

# Bus & Motorcoach NEWS

WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE BUS INDUSTRY

## 100% fuel-tax exemption? More operators are claiming it

WASHINGTON — An apparently growing number of motorcoach operators are filing tax returns that claim the charter work they perform for schools and government units is 100 percent exempt from federal fuel taxes.

Years ago, Congress exempted motorcoach companies from 17 cents of the 24.4-cents-per-gallon

federal excise tax on diesel fuel, but some operators say IRS rules also allow full exemption from federal fuel taxes for trips performed for nonprofit educational organizations and for state and local governments.

A Florida-based operator reports that during a recent IRS audit, the auditor asked him why

he was not claiming a fuel-tax exemption for the charter work he was doing for schools and government agencies.

The operator was dumbfounded, saying he was unaware of any deduction beyond the 17 cents a gallon he routinely claimed for the fuel burned by his full-size coaches.

Norm Littler, senior vice presi-

dent of government and industry relations at the United Motorcoach Association, says he has talked to other operators in recent days who are claiming the fuel-tax exemption for school and government charter work, and the operators have told him they called the IRS and were told the exemption applies.

“The IRS is indicating to these

operators that any work conducted that meets these definitions is fully exempt from the federal fuel tax,” said Littler.

“If this is true, operators can also file amended returns claiming refunds for the past three years. It would be prudent, though, to use the IFTA mileage/fuel fleet average as criteria for the exemption,” Littler added.

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## Annette Sandberg quits as top FMCSA official

WASHINGTON — The Bush Administration is seeking a new administrator for Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, following the abrupt resignation of Annette Sandberg, who was only the second head of the six-year-old agency that oversees commercial bus and truck safety.

Sandberg unexpectedly quit last month. Her last day on the job is March 1.

In her resignation letter to President Bush, Sandberg wrote: “During my three-year tenure, we have made significant strides in improving commercial motor vehicle safety and security on our nation’s highways.

“In this time, we have reduced the agency’s regulatory backlog by

(more than) 68 percent and provided additional enforcement status at the local, state and federal level, resulting in the lowest large truck fatality rate since the collection of data began in 1975.”

Sandberg’s letter gave no reason for her resignation, nor did she say where she would be working — if anywhere.

Much of Sandberg’s time at the FMCSA has been devoted to trying to come up with revised hours-of-service rules for truckers that would be acceptable to all segments of the industry, as well as safety advocates. In that regard, she had mixed success.

Her first attempt to overhaul the hours’ rules for truckers, in early 2003, was shot down by the



Annette Sandberg

Washington D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, leading to another set of rules issued last October.

Two aspects of those rules have been challenged in court by the Owner-Operators Independent Drivers Association. And it is believed that Public Citizen and other safety groups may file their own suits, pending FMCSA’s response to the independent truckers’ petition.

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## Texas charter bus owner indicted

MC ALLEN, Texas — Not surprisingly, the federal government has decided to make an example of the owner of a small charter bus company whose motorcoach caught fire and killed 23 nursing home residents as they were fleeing Hurricane Rita last September.

James H. “Butch” Maples, a former NFL player who operated Global Limo Inc. of Parr in south Texas, has been criminally indicted

for conspiring to falsify driver records, failure to inspect and maintain his buses, and failure to require his drivers to complete inspection reports.

If convicted on all charges, Maples could face up to seven years in federal prison and up to \$450,000 in fines. His company could be fined as much as \$900,000.

Maples pleaded not guilty last month when the charges were read,

and his attorney said the government was blaming Maples for “something that was really completely out of his control.”

Lawyer Charles Banker of McAllen, said his client would mount an aggressive defense. “I think it’s really a weak attempt to try and pull Mr. Maples into being involved in some type of criminal activity.”

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## Cat to offer automatic to motorcoach sector; Allison seeks an Edge

For years, picking the transmission for a new motorcoach was a no-brainer. Allison was essentially the one — and only — choice.

That changed just over two years ago when the ZF AS-Tronic was introduced to the industry. Today, four-in-10 seated coaches are ordered with AS-Tronics; sometimes the ratio creeps higher.

Now, coach buyers are about to get another choice with Caterpillar confirming it intends to begin offering its new CX31-model automatic transmission to the over-the-road bus industry.

And, if that weren’t enough, Allison is making a strong push to hold onto market share by introducing a brand-new program — called Allison Edge — that offers manufacturers discounted prices to encourage them to sell more Allison transmissions to their customers.

Motor Coach Industries has become the first North American coach builder to enroll in the Allison incentive program, which provides customers increased warranty protection, reduced routine maintenance costs, and greater flexibility in horsepower and torque ratings.

The Allison program is so new

that not all manufacturers supplying coaches to the North American market have been briefed about the program or had time to evaluate it.

Key executives at Prevost Car, Setra of North America, and Van Hool and its distributor, ABC Companies, are studying the program and are expected to decide within the next 30 to 60 days whether they will participate — and the extent of their participation.

Blue Bird Corp. has announced it will participate but only for its school buses and luxury recreational vehicles, which are marketed under the Wanderlodge brand name. The program will not be available for Blue Bird over-the-road buses, the Express 4500 and Express 4000.

Blue Bird made the strategic decision to participate in the program — at its highest level — for its school buses and RVs. That means it will make Allison the exclusive transmission offered in all Blue Bird school and school-activity buses and Wanderlodges.

By doing that, Blue Bird will be able to buy Allison transmissions for its school buses and RVs at a significantly discounted price.

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# Industry assessment by ABA offers positive outlook

NASHVILLE — Bolstered by increased travel and new federal initiatives, most U.S. motorcoach companies can expect good things to happen this year.

And, for those operators with a little daring and willingness to look beyond traditional tour busi-

ness, things could even be better.

That's the assessment of the American Bus Association in its annual state of the motorcoach industry report that was released last month at the trade group's Marketplace 2006 here.

Noting that most operators

grew last year, with travel brisk to such perennial favorites as New York City and Branson, Mo., and new hot spots like Brandywine, Pa., and Traverse City, Mich., the report said more of the same is likely this year.

"That trend is expected to con-

tinue as more and more companies look to expand their itineraries and provide products that appeal to a broad range of consumers," stressed the report.

Passage by Congress of the massive, five-year highway and public transportation law, known

as SAFETEA-LU (Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users), that included \$500 million in federal money for programs with a motorcoach industry component, bodes well for the bus

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## Hampton Jitney purchases Long Island bus company

SOUTHAMPTON, N.Y. — Hampton Jitney Inc. has purchased the assets of Sunrise Coach Lines of Greenport, N.Y., making "the Jitney" the dominate coach operator on eastern Long Island.

Hampton Jitney and Sunrise are long-time providers of commuter bus service on opposite sides of far-eastern Long Island.

Hampton Jitney carries so-called South Fork commuters from the Hamptons area of Long Island into New York City, while Sunrise transports commuters from Greenport and the North Fork area into the city.

"We are excited to serve the North Fork and believe we can build upon the excellent foundation of service Sunrise has delivered since 1937," said Geoffrey Lynch, president of Hampton Jitney, which has been around for more than 30 years.

Late last month, Hampton Jitney took over Sunrise routes, and began serving the company's tour-and-charter clients.

After Sunrise's owner, Robert Brown, died last year, his widow, Christa, ran the family business. "The sale is bittersweet for us," she said in announcing the sale. "But we know we are selling our fleet to a company that holds similar values to ours — a family business that cares about the community it serves."

The acquisition included Sunrise's fleet of 14 Prevost coaches and one midsize bus. Sunrise's Greenport location is being closed and all buses moved to Hampton Jitney's base in Southampton.

The Sunrise brand also will eventually give way to the Hampton Jitney name.

More than 40 Sunrise employees were laid off as a result of the purchase, but all who were interested were interviewed by Hampton Jitney and some were hired.

The purchase increases the Hampton Jitney fleet to more than 40 motorcoaches, making it one of the area's largest coach operations.

## Trans-Bridge Lines names new generation of leaders

BETHLEHEM, Pa. — Trans-Bridge Lines, a 65-year-old family owned line-run and tour and charter operator, has transitioned to a new generation of top management.

Thomas G. JeBran has succeeded his father, James J. JeBran, as president of Trans-Bridge Lines, while James A. JeBran has been named president of an affiliate company, Delaware River Coach Lines, also succeeding his father James.

James A. JeBran also becomes executive vice president and treasurer of Trans-Bridge Lines.

James J. JeBran, who has been president of the Trans-Bridge companies for the past 16 years, becomes chairman of the operation.

Both Tom and James A. JeBran have worked full-time for the company for 25 years, and were part-time employees while they were getting their educations.

Tom JeBran is president of the Greater New Jersey Motorcoach Association and serves on the board of governors of the Greater

Lehigh Valley (Pa.) Valley Chamber of Commerce.

James A. JeBran is vice chairman of the Pennsylvania Bus Association.

The JeBran brothers represent the fourth generation of family ownership and management of the company that was founded in 1941.

"Camille (JeBran) and I are proud that our sons have become the fourth president of each company," said James J. JeBran.

Trans-Bridge Lines operates a fleet of 66 motorcoaches and 4 midsize transit buses. It offers daily commuter service to New York City, Wall Street, Newark and JFK Airports and many points in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. It also offers charter service.

Affiliate company Delaware River Coach Lines is a contract carrier for New Jersey Transit, providing daily service between Easton, Pa., and Phillipsburg, N.J. Another business unit, Lehigh Valley Motorcoach, also provides line-haul service.

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# THE DOCKET

## No seat belts, feds say (again)

DALLAS — The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is sticking to its long-held belief that seat belts are not needed in over-the-road buses.

A NHTSA spokesman has told a Dallas newspaper that the federal agency has not been swayed by a huge damage award granted late last year in a Texas court by a jury that said buses should be required to have seatbelts. (See Nov. 15 *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

Rae Tyson, director of media

relations at the NHTSA, said the agency is aware of the Texas jury verdict, but has no plans to alter its position on safety belts in commercial buses.

"Given the overall safety record of motorcoaches and school buses, I think the approach has generally worked," Tyson told the *Dallas Morning News*. Tyson added, however, that there was nothing to prevent bus makers from acting voluntarily.

For a variety of reasons, bus

manufacturers have long resisted installing safety belts. The reasons range from doubts about their overall effectiveness, to NHTSA's refusal to conduct crash tests necessary to establish uniform seat belt standards, to cost, to operator resistance.

Another federal agency (with no regulatory power), the National Transportation Safety Board, which investigates fatal bus crashes, has pushed NHTSA to research or require installation of safety belts for decades.

## Judge halts W.Va. toll hike

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — A circuit judge has blocked the West Virginia Turnpike from collecting any more of the higher toll rates that the turnpike governing agency approved late last year.

Judge Irene Berger granted a temporary injunction sought by businesses that use the 88-mile toll road between Charleston and Princeton. In her ruling, Judge Berger said the public did not receive sufficient notice when the hikes were proposed.

The state Parkways, Economic Development and Tourism Authority voted to hike toll rates at its December meeting. Taking effect Jan. 1, the new rates increased tolls for three-axle motorcoaches from \$2.75 to \$4.50 at each of the turnpike's three mainline toll plazas. Autos went from \$1.25 to \$2 per toll booth. (See Jan. 15 *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

"People were unaware of the sign of what would happen on Dec. 14," said Anthony Veneri, a lawyer

for the businesses. "No one knew, apparently, that they were going to discuss a toll increase."

After the ruling, turnpike officials rolled the roadway's toll rates back to their December 2005 levels.

Outrage over the rate hikes also fueled several pending measures in the state legislature. A Senate bill would rescind the increases. One in the House would allow rate changes only after public hearings in each county the turnpike runs through.

## USDOT seeks \$65.6 billion for '07

### Alternatives to fuel-taxes will be investigated

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Transportation has submitted a fiscal 2007 budget request that is only slight higher than this year's total and includes money to investigate alternatives to the fuel tax to pay for highway construction and maintenance.

USDOT Secretary Norman Mineta unveiled the \$65.6 billion request that asks for record

amounts for highway, transit and safety programs.

The USDOT budget for fiscal 2006 is \$65.5 billion.

Included in the '07 request is \$100 million for a pilot program to determine the viability of alternatives to the tax on diesel fuel and gasoline for financing highways and reducing congestion.

The proposal calls for partnerships with up to five states to consider such fuel-tax alternatives as fees, tolls and other approaches to raise revenue and at the same time reduce traffic on congested roads.

The budget proposal would fully fund the highway law passed last year, known as SAFETEA-LU, at nearly \$50 billion for transit, highways and safety programs, a \$3.3 billion increase over 2006, DOT said.

The 8.5 percent in highway spending is the largest single line-item in the transportation budget.

Mineta said that 25 percent of the proposed budget request will pay for safety initiatives.

Proposed cuts include reducing subsidies to Amtrak and to some airport construction programs.

## Study lists worst U.S. bottlenecks

WASHINGTON — A study prepared for the Federal Highway Administration has identified the work bottlenecks on U.S. highways.

The study, conducted by Cambridge Systematics in association with the Battelle Memorial Institute, estimates the bottlenecks are costing commercial vehicle operators billions of dollars annually and hundreds of millions of hours of wasted time.

Here are the top 15 inter-

change bottlenecks identified in the study:

- I-90 at I-290 in Buffalo, N.Y.
- I-285 at I-85 in Atlanta
- I-17 at I-10 in Phoenix
- I-90/94 at I-290 in Chicago
- The San Bernardino Freeway in Los Angeles
- I-94 (Dan Ryan Expressway)/I-90 Skyway Split in Chicago
- I-285 at I-75 in Atlanta
- SR134 at SR2 in Los Angeles
- I-77 at Tryon Road in Charlotte, N.C.

- Long Beach Freeway in Los Angeles

- I-20 at I-285 in Atlanta
- I-80/I-94 Split in Chicago
- SR 60 at I-605 in Los Angeles
- Pulaski Road at I-55 in Chicago
- I-75 at I-85 in Atlanta

Bottlenecks account for 40 percent of vehicle delays, with the balance caused by construction work zones, crashes, breakdowns, bad weather and poor signal timing, the study said.

## Operators are urged to provide examples of transit violations

WASHINGTON — Leaders of 14 trade associations that represent bus, motorcoach, school bus, taxicab, shuttle and limousine operators are gearing up for a federal rulemaking that's expected to have profound implications for thousands of private operators who face or fear competition from their local public transit agency.

A provision in the five-year federal highway and public transportation act that President Bush signed into law last August, directs the U.S. Department of Transportation to complete a negotiated rulemaking to look at potential changes to federal charter bus service rules.

March 2nd is the deadline for interested parties to submit comments to the Federal Transit Administration, which has responsibility for coordinating the rulemaking and crafting the regulations expected to be developed during the process.

The FTA has issued a public notice saying it would like to convene the first two-day rulemaking session next month, but a date has not been announced. Two more two-day sessions are expected to take place.

One of the associations with a strong interest in the rulemaking is the California Bus Association, which will send its president, Mike Waters of CUSA, and its consultant, Jim Seal, to the rulemaking sessions in Washington. To pay for their expenses, CBA members are being asked to pay a special assessment.

California bus operators have faced transit competition for charter business for years. Two of the prime movers for gutting the federal charter service regulations operate in California, Monterey Salinas Transit and Santa Monica Municipal Bus Lines.

CBA fears California public transit agencies will pack the rulemaking sessions and be strongly represented on the group that negotiates for transits during the process.

Specifically, the Washington rulemaking sessions will consider allowing public transit agencies to provide charter bus service to local nonprofit organizations and government units. The rulemaking

also will consider whether there are "unmet needs" for passenger ground transportation that transit systems should have wide latitude in meeting.

Currently, transit agencies receiving assistance from the Federal Transit Administration are not supposed to provide charter bus service using equipment or facilities funded by FTA, unless there are no private charter operators willing and able to provide the service.

The purpose of these rules is to assure that federally subsidized assets, such as buses owned by public transit agencies, do not unfairly compete with private transportation companies.

Prior to passage of the latest highway bill it was difficult for the FTA to enforce federal charter service rules when there were violations. The new law gives the FTA flexibility in imposing penalties and directs the agency to initiate the negotiated rulemaking process on the implementation of the flexibility.

A negotiated rulemaking is a formal process, which emerged in the 1980s, as an alternative to traditional procedures for drafting proposed regulations. The idea behind the process is that in certain situations it is possible to bring together representatives of an agency and the various interest groups to negotiate the text of a proposed rule.

During the past two years, the coalition of 14 associations representing private passenger transportation providers worked with Congress and the American Public Transportation Association, which represents public transit agencies, to come up with the agreement that led to the negotiated rulemaking.

Members of the coalition include the United Motorcoach Association; National School Transportation Association; Airport Ground Transportation Association; Alabama Motorcoach Association; American Bus Association; American Transit Services Council; California Bus Association; International Motorcoach Group; Ohio Taxicab and Livery Association; Pennsylvania Taxicab and Paratransit Association; Taxicab, Limousine and Paratransit

# Groups seek Congress' nod for School Bus Safety Week

WASHINGTON — There was a time when Congress would “designate” certain days or weeks for special recognition as easily as it would spend \$100 million of taxpayer money.

Congress still spends taxes like it was Monopoly money, but it no longer hands out designations willy-nilly. Today, it takes enormous effort to get a resolution containing a special designation through Congress.

Consequently, the value of such designations has increased substantially.

The National School Transportation Association, along with other groups involved in pupil transportation, is leading a drive to have the U.S. House of Representatives adopt a resolution supporting the goals and ideals of School Bus Safety Week.

Held the third week of October each year, School Bus Safety Week is celebrated in more than 40

states and supported by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

NSTA and the other national school bus associations are seeking Congress' imprimatur for School Bus Safety Week as part of an effort to enhance awareness of school bus safety and build further support for the goal of improving

pupil transportation safety.

The association is asking its members and others to contact their representative in the House and ask him or her to join onto the bill as a co-sponsor.

The resolution is House Resolution 498 and it was introduced by Rep. John J. Duncan, R-Tenn.

“In order for the (House) com-

mittee to act on the resolution, we must have at least 50 co-sponsors,” said Becky Bentson Weber of the Washington public affairs firm of BKS and Associates.

NTSA has posted a draft letter and a list of representatives on its Web site to assist in the effort. Go to the Legislative Action Center at [www.yellowbuses.org](http://www.yellowbuses.org).

## Biodiesel back fueling buses in Minnesota

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The temporary suspension of sales of biodiesel fuel in Minnesota quietly ended last month.

The end of the 49-day suspension of Minnesota's law requiring that all diesel fuel sold in the state contain 2 percent biodiesel was described by state officials as “seamless.” The biodiesel now being distributed is “high-quality, trouble-free fuel,” said Edward Garvey, a spokesman for the Minnesota Department of Commerce.

The suspension was intended to give biodiesel producers time to “ensure that quality assurance measures are in place” and to “get out-of-spec product out of the supply chain,” said Bruce Gordon, another department spokesman.

The law was suspended in December amid complaints from truckers that it was responsible for fuel filter clogging. (See Jan. 1 and Jan. 15 issues of *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

The state Commerce Department confirmed in January that the state fuel supply was contaminated with biodiesel that did not meet standards set by Minnesota law.

## Transit violations

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Association; Taxicab Paratransit Association of California; Trailways Transportation System, and Virginia Taxicab Association.

Many of these associations have sent out urgent calls to their members, asking for examples of situations where transit agencies have violated federal charter service rules or appear to be in violation of the rules.

This is often referred to as “transit encroachment.”

Private motorcoach and bus operators are strongly encouraged to send any articles or examples of violations to the associations of which they are members.

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## Florida legislators may try again to limit left lane use

Tallahassee, Fla. — When the Florida Legislature reconvenes this month, lawmakers are expected to revisit the issue of limiting the use of far left lanes on highways.

A bill was passed last year but it was vetoed by Gov. Jeb Bush.

The goal of the bill is to reduce the incidence of drivers interfering with the movement of traffic; to reduce road rage and aggressive driving; to reduce the number of crashes caused by road rage, and to increase traffic flow.

The legislation would permit drivers in the left lane only when there is no traffic approaching from behind, when making a left

turn, when avoiding a road hazard, and when exiting the highway.

The legislation would give police officers the authority to ticket drivers who lag in the left lane and who fail to yield to others behind them traveling at a higher speed, even if the lead driver is driving the speed limit.

Road rage often develops when motorists driving the speed limit won't get out of the way of drivers who speed and want to get by them.

If approved and signed into law, the act would apply to all motorists, including bus and truck drivers, operating on state highways with at least two lanes.

## Transits seek charter firms

The following public transit providers have informed the United Motorcoach Association of their intent to provide charter bus service unless willing and able private operators step forward to offer service or to bid on contract opportunities.

UMA urges appropriate operators to take the time to respond to these notices:

**Newport News/Hampton**

**metro area, Va.** Deadline: Feb. 28, 2006. Write to: Carol Russell, Transportation District Commission of Hampton Roads, 3400 Victoria Blvd., Hampton, VA 23661. Phone: (757) 222-6100.

**Grand Haven, Mich.** Deadline: March 16, 2006. Write to: Harbor Transit, City of Grand Haven, 440 N. Ferry St., Grand Haven, MI 49417. Phone: (616) 842-3200.

## Millions asked for emissions cuts

WASHINGTON — The Bush Administration has proposed spending \$49.5 million to fund the Diesel Emission Reduction Act that was passed by Congress in August.

The figure is nearly four times the amount appropriated for federal clean-diesel programs in the current fiscal year.

The Bush budget request proposes combining all diesel-emissions reduction programs, including the Clean School Bus USA Program, the Diesel Truck Retrofit and Fleet Modernization Program, and the Engine Idling Reduction Program, under the Diesel Emission Reduction Act umbrella.

## Anti-idling tax credits are proposed

WASHINGTON — U.S. Rep. Kay Granger, R-Texas, has reintroduced legislation that would provide a tax break to bus and truck operators that buy idle-reduction equipment.

The Idle Reduction Tax Act of 2006, H.R. 4672, proposes a 25 percent tax credit, up to \$1,000, for each such device a fleet buys.

The goal, says Granger, is to reduce both air pollution and fuel consumption.

The act provides for grant funding for privately owned and operated fleets, using more flexible eligibility rules than have been used to fund Clean School Bus USA programs in recent years, which is important to members of the National School Transportation Association.

"As pioneers in the effort to reduce diesel exhaust and protect the health and safety of the children we transport every day, we welcome this new funding to help us continue our work and to expand clean-air efforts to other diesel users," said John Corr, president of the National School Transportation Association.

"While \$50 million is a good start, we will continue to push for the full \$200 million authorized by DERA."

NSTA actively participated in a coalition of more than 200 industry, environmental, labor and public officials that worked with members of Congress to support full funding for the Diesel Emission Reduction Act, which was included in the comprehensive energy legislation enacted last year by the Congress.

Coalition members will work with Congress to assure the funding requested by Bush is included — or increased — in the fiscal 2007 appropriations for EPA.

The idle-reduction equipment specified in the bill must be designed to service essential coach and truck functions, including heat, air conditioning or electricity, that normally are powered by the vehicle's main engine while it is stationary. The credit would be available to all bus and trucking companies.

"These tax credits will help truckers with exorbitant fuel prices while also reducing air pollution,"

Granger said in a statement.

Under the bill, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Secretary of Energy would certify which alternative idling-reduction devices meet appropriate standards to qualify for the tax credit.

Granger introduced similar legislation two years ago (see May 15, 2004, *Bus & Motorcoach News*).

Bill Graves, president of the American Trucking Associations, applauded Granger's bill.

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## Trailways marks key milestones

Members of the Trailways Transportation System are gathering in Scottsdale, Ariz., this month for Trailways' Annual Conference & Meeting. At the same time, they will mark the organization's 70th anniversary.

But while Trailways' 70 years of transportation services is a notable achievement, the past 10 years have been nearly as eventful as any decade in the organization's history.

Ten years ago, Trailways was struggling to find its niche and refocus its nature.

Ten years ago, Trailways was composed of roughly 30 regional line-haul operators.

Ten years ago, Trailways did not allow tour-and-charter operators as members.

How things — and times — have changed.

Today, Trailways is a vibrant, growing network of 68 small, medium and large operators, most of which are mainly in the tour-and-charter business.

Yet, as Trailways has become more inclusive and diverse, it hasn't abandoned the pillars that have sustained it for 70 years — the independence of its members and the commitment to support each other, says Trailways President and CEO Gale Ellsworth.

For the conference and meeting that Ellsworth and her staff are coordinating at the Hilton Scottsdale Resort on March 8-10, Trailways members will attend workshops and meetings, network, participate in an exhibitor showcase, watch demonstrations, plus enjoy receptions, dinners, lunches and golf.

They certainly have much to celebrate — whether it's the last 10 years or the 70 years of longevity.

## Mardi Gras, Harrah's return to New Orleans

NEW ORLEANS — Harrah's New Orleans Casino reopened last month — just in time for the city's annual Mardi Gras celebration that brought back a measure of fun and excitement to the city during the last couple of weeks of February.

"We're back and we're excited," said Anthony Sanfilippo, president of Harrah's central division. "Harrah's is working with government and community leaders, our vendors and other business partners to help the effort to bring tourism back to the city and rebuild the economy."

"Getting the casino back in action was an important step for us and for the region."

New Orleans' first Mardi Gras parades rolled the same day the casino opened and were continuing through Mardi Gras Day, Feb. 28.

More than two-dozen parades were scheduled to roll before month end. They included the Endymion parade on the 25th with Dan Akkroyd and Jim Belushi as grand marshals, Bacchus on Feb. 26 with celebrity monarch Michael Keaton and Proteus on Feb. 27, followed by Orpheus.

The Zulu parade, followed by Rex — the grandest of the parades, and the Elks and Orleanians wrap the festivities up on the 28th.

"New Orleans is open and ready to receive tourists," declared Sanfilippo.

Harrah's New Orleans Casino closed shortly before Hurricane Katrina hit near the city Aug. 29. The building sustained storm damage, and was used by first responders as a base of operations in the days following the storm.

Repairs to the facility and its electronic systems, gaming de-

vices and other infrastructure were needed. About 1,300 employees, many of whom were with Harrah's before the storm, were assembled to staff the complex, which has a 115,000-square-foot gaming floor, more than 2,000 slot machines and upwards of 100 table games.

The casino's restaurants also have reopened, including Besh Steakhouse at Harrah's, an Asian restaurant and sushi bar called Bambu, and the buffet. Also joining the re-opening were the Cafés on Canal, including Fuddrucker's, Starbucks and McAlister's, plus a Gordon Biersch brewery restaurant.

Masquerade, an "ultra lounge," also was reopened.

New to the casino is Party Gras, a themed slot area.

### 'New Orleans is open, ready for tourists'

Meanwhile, work continues on a 450-room, 26-story hotel across Poydras Street from Harrah's. The \$150 million project is slated to open in September.

Two more upscale New Orleans hotels have reopened, the W New Orleans on Poydras St. and the W French Quarter.

More information on Harrah's is available at [www.harrahs.com](http://www.harrahs.com).

### Jazz Fest returns

Organizers of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival have confirmed the dates for the 2006 Jazz Fest, which they say will be the most important in the history of the event.

The first post-Katrina Jazz Fest will be April 28-30 and May 5-7 at its traditional home, the Fair Grounds Race Course.

Among those signed up to perform are Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Keith Urban, the Dave Matthews Band, Lionel Richie and Elvis Costello. Fats Domino, the 1950s rock ion and New Orleans resident who disappeared for a time after Katrina struck, will make his first public appearance since the storm.

Jazz Fest organizers expect this year's event also to be a homecoming party for many New Orleans musicians, festival chefs and craftspeople.

Shell Oil Co. has been signed up as the festival's first-ever "presenting sponsor," helping assure its success. American Express and Tenet Choices Inc. also will be important corporate partners. American Express has committed to help promote other

events to further the economic recovery of New Orleans.

Tickets for Jazz Fest are on sale at [www.nojazzfest.com](http://www.nojazzfest.com) and [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com). Related information is available at [www.nojazzfest.com](http://www.nojazzfest.com).

### N.O. tours resume

Collette Vacations has announced it is reinstating two of its New Orleans and Deep South tours, beginning in the spring.

Collette Vacations, in business since 1918, says it's the first to re-enter the New Orleans marketplace.

J. Stephen Perry, president of the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau, said "we applaud Collette Vacations for stepping to the plate and not only reinstating their tours to

our city, but donating all the profits. Their actions are unparalleled." All profits from Collette's 2006 tours will be donated to the Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund of the American Red Cross.

For information, go to [www.collettevacations.com/view\\_escort.cfm/productID/3275](http://www.collettevacations.com/view_escort.cfm/productID/3275).

### Museum reopens

The New Orleans Museum of Art reopens its doors March 3, with a tribute to the arts called "The HeART of New Orleans."

The opening will be marked by a three-day ArtMart, featuring more than 60 artists. The event will spotlight visual, performing, literary and culinary arts. The activities are free and include music and dance performances, demonstrations, lectures and family activities.

For more information on exhibitions, events and schedules, go to [www.noma.org](http://www.noma.org).

### Shops reopen

The Shops at Canal Place reopened last month.

Situated on the edge of the French Quarter, The Shops at Canal Place is anchored by Saks Fifth Avenue, and includes Gucci, BCBG, Pottery Barn, Williams-Sonoma, White House/Black Market, Adrienne Vittadini, Banana Republic and Brooks Brothers.

### Cemetery tours resume

Historically accurate guided tours of two of New Orleans' most famous cemeteries — St. Louis No. 1 and Lafayette No. 1 — have been resumed by Save Our Cemeteries Inc.

For information, go to [www.saveourcemeteries.org](http://www.saveourcemeteries.org).

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# Cat establishes service network for motorcoaches

MOSSVILLE, Ill. — Caterpillar is substantially beefing up its maintenance services to the motorcoach industry with the designation of Cat Motorcoach Centers across the U.S. and in Canada.

So far, more than 70 Cat-branded dealers have signed onto the program and more are expected to begin delivering enhanced maintenance service to owners of Cat-powered motorcoaches.

All of the service centers offer 24-hour, seven-day-a-week emergency service assistance, while many also will provide chassis repair or service requiring a mobile lift or service pit.

“Cat Motorcoach Center technicians are trained to provide service for engines and the vehicle chassis,” said Tony Kapustka of the bus and specialty vehicle group of Cat’s on-highway engines unit.

“Full-service Cat Motorcoach Centers provide dedicated service bays, a dump station and even the ability to perform or sub-contract interior and exterior repairs,” said Kapustka.

Cat maintains a 24-hour Engine Call Center hotline (877-777-3126) and a Web site (<http://motorcoach.cat.com>) to help coach operators find the nearest Cat Motorcoach Center when

they’re on the road.

At the Web site, look for the small box on the right side that says “Related Links — Motorcoach Centers (brochure).”

“Motorcoach operators expect a high level of service. Dealers enrolled in the Motorcoach Center network are committed to these customers and their business needs,” said Kapustka. “The network of locations that offer this

service is growing fast. Owners whose coaches are powered by Caterpillar engines can travel across North America with confidence that a Cat Motorcoach Center will be there when they need service.”

The Cat Motorcoach Centers are part of the Cat dealer network, meaning they will parts readily available for most repairs and comfortable waiting rooms.

## Transmissions

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Dennis Whitaker, vice president of engineering at Blue Bird, said by becoming “the exclusive school bus partner” of Allison, Blue Bird can provide customers with product ratings and service levels superior to those offered by the competition.

“As our partner in the Allison Edge Program, Blue Bird will have the right transmission packaged, with the right coverage, at the right price for the particular vocational needs of their customers,” added Jim Wanaselja, director, North American marketing sales and service and global business activities at Allison.

MCI is participating in the program at a different level than Blue Bird, meaning it won’t limit customer transmission choices only to Allison. And, the program will be available on all MCI models, including conversion coaches.

MCI also says it will continue to offer the ZF AS-Tronic and Allison B500 at the same price. Plus, MCI is evaluating the Cat CX31 automatic as an additional transmission option.

Still, MCI says the Allison Edge program makes transmission warranty coverage, both standard and extended, more attractive for customers. Under the program, three years of transmission coverage is included in the base price of an Allison. Two additional years coverage is available for purchase either through MCI or an authorized Allison distributor.

Prior to the Edge program, the standard Allison warranty was for two years, with three additional years coverage available for purchase.

The MCI-Allison Edge program officially begins July 1. After that date, coach buyers will automatically receive the Edge program when they buy an MCI coach equipped with an Allison transmission. Whether there will be a retroactive component to the program has not yet been set in concrete.

### Here comes Cat

J.M. ‘Jeff’ Headean, sales manager for the bus and specialty vehicle group at Caterpillar, told *Bus & Motorcoach News* that over-the-road buses “are a great application” for the new Cat CX31 automatic.

“We surveyed OEMs and their customers to find out what they wanted and needed in an automatic transmission, and their answers included improved performance, more power take-off options, and a single source of service,” said Larry Riekert, on-highway manager of the Caterpillar OEM solutions group.

The CX31 is “designed to deliver all of these features, giving North American

motorcoach owners a new choice in automatic transmissions,” added Riekert.

Three of the five companies building motorcoaches for the North American market — MCI, Van Hool and Blue Bird — are considered the most likely prospects for eventually offering the Cat automatic.

Prevost is not expected to offer the Cat transmission for the same reason it does not offer Caterpillar engines as an option. Prevost is owned by Volvo, and Volvo and Cat are very strong competitors in the truck power-train market.

In fact, it is widely anticipated that Prevost will begin making Volvo engines available in its coaches, starting next year or in 2008.

Setra, which is owned by DaimlerChrysler, currently offers its North American coaches only with Allison transmissions and Detroit Diesel engines. Like Setra, Detroit Diesel is owned by DaimlerChrysler.

However, when the reduced-emission diesel engines are introduced next year, Setra intends to make the ZF AS-Tronic available as an option for its customers. Detroit Diesel will remain the only engine available in Setra coaches; there are no plans to introduce Mercedes Benz engines built by Setra’s parent company.

Cat’s CX31 automatic has six forward speeds, same as the Allison B500, with ratings up to 600 horsepower and 1,850-foot pounds of torque, both of which are modestly higher than those published by Allison.

As might be expected, the exterior dimensions of the Cat automatic are about the same as the Allison, and the fluid capacity is almost identical. The gearing is slightly different, however.

First, second and third gears in the Cat automatic are measurably lower than the Allison — 4.40 for first, 2.33 for second and 1.53 for third, vs. 3.51, 1.91 and 1.43 for the Allison B500. The remaining ratios, for fourth through sixth gears, are the same or very close.

The Cat automatic does weigh more than the Allison — 1,160 pounds vs. 968, and it currently can only be mated to a Cat C13 engine. The Allison B500 can be hooked up to any engine currently available in the North American motorcoach market.

Cat is expected to emphasize the reliability of its products in marketing the CX31 to the coach industry.

### ZF optimistic

So, how does upstart ZF see the new developments?

ZF’s top North American sales executive doesn’t expect either the Allison Edge pro-

gram or the new Cat automatic to affect sales of ZF transmissions to coach operators.

“We don’t see (either one) impacting us,” said Rick Manna, sales manager for ZF Group North American Operations.

Manna contends the changing coach industry transmission landscape hasn’t

altered the basic reasons why the ZF has come from nowhere to capture 40 percent of the market — fuel economy, plus weight and operational savings.

Both the Allison and the Cat automatics have torque converters and those “are fuel drains,” Manna asserts.

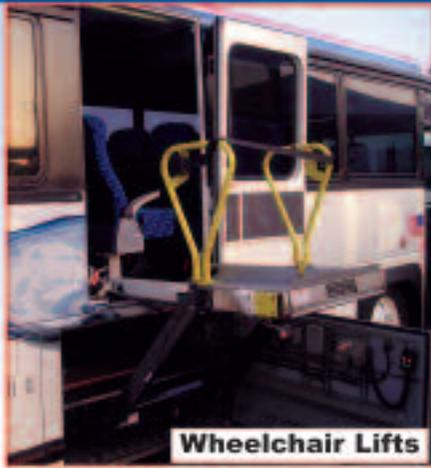


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## Fuel taxes

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Not everyone is convinced operators can legally claim the exemption, however.

A certified public accountant who is well versed in motorcoach industry tax planning and preparation says he doesn't interpret the regulations as granting the exemption to the charter bus operators.

He contends the exemption applies to schools and government units buying their own fuel.

"I would not put my name to the assumption," said the accountant.

At the same time, he concedes the rules and instructions are fuzzy and open to interpretation. He says he would not be surprised that an IRS auditor, shown the applicable forms at the time of an audit, would go along with the exemption.

He strongly advises operators to consult with their tax adviser before claiming the exemption.

Operators that want to probe the issue with their accountants or tax advisers should refer to the following:

- *IRS Publication 378 Fuel Tax Credits and Refunds* (Rev. April 2005)
- *IRS Form 4136* (see instructions, especially the "Type of Use Table" on page 4 [item nos. 13 and 14] and the instructions for

line 3).

- *IRS Instructions for Form 720, Quarterly Federal Excise Tax Return* (Rev. October 2005), including the "Type of Use Table" on page 10.

- *IRS Form 8849 Claim for Refund of Excise Taxes*

Meanwhile, there's no question most operators should be claiming the 17 cents per gallon exemption from the 24.4-cents-per-gallon federal excise tax on fuel.

Form 4136 is still used for full-year and fourth-quarter refunds, and Form 8849 is used for claiming any cumulative refund of more than \$750 through the first three quarters of the year.

To qualify for the 17-cent federal exemption, operators must use diesel-powered vehicles, designed with a seating capacity of at least 20 adults (excluding the driver), and operated for compensation and available to the general public.

You may benefit by filing a Form 637 with the IRS, pre-identifying your company as a qualified tax-reduced buyer. Ask your accountant for advice.

You also should be eligible to receive a refund of the 10 percent federal excise tax on tires. The filing of Form 637 may allow you to avoid paying this tax at the time of tire purchases.

Some state fuel taxes also may be

## Bernard Coaches of Minnesota buys troubled Chippewa Trails

CHIPPEWA FALLS, Wis. — Bernard Coaches Inc. of Chatfield, Minn., has purchased Chippewa Trails, a company founded more than 100 years ago as a horse and buggy service.

Last October, Chippewa Trails was involved in a fatal crash that killed five people. However, in a news release, Chippewa Trails said the sale to Bernard Coaches had been pending since July — before the crash. The sale reportedly does not affect Chippewa Yellow Bus, an affiliated school bus operation.

"Mr. (Mike) Bernard will continue to run Chippewa Trails' motorcoaches under the same name and out of the same building. The transition was started many months ago and there should be no noticeable difference in service," the news

release said.

Chippewa Trails has nearly 30 employees and operates a dozen coaches.

On Oct. 16, a Chippewa Trails coach was carrying members of the Chippewa Falls Senior High School Marching Band back from a competition at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater when it crashed into an over-the-road truck that was blocking two lanes of Interstate 94.

The driver of the truck has been charged with five felony counts of homicide by negligent operation of a vehicle, 11 felony counts of reckless driving causing great bodily injury, and nine misdemeanor counts of reckless driving causing injury.

Lawsuits from passengers on the bus or their families have been filed against Chippewa Trails.

refundable. Check with your state or one of the commercially available state guides. Do not expect to capture state fuel tax refunds through the International Fuel Tax Agreement system. Funds are processed directly

by each state.

The IRS Web site, [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov), provides access to all tax publications, forms and instructions cited in this article. They can be printed directly from the Web site.

## Outlook

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

business this year, according to the report.

The new law included an increase in ADA wheelchair-lift funding, a \$35 million fund for intermodal facilities, triple the funding from past bills for rural bus transportation, new enforcement tools for charter rules violations, axle-weight exemption, a switch to destination rather than roadside coach inspections, and certification of doctors that examine drivers.

Still, the report cautioned, there remains concern about the infringement on the charter business by tax-supported transit operations and so-called curbside coach operators.

"The scales are tilted toward the transits and other forms of competition for passenger service, with the other modes receiving more than 14 times the federal subsidy received by the motorcoach industry," it stressed. "Combined with the competitive pressure coming from rapidly emerging, though often fly-by-night curbside operators, it is increasingly difficult for motorcoach operators to stay in business."

The report noted that a negotiated rule-making session will be held this year at the U.S. Department of Transportation that will look into possible modifications to the cur-

rent charter rules that could improve enforcement efforts and slow down the encroachment by transits.

Additionally, it noted that Congressional hearings could be held this year on curbside operators that run low-cost operations by skirting the rules and ignoring safety regulations.

Meantime, the report held that the industry is headed in the right direction.

"More companies are looking for ways to enhance their services, including providing newer equipment, more amenities and wider ranges of destinations, and consumers are noticing the difference," it suggested.

The operator innovations could be as simple as providing commuters with coffee and a newspaper, to complex offerings such as adding a variety of off-the-bus activities so a coach ride is not just a one-size-fits-all approach, the report said.

"All the segments of the travel industry are vying for the traveler's dollar and it's becoming essential for the group travel industry to provide a wide range of products to entice new entrants to the industry," the report maintained. "Thinking outside the box — or in our industry's case, the bus — and garnering new interest from non-traditional riders will be the key to our industry's future success."

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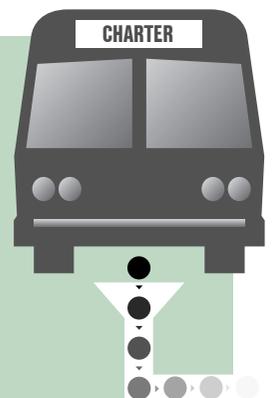
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## Calendar

### MARCH 2006

**6-7 ABA-UMA Security and Emergency Preparedness Planning Workshop**, 70th annual Trailways Conference and Meeting, Scottsdale, Ariz. Co-sponsor: Trailways Transportation System. Info: Contact Daecher Consulting Group, (717) 975-9190, or e-mail [security@safetyteam.com](mailto:security@safetyteam.com).

**7 ABA Motorcoach Symposium**, Tempe, Ariz. Info: (800) 283-2877 or go to [www.buses.org](http://www.buses.org).

**8-10 70th annual Trailways Conference and Meeting**, Scottsdale, AZ. Info: (703) 691-3052, or go to [www.trailways.com](http://www.trailways.com).

**20-23 75th annual International Convention**, Family Motor Coach Association, Fairplex, Pomona, Calif. Info: Go to [www.fmca.com](http://www.fmca.com).

**22-27 2006 National Tour Association Tour Operator Spring Meet**, Louisville, Ky. Info: Go to <http://springmeet.NTAonline.com>.

**23 DATTCO Sales & Service Expo**, Mohegan Sun Casino, Uncasville, Conn. Info: Call (800) 229-4878.

**28-29 Pennsylvania Bus Association Marketplace 2006**, York Expo Center, York, Pa. Info: Call (717) 236-9042 or go to [www.pabus.org](http://www.pabus.org).

### APRIL 2006

**22-27 Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance Annual Meeting**, Hartford, Conn. Info: (202) 775-1623, or go to [www.cvsa.org](http://www.cvsa.org).

**30-May 3 American Public Transportation Association Bus and Paratransit Conference**, Orange County, Calif. Info: Go to [www.apta.com](http://www.apta.com).

### MAY 2006

**4-7 New England Bus Association Annual Meeting**, Hyatt Regency, Newport, R.I. Info: Go to [www.newenglandbus.org](http://www.newenglandbus.org).

### JUNE 2006

**3-6 Georgia Motorcoach Operators Association Annual Meeting and Marketplace**, Pigeon Forge, Tenn. Info: Go to [www.gamotorcoachoperators.org](http://www.gamotorcoachoperators.org).

**20-22 FedFleet 2006**, Los Angeles Convention Center, Los Angeles. Info: Go to [www.fed-fleet.org](http://www.fed-fleet.org).

## REI unveils newest A/V system

OMAHA, Neb. — Radio Engineering Industries, the No. 1 supplier of A/V equipment to the coach industry, has introduced its first completely new entertainment system in a decade.

“The Elite Series is a fully integrated, modular entertainment system designed to bring a state-of-the-art, multimedia experience to coach passengers,” said REI Vice President of Marketing Guy Jukes.

All of REI’s experience and knowledge are incorporated into the Elite Series components, “making it the equipment to have on your next motorcoach,” Jukes added.

The modular design of the system means components can be

easily added, including DVD, DSS satellite video, satellite radio, wireless microphone, GPS mapping, speaker enhancements and other elements, Jukes explained.

Other features include:

- Serial communication links which reduce wire complexity
- The control module features graphic display for precise, clear readouts
- Integrated DVD player and CD changer controls
- Separate driver’s control for personal audio channels
- Multiplex option for direct interface with vehicle electrical system
- Expandable up to eight video

channels

- Integration with the new REI wide-screen LCD video monitors
- Enhanced audio capabilities — up to five channels with dedicated sub-woofer output
- Individual passenger headphone seatback audio system with up to 8 channels
- Multi-lingual capabilities
- Option for full escort-area system control

The REI Elite system replaces REI’s System 2000 that was introduced to the industry in 1991 and the Advanced System that was introduced in 1996.

For more information, go to [www.radioeng.com](http://www.radioeng.com).

## ABC upgrading service center systems

FARIBAULT, Minn. — ABC Companies is upgrading the system and software used to manage its five service centers across the U.S.

The enhanced business system will improve service to customers by streamlining activities, making processes more efficient, and bettering communications, ABC says.

“The upgrade integrates the latest release of Movex, effectively adding more functionality and flexibility for users, which will trans-

late into greater accuracy and improved service to customers,” said ABC spokeswoman Brenda Borwege.

The new version of Movex will give ABC managers and other personnel faster access to vehicle information, the ability to automate shop floor activities, provide better insight into future requirements for parts and labor, and improve appointment scheduling and communications between ABC divi-

sions and customers.

Borwege said ABC’s investment in the system reflects the company’s commitment to using technology that can optimize business operations and, at the same time, upgrade customer service.

The system is expected to be operational by the third quarter.

ABC has service centers in Winter Garden Fla.; Garden Grove, Calif.; Grand Prairie, Texas; Camden, N.J., and Faribault.

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## Sandberg

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Sandberg has said she believes that misconceptions about trucking have contributed to the contentious and sometimes bitter wrangling over HOS reform. "There's a misunderstanding out there in the public and among a variety of interest groups about trucking," she told a trucking magazine last year. "First, trucking is not one single industry - it is many different industries that are only similar in that they use a truck as a tool to conduct their business.

"The dilemma we face is that every segment of trucking uses that tool in a significantly different way. That's what the real issue is. People don't understand that one size doesn't fit all."

Another rulemaking issued during Sandberg's watch, concerning training of new bus and truck drivers, also was challenged in court and thrown out by appeals judges. That rule currently is being revised.

FMCSA also has caught flack for its safety monitoring of the motorcoach industry, with the most recent criticism coming last fall following the bus fire near Dallas that killed 23 nursing home residents. (See story on Page 1.)

The company whose bus caught fire received a satisfactory rating from the FMCSA in February 2004, even though its driver-safety history was one of the nation's worst.

## Owner indicted

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Banker noted that the federal charges did not accuse Maples of being responsible for the Sept. 23 tragedy. "There is no connection to the indictment and the accident that occurred outside of Dallas. They're trying to link him to drivers who made false statements in daily logs, in violation of DOT regulations," Banker said.

Safety advocates and coach industry observers were hard pressed to remember a bus company owner ever being criminally indicted for falsifying the hours-of-service records of relief drivers.

There was speculation the government's investigation of Global Limo must have yielded sufficient evidence for U.S. Department of Transportation Inspector General Kenneth Mead to push for criminal charges.

"I think he realized this was an opportunity to set an example of a company that had grossly misbehaved and injured a lot of people," said one observer.

Mead said in a prepared statement that the indictment of Maples "reminds us of the serious

Questions about the company's performance and how FMCSA came to its conclusion prompted a review of the company and its safety oversight by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Office of Inspector General.

One trucking publication opined that Sandberg may have grown weary of battling over hours-of-service rules and other issues. "We know how hard Sandberg has been working, and how seriously she has taken her job," said *Transport Topics* in an editorial.

"It's not easy trying to referee the kinds of fights that trucking and its critics have been embroiled in over recent years. And we know how wearing that kind of job can be."

Sandberg's resignation came as a disappointment to many who closely monitor the FMCSA. She had come to be appreciated for her steady, even-handed approach to issues, and her efforts to assure fair and responsible regulation.

In January, the United Motorcoach Association honored Sandberg, presenting her with its good government award because she had "demonstrated again and again, through keen insight and a com-

## FMCSA postpones EOBR regs

WASHINGTON — The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration has postponed issuing its regulation on the use of electronic onboard recorders.

"It's probably going to be late May," said FMCSA Administrator

potential risks posed to the traveling public by those who evade or ignore motor carrier safety laws."

U.S. Attorney Chuck Rosenberg added that "rules governing the safe carriage of passengers are not made to be broken."

Maples operated Global Limo until Oct. 7, when the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration shut it down because the condition of its vehicles and drivers were "likely to result in serious injury or death."

The indictment, returned by a federal grand jury in Houston, details a scheme in which Maples had his drivers deliberately circumvent federal driver hours-of-service rules.

Between May and June 2005, Maples and Global Limo "routinely assigned two drivers to one bus with no sleeper berth for long cross-country trips," the indictment says. When not driving, the second, resting driver would falsely classify himself in logs as "off duty" instead of the proper "on-duty not driving" classification.

In the second count, Maples and Global Limo are accused of failing to inspect and maintain the buses in safe working order be-

mon-sense approach to regulation and enforcement, that she knows what needs to be done" to improve bus and truck safety.

Sandberg was cited by UMA for implementing changes at the FMCSA that "are nothing short of astounding."

Bill Graves, president of American Trucking Associations, said Sandberg and her staff have "consistently demonstrated a willingness to openly examine motor carrier concerns and issues while maintaining the highest commitment to highway safety."

Sandberg's boss, Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, agreed. He praised her "exceptional record of accomplishment. Under her leadership, FMCSA made significant progress in improving the safety of commercial vehicles, including reducing the large-truck fatality rate to its lowest level ever recorded."

Before being named FMCSA administrator in August 2003, Sandberg served as FMCSA deputy administrator. Prior to that, she was deputy secretary of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Annette Sandberg. "We had some issues that came up, mostly out of hours of service and hours-of-service supporting documents."

FMCSA officials previously said the regulation would be issued in February.

tween May and August 2005. The third count charges Maples and Global Limo with failing to require the company's bus drivers to complete vehicle inspection reports between May and August 2005.

The indictment documents four incidents, from May 5 to July 8, in which five drivers stayed on buses but marked themselves off duty while another employee drove.

Prosecutors said the drivers were trying to comply with the travel schedules required by Global and Maples. It said Maples obtained false statements and kept them in Global records for inspection.

Since the September fire, a number of lawsuits have been filed against Maples and Global Limo on behalf of those who died. The nursing home, Brighton Gardens, also has been sued, along with Bus Bank, the charter bus broker that matched the nursing home with Maples' company.

The cause of the fire is still under investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board. Dallas County sheriff's deputies have said that poorly maintained wheel bearings led to a heat buildup that started the fire, which spread to the bus interior.

## Turnaround specialists lend hand at Blue Bird

FORT VALLEY, Ga. — The transformation of Blue Bird Corporation — from a money loser to a consistent money maker — has begun in earnest, with the effort being directed by some of the nation's pre-eminent business turnaround specialists.

When a federal bankruptcy court in Reno, Nev., approved the financial reorganization of Blue Bird just over a month ago, the plan included a new board of directors for the company that owns Blue Bird. That company goes by the name of "Reorganized Peach County Holdings."

The board of Reorganized Peach County Holdings includes three top executives from Kroll Zolfo Cooper, a leading New York City firm that specializes in financial and operational restructurings.

Kroll Zolfo Cooper is not exactly a stranger to the North American bus industry, having been involved in the reorganization of Laidlaw International and also Henlys, the British outfit that once owned Blue Bird.

The new chairman of Blue Bird's parent company is Stephen F. Cooper, chairman of Kroll Zolfo Cooper and its corporate advisory and restructuring group. He has held those jobs since 2002, when Kroll acquired Zolfo Cooper, a corporate recovery and crisis-management company Cooper co-founded 20 years ago.

Most recently, Cooper has been chairman of Collins & Aikman, a global leader in cockpit modules and automotive floor and acoustic systems and a major supplier of automotive instrument panels, fabric, trim and convertible tops.

Last year, he was named CEO of Krispy Kreme Doughnuts, and he has served as CEO and chief reorganization officer at Enron for the past three years.

He's considered a pioneer in the "turnaround industry," and included among his more than 300 engagements are such companies as Laidlaw, Morrison Knudsen, and Federated Department Stores.

The new vice chairman of Blue

Bird's corporate parent is Leonard LoBiondo, senior managing director and co-COO of Kroll Zolfo Cooper. He has more than 20 years of restructuring expertise, spanning a range of industries, including wholesale/retail, manufacturing, consumer products, energy, transportation, distribution, hotels and real estate. His assignments have included Continental Illinois Holding Co., Laidlaw, NationsRent, The Pittsburgh Penguins, Prime Motor Inns and Sunbeam.

The new "chief restructuring officer" for the company that owns Blue Bird is Robert Bingham, a director at Kroll Zolfo Cooper who, during the past six years, has primarily represented debtors in large, complicated bankruptcy cases. For more than three years, he has represented Enron in its bankruptcy, serving as interim CFO and treasurer.

The Kroll Zolfo Cooper trio, plus Blue Bird President and CEO Jeffrey Bust and director Tom Weber, are overseeing a restructuring plan that increases Blue Bird's borrowing availability by \$52.5 million and includes a debt-for-equity conversion program that strengthens its balance sheet. Under the debt-for-equity swap, Blue Bird is now 100 percent owned by the banks that are lending it money. The banks formerly owned 42.5 percent of the company.

The Chapter 11 restructuring plan wiped out the equity that previously had been held by Volvo Truck and Bus Limited (42.5 percent), a group of senior managers of Blue Bird (10 percent) and a pension fund for former employees of Henlys Group in England (5 percent).

The plan calls for all of Blue Bird's general unsecured creditors to receive what the company owes them.

Blue Bird produces the most diverse line-up of buses manufactured by one company in North America. It includes motorcoaches, low-floor transit buses, RVS and 30 percent of North America's school buses.

## National Interstate sets payout

RICHFIELD, Ohio — National Interstate Corp. announced that its board of directors approved a 4-cents-per-share dividend that is payable March 7, to stockholders of record Feb. 21.

The company also announced

it plans to release its fiscal 2005 financial results March 21.

National Interstate is the parent company of National Interstate Insurance, the No. 2 insurer of over-the-road buses.

# MCI plans major expansion of service/sales centers

LEBANON, Tenn. — Motor Coach Industries plans to expand its network of service and sales centers to more cities and states across North America.

After opening a new facility here and announcing it is close to locating a repair center in Atlantic City, the company says its long-term plans call for opening two or three more centers annually for an unspecified period.

MCI Chief Executive Thomas C. Sorrells, who outlined the company's expansion plans while attending the grand opening of the Tennessee sales and service center

22 miles east of Nashville, declined to pinpoint where the company is looking to further expand its sales and service center network.

"I can say that we plan to open two or three each year moving forward," he said.

MCI currently operates eight centers, seven of which are combination sales and service operations, and one that handles service only. In addition to the new facility here, others that provide sales and service are in Des Plaines, Ill.; Los Alamitos, Calif.; Blackwood, N.J.; Dallas; Orlando, and Montreal.

The lone service facility is in Loudonville, Ohio.

The newest facility, located in a former Lebanon truck repair shop less than a mile from Interstate 40, has 18,720 square feet of space with six drive-through service bays, a bus wash, customer lounge and a fully stocked parts warehouse with sales counter. It is currently staffed by four full-time technicians, but that number is expected to increase to nine soon.

"This area really cried out for a service center because the market here is really underserved," said Sorrells.

It provides the same services that are offered at other MCI centers, including same day guaranteed service if the repair is expected to take less than four hours, on-call technicians who are available outside of regular business hours, emergency roadside service and a free bus wash with repairs.

The new facility is at 215 Maddox Simpson Parkway, near I-40 exit 238. Mark Paterson, general manager of the MCI service center in Des Plaines, is responsible for the center.

Meantime, the company said negotiations for the Atlantic City

center are progressing and a deal is expected to be worked out by spring. The center, which would not include motorcoach sales, would be in the Atlantic City Transportation Center in a maintenance facility that previously had been operated by Greyhound Lines.

Sorrells said Atlantic City was selected because the MCI sales and service center in nearby Blackwood has been operating at near capacity for about a year, making it a good time to expand. Business at all of the MCI centers, he said, is up 25 percent.

# MCI launches shell model based on popular J4500 coach

LEBANON, Tenn. — Motor Coach Industries has introduced a new conversion coach shell based on its top selling J4500 model, and is aiming it primarily at the entertainer market.

The shell was introduced last month at the opening of the MCI Sales and Service center here, which is 22 miles east of Nashville.

The coach features a re-engineered suspension system and a

raised roof line, providing an extra three inches of inside headroom. Those features, say company executives, should help sell the bus to celebrities and others in the market for a custom coach of their own.

Jay Daab, MCI vice president of conversion coach sales, said the company first considered raising the roof on its 86-inch E4500 conversion coach, but decided instead to introduce a new 89-inch shell.

"It's all about choice," said Daab.

The coach is geared to the entertainment segment, which makes up about 30 percent of the conversion market. Daab said the additional headroom provides more room for bunks, making it possible to fit three tiers of beds in the coach more comfortably.

Additionally, he said the J4500 has been developed with an X12 common-axle suspension, provid-

ing it with a more comfortable ride and a very stable front end with less lateral sway.

"It'll drive like a car," he said. "People who drive it are just going to love it."

The J4500 shell has most of the same components — Detroit Diesel engine and Allison B500 transmission — as other J4500s, MCI's top selling seated coach.

MCI intends to continue selling

its E4500 conversion coach, the model used by its most-famous celebrity customer, National Football League broadcaster John Madden.

"It will be a neck-and-neck race to see what the entertainers ultimately prefer," said Daab.

And will Madden be switching out his coach for a new J4500?

"He's thinking about it right now," said MCI Chief Executive Thomas C. Sorrells.

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# Buying used coaches can be very smart business

While used motorcoaches, including those that have been repossessed, may not compare well with brand-new models in terms of technology, curb appeal and amenities, they can still be a good bargain.

In fact, in some cases, they can be even a better deal.

Operators who buy used don't suffer the hefty depreciation that occurs during the first year of service for a new coach, and because the payoff period for used buses is

shorter than new coaches, the monthly payments are close to the same.

That assessment comes from used-bus expert John Oakman Jr. of ABC Companies in Winter Garden, Fla., and coach financing expert Peter King of TCF Equipment Finance in Minnetonka, Minn.

Oakman says new buses lose 25 to 30 percent of their value in the first year and then another 5 to 10

percent each year after that for about seven years before leveling off. Letting someone else take such big losses on the equipment, he said, often makes good business sense.

Payments on used coaches frequently are about the same as the payments on new buses — even though used coaches have a smaller price tag. The reason for that, says King, is because the financing period is shorter on used equipment.

"However, there is an advantage to paying the coach off in a shorter period of time," he observes. "It makes a lot of sense because when you pay off the loan quicker, you build equity . . . faster. That allows more flexibility when deciding whether to sell or trade-in the coach, or keep it in your fleet,"

he adds.

King also debunks the perception that many operators have that financing for a used coach is more difficult to obtain than for a new bus. That's not necessarily true, he suggests, noting, though, that operators might have to look a little harder for the best financing deal.

Repossessed coaches also can be good values, according to Oakman. "If you know how to evaluate and repair them, they can be a very good buy."

Oakman says there is a good chance that the bank or finance company selling the coach will provide the financing as well.

But, according to King, banks don't typically provide money to refurbish a used coach. However, if you work with the vendor, they can refurbish the coach and the finance

company will most likely be willing to finance the cost of the coach, including the refurbishment.

Oakman suggests that operators who buy used coaches track model changes so they can upgrade their older models to match some of the amenities found on new buses, including the latest A/V equipment. "If there is something you can do to make it look like a new one, then that's an advantage to you," he notes.

He suggests, also, that the cost of maintaining a new coach is better for only about the first 200,000 miles, and then it levels off and is comparable with the maintenance costs incurred for a used coach.

Oakman and King made their remarks during a panel discussion at Motorcoach Expo 2006 in Tampa, Fla.

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## Driver courtesy: Philly public transit style

PHILADELPHIA — A transit bus driver grabbed a woman by the hair, knocked her head into a pole, opened the door and tossed her into traffic after she yelled at him for missing her stop, Philadelphia police reported.

The 52-year-old woman, who was not identified, suffered a broken shoulder.

Bus driver Mario Edney, 53, was charged with aggravated assault and other crimes, said a police spokeswoman.

Edney told police he had to skip the woman's stop because of a detour.

Officials of Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority said Edney would be fired.

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# State associations pick officers, directors for '06

State motorcoach associations from South Carolina to California have new officers and board members for 2006.

## Alabama

Bill Tilton of Southern Transportation Leasing in Jacksons Gap is the new president of the *Alabama Motorcoach Association*. He succeeds Jim Thrasher of Thrasher Brothers Trailways in Birmingham, who becomes immediate past president and remains on the board.

Frank Montgomery of Colonial Trailways in Mobile is the association's new vice president and Lynn Ledbetter of Alabama Limousine in Birmingham has been chosen treasurer.

John Adams of Southern Coaches in Dothan is the association's lone new board member.

## California

Elaine Rickett of H&L Charter Co. in Rancho Cucumonga has been elected to the board of directors of the *California Bus Association*.

## Coach operator William Hubers dies at age 83

FERNDALE, Md. — William J. Hubers, owner of Hubers Bus Service of Glen Burnie, Md., died last month. He would have been 84 on March 12.

Mr. Hubers owned his bus company for 45 years.

Hubers Bus Service operates a fleet of 10 coaches and three mid-size buses, providing tour-and-charter service, casino runs, airport and Amtrak transfers, and shuttle service. The company also provides garage services and is a member of the United Motorcoach Association.

Mr. Hubers served in the U.S. Navy, and worked for the Anne Arundel County Fire Department, Ferndale Station.

He was a member of the Masonic Lodge in Glen Burnie, the American Legion, The Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Ferndale Community Club.

He is survived by his son John E. "Eddie" Hubers; a sister, Alma Poteet, and several grandchildren and a great grandchild.

Memorials have been established at the Baltimore Washington Medical Center, 300 Hospital Dr., Glen Burnie, MD 21061; the Hospice of the Chesapeake, 445 Defense Hwy., Annapolis, MD 21401, and the Friendship Church of the Brethren, 217 Mansion Road, Linthicum, MD 21090.

## Georgia

The *Georgia Motorcoach Operators Association* has elected two new board members: Jeffrey L. Mills of Atlanta's DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau, and John Garrett of American Coach Lines of Atlanta in Norcross.

## South Carolina

Elaine Johnson of Cross Country Tours in Spartanburg has been elected president of the *Motorcoach Association of South Carolina*. She succeeds Bob Garrett of Sunshine Travel & Express in Lancaster, who becomes immediate past president and remains on

the association board of directors.

New members of the board of the association are Franklin Simmons of S&S Charter Services in Moncks Corner, and Bill Leonard of Prevost Car.

## Tennessee

Danny Brantley of Brantley

Charter in Lexington, Tenn., has been elected vice president of the *Tennessee Motor Coach Association*.

New members of the association board are Bill Gentry of Gentry Trailways in Knoxville, Randy Ingram of Premier Transportation in Knoxville, and Cecil Morgan of C&A Charters of Chattanooga.

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