes, schedules, etc. They can be contacted at 496-8900.