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DART moving quickly to build alternatively fueled bus fleet

Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) is introducing 268 new clean-running buses this year -- part of a four-year plan to build one of the most modern and environmentally-friendly bus fleets in the industry.

In April, DART debuted the first of its RTS 40-foot Wide Front Door transit buses from Nova BUS of Roswell, NM. The agency is purchasing 488 of these buses over the next four years. At least 200 will operate on liquefied natural gas (LNG). This year's mix of new buses includes 140 LNG-fueled buses, 108 clean diesel buses and in addition, 20 streetcar-style buses powered by compressed natural gas (CNG).

DART Vice President of Maintenance Mike Hubbell describes LNG as "one of the foremost fuels of the future. In learning to use it now, we're getting ahead of the curve." But the presence of both technologies is a plus, he feels. "Cleaner-burning diesel engines are a proven technology, while LNG is fast approaching this same level of reliability. This fleet mix assures reliability while exceeding Environmental Protection Agency emission standards. Our LNG vehicles are among the first heavy duty transit buses in the country to be certified as Ultra Low Emission Vehicles by the EPA."

The dual natural gas/diesel purchase provides the rare chance for a comparison study of the cost effectiveness and reliability of both fuels using otherwise identical vehicles. This will be conducted later this year by Batelle Laboratories of Columbus, OH and the University of West Virginia with results presented to the U.S. Department of Energy.

"This study has industry-wide implications," said Hubbell. "It should go a long way toward resolving the debate over which fuel is superior, and our future procurements would certainly be influenced by the conclusions of the study."

"DART has made a major commitment to alternative fuels, first with Compressed Natural Gas, then electricity with its enormously successful light rail system, and now LNG," said Stan Taylor, manager of engineering and construction for Lone Star Energy Company of Dallas, which installed DART's first LNG tanks in October 1997 and will supply more than 16 million gallons of LNG to the agency over the next five years.

Two 30,000-gallon LNG tanks are now operational, and two additional tanks of 20,000-gallon capacity each will be in place when a new bus facility opens in Dallas' southern sector in 1999.

One of the largest single orders in Nova BUS history -- an order which coincidentally included the 20,000th bus in the RTS series -- the DART purchase earned a thumbs up from the project's major partners.

Clark Ahrens, director of Worldwide Bus Business for Cummins, the engine supplier for the DART buses is proud to be a part of the project. "The partnering-type environment being embraced by DART and the supply base is truly a blueprint for success," he said.

"DART did a great job in evaluating the product," added Ron Geiger, regional sales manager for Nova BUS. "We feel we have the best bus, value-wise, in North America, and DART obviously agreed."

DART maintenance personnel have gone back to the classroom in preparation for the new fleet. They are learning about the new LNG technology on a unique training bus equipped with transparent floors and sides. A fully operational vehicle, this "glass bottom bus" provides full view of fuel tanks and other working components in action and is said to be the only bus of its kind in the industry.

Other new Nova BUS features offer their own special challenge to mechanics. These include on-board security cameras, electronic engine control, internal/external announcing systems and advanced wheelchair lifts. "Our guys have spent more than 20,000 hours training on these new buses, while at the same time keeping our existing fleet performing safely and dependably," he said. "They've done a yeoman's job."

Also joining the DART fleet this year are 20 Cummins CNG-powered streetcar-style buses built by Chance Coach Company, Wichita, KS. The 30-footers will be used on downtown and neighborhood circulator routes and special charters. They join 200 paratransit vans, plus DART's non-revenue cars and trucks, already equipped for CNG operation.

"With their unique appearance, these buses will definitely fill a need," Hubbell said, "by attracting the casual rider. Any system can benefit from that."

Hubbell expects the new additions to re-energize an over-worked fleet which has labored beyond its prime during DART's rail development. "For a number of years, the emphasis around here has been on rail, and we have a world-class system to show for it. Now it's time for our buses to get some attention," he said.

The introduction of the new buses is part of a major agency-wide commitment to bus service. In recent months, DART has reversed a six-year decline in bus ridership, posting a nearly five percent increase in ridership over the past year. Building on that momentum, the agency recently carried out its largest-ever bus service change, introducing a customer-friendly number-only route identification

system, increasing service frequency, changing schedules to accommodate more riders on nights and weekends, and expanding crosstown routes outside of downtown Dallas.

Hubbell summarized all the recent bus-related activity at DART this way: "No matter how vast or varied a transit property may be, if you don't have a quality bus operation as the core, you're not going anywhere."