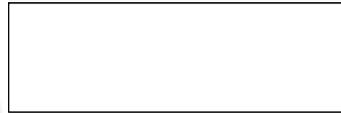


PALATKA DAILY NEWS



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School system finds propane power passes the test

by Pete Skiba

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The wave of the future just pulled into the school bus garage and it is powered by propane gas.

The Putnam County School District officially took delivery of three liquid-propane-burning buses with V-10 engines at 2 p.m. Thursday.

"I need a whole fleet of these buses, but I don't have the money," said School Superintendent Phyllis Criswell. "They are cleaner and cheaper than diesel."

The 47-seat buses cost about \$3,500 more than diesels because of the propane Ford/Roush engines. Florida law provides that about half the higher cost can be recaptured as a rebate from the state.

The rebate focuses on another benefit of propane power, said Steve Murphy from Florida Transportation Systems Inc. He added, "Propane autogas buses produce near zero emissions, creating a cleaner environment around the schools."

There is a greater return on investment with the new buses, Murphy said. "Even without the subsidy, in seven months, the cost savings are outstanding."

Rattling off the savings, Murphy said diesel fuel costs a bus between 45 cents to 52 cents a mile. The new propane-fuel buses cost between 20 cents and 30 cents a mile.

"That's going green," said Wanda Forrest, of the North Florida Clean Fuels Coalition, to Criswell. "You are a step ahead of the rest of Florida."

Not only does propane cost less and burn much cleaner, Murphy said, 93 percent of the fuel is made in the United States.

Two staff members, present and former transportation directors Rodney Symonds and Danny Hood, looked around for alternates to diesel and brought the propane-bus proposal to Criswell.

Hands-on Coordinator of Vehicle Service Gary McClellan jumped on board and said he was for the transition.

"We expect to see good savings from the buses," McClellan said. "I think they'll really work out for us."

Hood dropped into the driver's seat and noted that the engine would run quiet, very quiet, compared to diesel engines. He compared starting the engine to a home backyard gas grill and a computer.

"Turn on the gas first to let a little gas into the engine," Hood said. "Then start it. It boots up just like a computer."

Not to forget the young passengers, Murphy pointed out the safety railing and roof features on the bus. Then with school board member C.L. Overturf on board, the group took off for a ride to see how the bus felt to passengers.

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