



With an eye on costs and the environment, Hernando to test propane school bus



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Thursday, August 30, 2012 4:30pm

BROOKSVILLE — Joseph Handzus knelt behind the school bus and ran his fingers around the edge of the tailpipe. Then he looked down at his hand.

No residue, no grime — not even after 40,000 miles on the road.

"There's no particles," said Handzus, fleet manager for the Hernando County School District.

He moved to the next bus at the district garage and did the same thing. His fingers were coated with a thick black layer.

The difference? The first bus runs on propane.

These buses might be the future of transportation across Hernando.

Touting cost savings, environmental advantages and American pedigree, school district transportation officials hope to see propane-powered buses joining their fleet of diesel vehicles in the coming years.

"We do have a responsibility to try, if the technology is there, to use the resources . . ." said transportation director Douglas Compton. "I think it's only right that we look at . . . what we can do for future generations."

The district would like to buy between 20 and 30 new buses next year to make up for a lack of purchases in recent years, Compton said.

He hopes they will be propane.

"I don't know how you can't," he said. "I think the technology is there. I think it's there now. It's proven. Districts all over the country have them. It's ready."

Propane-powered buses, though in their infancy, are gaining in popularity.

At least 2,000 are on the roads across the country now, with large school districts in Portland, Ore., Los Angeles and Dallas recently investing in them.

Florida's use of propane buses is just beginning.

The Indian River County School District was the first to invest in the buses in 2009 and has the only ones on the road today in the state.

Indian River has since bought 11 more for this school year after seeing numerous environmental, cost and health

benefits, said transportation director George Millar.

"There has been a significant savings," Millar said.

Propane is cheaper. It burns cleaner, and the buses require less maintenance, he said. The buses are also quieter and rattle less, which might have safety benefits.

The only downside: The buses get fewer miles per gallon than diesel.

Others districts across Florida are expected to join in soon.

Alachua County has ordered three buses. Seminole, Volusia and Broward have all expressed interest.

And now Hernando.

The district this week began test-driving a loaned propane bus on a Weeki Wachee High School route.

The bus will go on a few runs before being put on display Wednesday at the high school for students in the environmental studies program.

The bus looks like any other on Hernando roads, except it's a little bit newer and brighter. Under the hood, no one but a mechanic would likely see a difference.

The sound is a different story. Whereas a diesel engine runs so loud it shakes the mirrors, this one is comparatively silent.

The cost savings could be significant. Propane tend to be about half the price of diesel.

Compton estimates the district could see about \$5,000 in savings per bus per year. That would be enough to make up the additional cost of the bus over a diesel bus in one year, he said.

The buses would save about \$75,000 over their life expectancy if the difference in propane and diesel stayed the same, he said.

Propane is also greener than diesel, emitting fewer greenhouse gases, fewer hydrocarbons and less particulate matter, according to data from the Propane Education & Research Council.

sParticle pollution exposure has been linked to a variety of respiratory problems, said Gregg Walker, a spokesman for the organization.

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