

Bought for \$17 million, buses now sit unused

TransLink was ordered to buy fleet but says it costs too much to operate

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After spending \$17 million on new natural gas-powered buses, TransLink is going back to the old diesels -- because they're cheaper.

A \$17.4-million fleet of environmentally friendlier buses that run on natural gas is sitting idle at a Coquitlam transit yard because diesel buses that produce more pollution are cheaper to run.

TransLink spokesman Ken Hardie told BCTV-Global News on Friday the 50 buses are off the road because they are more than 25 per cent more expensive to operate and are in for service twice as often as the dirtier diesel buses.

"If you are going to maintain a certain level of service using natural gas buses, you actually have to have more [buses] in reserve than you would spare diesel buses," Hardie confirmed in a later interview with The Vancouver Sun.

"For TransLink, we gave the Coast Mountain Bus Company the directive that they were to operate the bus fleet in as cost-effective a way as possible, and Coast Mountain said, that being the case, we should not use the natural gas fleet because they are more costly to operate, they are not as reliable and they also carry fewer passengers per vehicle."

He said the expected savings from using diesel buses instead of the natural gas vehicles are expected to be between \$600,000 and \$1 million a year.

Hardie said a combination of the reduced levels of bus service that went into effect in the fall of 2001, combined with 200 new diesel buses purchased in 1999, made the natural gas-powered buses superfluous.

He said the purchase of the buses, which cost about \$347,000 each and were delivered in two batches of 25 in the mid and late 1990s, was a politically motivated decision by the former New Democratic Party government.

"The interest in the environmental attributes of these things was very high, that was one of the values of that government. They wanted to demonstrate an environmental concern."

When the fleet of natural-gas buses was launched with great fanfare on Nov. 21, 1995, then Employment and Investment Minister Glen Clark said diesel buses would not be purchased as long as the NDP was in government.

Hardie denied, however, that TransLink was turning its back on environmental concerns. He said the natural gas buses produce twice the amount of polluting carbon monoxide, although they emit less carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas attributed to global

warming, as well as less particulate matter and oxides of nitrogen, which are associated with heart and lung disease.

He also said TransLink is committed to updating its much older, zero-emission trolley bus fleet, by purchasing at least 244 of the \$1 million electric buses.

However, Hardie admitted there is an environmental cost to running the diesel buses.

"It's something that we have to balance because part of TransLink's mandate is to support the air quality objectives of the GVRD," he said. "Clearly, when we're in the position where we have to run diesel, that causes us some difficulty."

Gerry Scott, director of the environmentalist David Suzuki Foundation's climate change campaign, said he was disappointed by the move away from what he called a cleaner technology.

"I would say this is a step in the wrong direction," he said. "Unfortunately, and as always, the atmosphere is seen as a free dumping ground. If there's more pollution, that doesn't factor into the costing. The pollution is seen as a free opportunity."

"Diesel is increasingly a problem on most accounts. I think TransLink and all the public agencies involved in transport have to start looking very, very hard for a significant movement towards cleaner fuels."

A government study commissioned before the buses were purchased found natural gas buses released about one-tenth as many of the fine particles that trigger heart and asthma attacks.

As well, a 1994 bulletin from then-provincial health officer Dr. John Millar said particulates from combustion are the single greatest air-pollution problem in B.C.

"Operators of urban diesel fleets of all kinds should consider replacing or retrofitting existing fleets of commercial diesel vehicles to run on natural gas," the bulletin read.

Surrey Mayor and new TransLink chair Doug McCallum said he supported the decision to mothball the gas buses.

"When you look at all those reasons for it, then I think it's a prudent move to just hold them back for a while until we look at whether we'll need them in the future," he said.

Hardie said the buses will go back into service one day because that is a less-expensive option than junking them.

McCallum also suggested the buses may be converted to diesel power, which he said could be done easily.