FMCSA puts action behind words
Focuses attention on coach industry

WASHINGTON, D.C. — After promising for years to crackdown on over-the-road bus companies that flaunt safety regulations, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration has implement a series of initiatives aimed at getting schlock operators off the road.

The agency’s new National Motorcoach Safety Program has six elements, all of which are either now operational or will be by year end. Here’s how the agency intends to ferret out the industry’s bad apples.

• Force states that do not have formal motorcoach safety inspection programs to get in gear and adopt one — this year — or lose the money the FMCSA gives states to conduct coach inspections.
• Increase by 20 percent this year the number of FMCSA compliance reviews of coach companies. The rise would follow a similar jump last year. Further increases are planned.

The alleged violations are now in the hands of the U.S. Justice Department, which enforces the Americans with Disabilities Act. The alleged violations are now in the hands of the Justice Department, which enforces the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The new FMCSA focus on motorcoach safety was outlined earlier this month by the agency’s administrator, Annette Sandberg, in an appearance before a subcommittee of the U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

Annette Sandberg, in an appearance before a subcommittee of the U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure earlier this month, Sandberg said that noncompliance with ADA regulations is an issue throughout the bus industry, and is not limited to cut-rate bus companies.

WASHINGTON — Eleven over-the-road bus companies operating between Boston, New York and Washington have been accused of violating federal laws governing service to disabled passengers.

The 11 operators were among 14 companies inspected during a sweep by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, the Washington Post reported.

Probing of ADA violations; 11 operators cited

WASHINGTON — Eleven over-the-road bus companies operating between Boston, New York and Washington have been accused of violating federal laws governing service to disabled passengers.

The 11 operators were among 14 companies inspected during a sweep by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, the Washington Post reported.

WMATA’s parking problem

WMATA was recently the target of a media investigation that revealed a significant number of parking tickets had been issued in the past year. The investigation found that WMATA’s parking enforcement policies were inconsistent and unfair, leading to citizen complaints and negative press.

The WMATA parking department has since implemented new policies to address the issues raised in the investigation, including increased enforcement of no-parking violations and more transparent communication of parking regulations.

New twist in NYC: Criminal parking tickets

NEW YORK CITY — The motorcoach industry’s on-again, off-again battle to find legal parking and loading areas in the city has taken an ugly new twist with police issuing criminal parking citations to parked buses.

A number of operators report they have gotten criminal parking tickets in recent weeks that require them to appear in a city criminal court and be accompanied by an attorney.

Norman Littler, senior vice president of government and industry relations at the United Motorcoach Association, said that in all of his years in the industry he has never seen a city issue a criminal citation for a parking violation.

Were that not bad enough, other new New York City parking horrors also have surfaced:

• City patrol-car cops are pulling up behind coaches and writing parking tickets without getting out of their autos. Then, after writing the ticket, rather than place it under the windshield wiper blade, the officer will pull his or her car up next to the coach and stuff the ticket in the rubber molding of a baggage compartment door. Of course, a driver may never see the ticket and as often as not it will blow away as the coach is driven down the road. Months later, the company gets a notice from the city about the past-due ticket, with a huge bill for late fees.

• Commuter bus lines are re

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

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Hurricane payments dribble in

Motorcoach operators that have waited nearly six months to get paid for hurricane evacuations and other work along the Mississippi Gulf Coast are finally seeing some checks.

But not all are happy with what they’re getting, and some still have only gotten half — or less — of what they’re owed.

Operators contend they are being shortchanged by the companies that hired them because the daily rate was reduced to $500, while they were working under a contract rate of $1,000 per day.

“They tell us they can’t pay more than what the rate was reduced to, and I won’t agree to that,” said Jeff Polzien of Red Carpet Charters in Oklahoma City.

“They can’t show me anything where I agreed to $700.”

He said that while his company has been paid a substantial portion of its billings, he maintains he still is entitled to be paid the higher rate because he never agreed to work for the lower daily price.

“They can’t change the contract on their own,” he maintains.

The slower-than-molasses pace of evacuation payments has flared as an issue for months, following the federal government’s call for 1,000 buses to move people out of the path of or aftermath of two devastating hurricanes – Katrina, which hit Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama at the end of August, and Rita, which struck Texas about a month later. Scores of operators kept buses in the area for weeks afterwards to transport military personnel, utility workers and others, and some still have coaches there.

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*Used vehicle sold “as is.” No warranties expressed or implied.*
CARSON CITY, Nev. — Nevada transportation officials have pulled the operating authority of a small operator here who filed a federal lawsuit last year, challenging the state’s power to regulate buses.

The operator says the state action is in retaliation to his suit and to the coalition he heads that contends federal law preempts Nevada regulatory statutes.

“It’s just harassment,” said Bob Fairman, owner of No Stress Express and the chairman of the Nevada Transportation Coalition. Fairman’s attorney agrees.

In September, the coalition filed suit in U.S. District Court against the Nevada Transportation Services Authority, charging the agency had overstepped its authority by attempting to regulate motorcoaches and buses. The suit maintains that federal laws eclipse state regulatory authority.

Fairman said he refused several times last month to allow a TSA inspector on his property to inspect a van used in his business because the inspector was not certified as required by federal law. The refusals, he said, brought threats from the inspector that he could be subject to enforcement action.

He said the inspector returned March 1, leaving a notice on his office door that his certificate to operate in Nevada had been rescinded.

Fairman intends to seek a court injunction against the TSA that would restore his operating license and allow his company to remain in business.

Operators: Stand up and be counted

WASHINGTON — The American Bus Association is appealing to all motorcoach companies to participate in an industry-wide research project aimed at gauging the size and shape of the industry.

Nathan Associates Inc. of Arlington, Va., has been commissioned by ABA to conduct a census of the industry. The ABA says all operators will benefit from an accurate picture of the industry because coach organizations will use the data to communicate the industry’s importance to lawmakers, the media, government agencies and consumers.

“It is very important to get your support in completing this census,” the association said in a statement. “We must get a complete and accurate census of our industry if we are to effectively fight for fair treatment at every level of government and to insure that our industry’s efforts are fully recognized and appreciated by the public-at-large.”

Feds okay CUSA purchase

WASHINGTON – The Surface Transportation Board has tentatively approved the purchase of American Coach Lines of Lake Worth Fla., by CUSA of Dallas.

CUSA is the largest tour-and-charter motorcoach operator in the U.S., and American Coach Lines is the fifth largest coach company.

The Surface Transportation Board, which is part of the U.S. Department of Transportation, issued a notice late last month saying it was approving the deal subject to receiving no opposing comments.

American Coach Lines was created in 2003 when investors bought the companies that made up the southeast region of Coach USA.

Anyone wishing to comment on the deal must file comments with the Surface Transportation Board by April 10. Information about submitting comments is available at www.stb.dot.gov.
More states taking look at fuel taxes

The continuing high price of diesel fuel and gasoline has prompted a handful of states to examine their fuel taxes and fuel-tax systems.

Wisconsin has become the newest state to halt its automatic fuel-tax increase, but Maine seems likely to stick with its system. And in New York, a fuel-tax cap has been proposed.

Meanwhile, taxes on diesel fuel rose in eight states during the fourth quarter of last year, including New York where the tax jumped nearly four cents a gallon. Wisconsin has repealed the indexing of its fuel tax effective next year, and it also has prohibited a penny fuel tax reduction.

The indexing of Wisconsin’s motor vehicle fuel tax began in 1985 and the rate is adjusted annually for inflation. The state fuel tax is currently among the highest in the nation at 32.9 cents per gallon for diesel and gasoline.

The repeal becomes effective April 2007. Last July, the state adopted a budget that included a penny fuel tax reduction. In Maine, a bipartisan legislative group appointed by Gov. John Baldacci to study highway financing has recommended no change in the state fuel tax, the rate of which is indexed to inflation.

Both the diesel and the gasoline tax, currently 27.5 and 26.8 cents per gallon respectively, are expected to rise — with inflation — by half a cent July 1. The group did not recommend any increases in registration fees either, but did suggest the state look into borrowing to finance some of its highway needs under revenue-anticipation bonds.

New York is among the dozen or so states that impose a sales tax on fuel. These days, with the price of fuel as high as it is, such a tax boosts state revenues but is something of an embarrassment to state legislators.

A group of state senators has proposed to set a cap of $2 a gallon on the price of fuel used to calculate state and local sales taxes.

Combined, these taxes average 8.25 percent in New York, which helps produce the highest fuel taxes in the nation.

The combined state tax on gasoline in New York is 42.2 per gallon, versus 41.65 cents per gallon for diesel fuel.

Other states that raised diesel fuel taxes in the fourth quarter of last year were California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Nebraska, North Carolina and Pennsylvania. Diesel taxes declined in Georgia and Michigan.

EPA pressed on exhaust as hazard

WASHINGTON — An environmental advocacy organization says the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has agreed to determine by mid-year whether diesel exhaust should be classified as a “hazardous air pollutant,” a decision long sought by environmentalists.

The decision is required under a consent agreement between EPA and the advocacy group Environmental Defense. The agreement allows EPA to delay the decision by no more than 60 days provided it has the consent of Environmental Defense, according to Greenwire.

If the agency decides to classify diesel exhaust as a hazardous pollutant, it must issue a final notice by May 1, 2007.

Environmental Defense petitioned EPA to act on the diesel exhaust designation in August 2003. When the agency failed to act on the petition, the group filed suit against the agency.

Listing diesel exhaust as a hazardous air pollutant could require the agency to take additional action to curb emissions, Greenwire noted.

State & Provincial Fuel Tax Rates

A number of states boosted fuel-tax rates during the fourth quarter of 2005. Here are the updated rates for all states and provinces, plus the federal tax rate in the U.S.

Scientists want tour coach passengers tracked for flu; CDC is considering rule

ALTANTA — Epidemiologists in Las Vegas and Branson, Mo., have asked the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to expand a proposed regulation to include the electronic tracking of tour bus passengers to help stop the spread of pandemic flu.

If the CDC were to include the tour-and-charter bus industry in its proposed rule, it would have profound implications for motorcoach operators.

Robert Niezgoda, regional epidemiologist specialist for the Taney County Health Department in Missouri, wrote the CDC that tour buses and their passengers pose more of a threat in spreading the flu because they travel through multiple states, compared with airplanes or ships and their passengers. Branson is in Taney County.

The CDC is proposing a regulation, called “Control of Communicable Diseases,” that calls for airlines, travel agents and global reservation systems to collect, store and then transmit a wide range of information on passengers to help the agency control the spread of diseases.

The CDC wants airlines and travel agents to electronically collect and retain names, addresses, e-mail addresses, home and mobile phone numbers, passport or travel-document numbers, and flight information.

Extending the rule to include tour buses would mean coach operators would have to collect and store the same information for their passengers.

CDC officials said they developed the new regulation because of frustration with manual data collection during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis in 2003.

When the agency released the proposed regulations last November, Dr. Marty Cetron, deputy director of the CDC’s Division of Global Migration and Quarantine, said the lack of detailed electronic passenger information “completely paralyzed our ability to notify people who were on board together with suspected SARS cases in a timely way.”

Brian Labus, senior epidemiologist at the Clark County Health District in Nevada, which includes Las Vegas, referred to his experience with SARS in his request to the CDC to cover tour bus operators and their passengers under the proposed rule.

“We had an experience with SARS that was related to a tour bus and not an airline,” Labus said, in an e-mail to the CDC. “A large number of people had traveled with the exposure individual from San Francisco to Los Angeles, then to Las Vegas, then to the Grand Canyon and then back to Las Vegas.”

“Tour bus or train operators should be held to the same requirements as air carriers, as they just as easily transport infected people,” Labus wrote.

Niezgoda asked the CDC in his comments if “any thought has been given to including tour buses in this rule, or an alternative rule?” He said that “during the SARS in Canada, we learned that tour buses from the affected area were moving freely across the border, while airline passengers were being screened.”

Lack of screening of tour bus passengers during the 2003 SARS outbreak did not present a problem, Niezgoda said. But, he added, “in certain scenarios, it is conceivable that a tour bus traveling through several states, making frequent stops, may pose more of a threat than an airplane.”

Niezgoda said he realized it would be difficult to monitor the tour bus industry and its passengers, but “it would be prudent to investigate the problem, so that future control measures or disease surveillance can be implemented.”

The Branson Health Department and the Taney County Health Department routinely conduct surveillance for outbreaks of Norovirus — which can cause stomach pain, diarrhea and vomiting — “because our tourist industry can be severely affected,” he said.

The CDC is not expected to complete its proposed rulemaking for at least 16 to 18 months.
FMCSA (finally) dumps much-delayed CDL rule

WASHINGTON — A federal rule setting minimum standards for state-issued commercial vehicle learner permits has been withdrawn — more than 15 years after it was proposed. Even for the federal government, the bureaucratic foot dragging was pretty remarkable.

In announcing the withdrawal, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration said the proposed rule was no longer relevant, adding that it was “obsolete and it is in the public interest to withdraw it.” The FMCSA’s predecessor agency, the Federal Highway Administration Office of Motor Carriers and Highway Safety, published the rule in August 1990, to standardize driver training and make it easier for drivers to obtain training outside of their state of residence.

The proposed rule was supposed to establish standards for issuing a CDL learner permit; make it easier for out-of-state drivers to obtain on-the-road commercial vehicle driver training; make it easier for drivers to obtain a CDL outside their state of residence, and a handful of other issues. Of course, it took the FMCSA almost six, single-spaced pages to announce it was withdrawing the rule. After all, there was a lot of history to rehash.

Truckers HOS face lawsuits

WASHINGTON — As expected, more lawsuits have been filed against the revamped federal hours-of-service rules for truck drivers.

Five groups, including Public Citizen and the Teamsters union, are challenging the rules on safety grounds.

The five asked the court to review the HOS rules issued last August, by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration. The groups said the rules’ provisions on hours-of-service rules for truck drivers and other commercial vehicles that were to expire on June 30, will remain in effect through the end of the year.

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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:


Greene County (Xenia), Ohio. Deadline: March 31, 2006. Write to: Julie Bildner, Transit Director, Harbor Transit, City of Grand Haven, 440 N. Ferry St., Grand Haven, MI 49417. Phone: (616) 842-3220.

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Ohio extends toll cuts through ’06

BEREA, Ohio — The Ohio Turnpike Commission has voted to extend the toll cuts it introduced in January 2005. That means the reduced tolls for large over-the-road buses and other commercial vehicles that were to expire on June 30, will remain in effect through the end of the year.

Currently, a 40,000-pound motorcoach pays $21.50 to cross Ohio on the turnpike. That’s 17 percent less than the rate before the tolls were reduced 15 months ago. (See Nov. 1, 2004, issue of Bus & Motorcoach News.)

The turnpike commission reports that commercial vehicle traffic along the 241-mile roadway rose 12.3 percent last year, to just over 11 million vehicles. Revenues, however, dropped 7.7 percent, to $102.2 million.

The turnpike does not expect to receive supplemental payments from the Ohio Department of Transportation for the last six months of 2006 to assist in the funding the temporary toll reduction.

Super speeders face big fines in Oregon

SALEM, Ore. — Drivers in Oregon who get caught driving 100 mph or more will face stiffer penalties under a new law.

Those convicted of going at least 100 mph will face a mandatory minimum 30-90 day driving suspension, in addition to a $1,103 fine, a huge increase from the previous fine of $424.

Last year, Oregon state troopers cited 464 people for driving 100 mph or faster. Eighty-one percent of the speeding citations were issued on interstates, while the remaining 21 percent were issued on other state highways.
Groups in New York want traffic tackled

NEW YORK CITY — Neighborhood business groups in New York City are asking Mayor Michael Bloomberg to do more to relieve congestion on city streets, The New York Times reports.

The groups, representing property owners in three city boroughs, sent a letter criticizing what they labeled “piecemeal” efforts to reduce traffic congestion, and that commerce and commercial traffic would flow better with fewer personal cars on the streets, the Times reported.

New York City

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

New York City

portedly occupying parking spaces or lay-over zones that are reserved for, or traditionally used by, charter bus companies bringing groups into New York.

- New York City DOT Bureau of Parking workers are driving around city streets and when they spot a coach that is unloading a group they approach the driver, produce credentials, and offer to sell the driver a parking permit. The bureau workers have a small machine that prints a parking permit and contained on the permit is a message saying that the permit is to be displayed on the driver’s side of the windshield. Beat cops, however, are routinely ignoring the permit and issuing parking tickets to buses displaying the permit.

- A New Jersey operator reports that New York DOT officials boarded his coach just as the last passenger was getting off and proceeded to conduct a routine safety inspection, checking the log book, driver CDL, insurance papers and other documents. When they couldn’t find anything wrong, they gave the driver a ticket for parking illegally while the inspection was taking place. Welcome to New York City.

The criminal tickets being given to operators don’t cite New York parking laws, rather they allege violation of the state Bus & Passenger Carrying Vehicle Safety Regulations (N.Y. Transportation Law Section 140 (2) Title 17). In other words, the tickets attempt to raise a parking complaint to a criminal safety violation.

And operators should be aware that criminal citations in New York are handled very differently than traditional parking violations.

First, the ticket looks different. Routine parking tickets in New York City are yellow in color; the criminal citations are pink and they are processed in criminal court.

Second, state law requires that a corporation must be represented by counsel at all stages of a criminal court proceeding. That, of course, means that in addition to the potential $500 parking fine, an attorney fee of $350 to $500 or more is likely to be incurred.

Third, New York has a gaggle of ambulance-chasing attorneys who cull New York City Criminal Court records looking for potential clients. When they find a bus company has gotten a criminal parking ticket, they fax or send a letter to the company, offering to represent the operator at the arraignment hearing and any subsequent proceedings.

One New Jersey operator received such a letter from a small law firm that said, in part, “I frequently appear before the New York City Criminal Court that has jurisdiction over the referenced matter, and I am well acquainted with the issues and applicable defenses. If you require representation for the captioned matter or any other matter you deem suitable, please contact the undersigned at your earliest convenience.”

Most of the criminal parking tickets have been issued in the Midtown area of Manhattan. Operators have reported getting them while buses were parked in the Lincoln Center area, Times Square and theater district. Some specific locations have included 54th St. and 12th Ave., 155 W. 55th St., 51st or 52nd St. and 8th Ave., and 50th St. and 11th Ave.

Little urges any operators who have gotten criminal parking tickets during the past six months to contact UMA immediately, and fax or send the association clear copies of the ticket(s), summonses, and letters from attorneys. Make clear copies of the tickets on a copying machine before attempting to fax them. Pink does not fax clearly. Having readable copies of the citations is particularly important. UMA’s fax number is (703) 838-2950.

East Coast operators may also want to contact one of the UMA board members based in New York. They are Godfrey Lebron of Paradise Trailways at (516) 505-8440; Bob Brisman of West Point Tours at (845) 561-2671, or Steve Brown of Brown Coach at (518) 843-4700.
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**2005 Bus Accessibility Grants**

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<td>Adronack Trailways – Hurley, N.Y.</td>
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<td>All Aboard America – Santa Fe, N.M.</td>
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<td>M&amp;L Transit Systems – Woburn, Mass.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midnight Sun Tours – Lake Worth, Fla.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morgan’s Bus Tours – Upper Marlboro, Md.</td>
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<td>MTR Western – Seattle</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Coach Works of Virginia – Tuckedo, Md.</td>
<td>$42,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northwestern Stage Lines – Spokane, Wash.</td>
<td>$33,750</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oklahoma Trailways – Tulsa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Onondaga Coach Corp. – Auburn, N.Y.</td>
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<td>Peter Pan Bus Lines – Springfield, Mass.</td>
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<td>Philpotts Bus Service – Winnom, Minn.</td>
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<td>Pioneer Coach Lines – Chicago</td>
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<td>Plymouth &amp; Brockton – Plymouth, Mass.</td>
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<td>Premier Alaska Tours – Anchorage</td>
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<td>Premier Coach Company – Colchester, Vt.</td>
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<td>Prestige Transportation Systems – Wichita, Kan.</td>
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<td>Ready Bus Line – La Crescent, Minn.</td>
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<td>River Trails Transit Lines – Galena, Ill.</td>
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<td>Robert Howard – Honolulu</td>
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<td>Royal Tours – Asheboro, N.C.</td>
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<td>Si Texas Tours – Bandera, Texas</td>
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<td>Sierra Stage Coaches – South Houston, Texas</td>
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<td>Sierra Trailways of California – Sacramento</td>
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<td>Silverado Stages – San Luis Obispo, Calif.</td>
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<td>Southern Coach Co. – Durham, N.C.</td>
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<td>Southeastern Trailways – Indiana</td>
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<td>Southwest Coaches – Marshall, N.C.</td>
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<td>Southwestern Illinois Bus Co. – Chester, Ill.</td>
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<td>St. Cloud Charter Service – St. Cloud, Minn.</td>
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<td>Star Transit Company – Trenton, N.J.</td>
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<td>Sunrise Coaches – Greenport, N.Y.</td>
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<td>Syracuse and Oswego Coach – East Syracuse, N.Y.</td>
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<td>T&amp;M&amp;O – Lubbock, Texas</td>
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<td>The Enterprise System – Phoenix, Ariz.</td>
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<td>Trans-Bridge Lines – Bethlehem, Pa.</td>
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<td>Triple J Tours – Las Vegas</td>
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<td>Utica Rome Bus Company – Clinton, N.Y.</td>
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<td>Valley Transit – Harlingen, Texas</td>
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<td>Vandala Bus Lines – Caseyville, Ill.</td>
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<td>Van Galder Bus Co. – Janesville, Wis.</td>
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<td>Vermont Transit – Burlington, Vt.</td>
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<td>Village Charters – Wichita, Kan.</td>
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<td>Wisconsin Coach Lines – Waukesha, Wis.</td>
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WASHINGTON — The Federal Transit Administration has announced that nearly $7.43 million is available this year to help private motorcoach operators pay for the installation of wheelchair lifts on new and used coaches.

The amount for the fiscal 2006 Over-the-Road Bus Accessibility Program is similar to the amounts awarded in each of the past five years. In fiscal 2005, 93 over-the-road companies received federal grants totaling nearly $6.9 million. (See accompanying list.) In fiscal 2004, grants totaling $6.89 million were awarded to 74 operators.

A year ago, a total of 120 companies applied for the ’05 grants, meaning 27 operators that sought money got none. Instead, they received a letter explaining how the FTA makes its funding decisions.

The FTA says it bases its selections on applicants’ responsiveness to “statutory project selection criteria” (which are spelled out in the announcement for the grants), fleet size and level of funding received in previous years.

For fiscal ’06, $5.57 million will be available for intercity, fixed-route operators, and roughly $1.86 million for local fix-route, commuter, charter, tour, and special operations carriers.

If you are strictly a charter-and-tour bus operator, you can just about forget about winning one of the grants. That’s because Congress decided last year that most of the money should go to fixed-route operators.

Acting on the Congressional mandate, the FTA lumped charter operators in with local fixed-route and commuter services, diluting the amount of money likely to end up in the hands of tour-and-charter operators. (See Dec. 15, 2005 Bus & Motorcoach News.)

The wheelchair-lift grants are awarded on a competitive basis. To apply, operators must submit a completed application to the FTA regional office that covers the state where the applicant is based. There are 10 regional FTA offices and their locations are listed in the announcement of the grants that was published in the Federal Register last month.

The deadline to apply is April 3.

The 10-page announcement can be found on the Internet at the FTA Web site: www.fta.dot.gov. Applications may be submitted to FTA in hard copy or electronically through the GRANTS.GOV APPLY function. However, unless you have previously registered at GRANTS.GOV, you may miss the deadline because registering at the Web site frequently takes several weeks to complete.

The notices about the program spell out the application process, which is no cakewalk. Grants under the program generally range from around $21,000 to about $200,000 — except for Greyhound Lines. Greyhound typically ends up getting about 40 percent of the total. No operator receives as much as it applies for.

Questions? Contact the FTA regional administrator in your area for application-specific information. For general program information, contact Blenda Younger, Officer of Program Management, at (202) 366-2053, or e-mail: blenda.younger@fta.dot.gov.

The federal money can be used to add lifts, tie-downs, moveable seats, doors, and all labor costs associated with work needed to make a coach accessible. The money can be used either for retrofitting coaches or helping offset the cost of having a lift installed in a new coach. The money also can be used to pay for training, or pay costs already incurred.

How to contact us:

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  - Mail: 4930 W. Glendale Ave., Suite 6
  - Glendale, AZ 85301
  - Call: (623) 930-8423

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SCHAUMBURG, Ill. – Motor Coach Industries has announced that its long-time biggest customer, Greyhound Lines, has ordered 36 MCI D4505 coaches.

At the same time, MCI said it is increasing the production rate at its plants and hiring additional workers. The Greyhound order is the first purchase of new coaches by the Dallas-based line-haul company in two years, and is only slightly larger than its last two new-coach buys. In 2004, Greyhound purchased 20 G4500s and in 2003 it purchased 34 G models. Last year, Greyhound didn’t buy any new MCI coaches.

There were years in the 1990s when Greyhound would purchase upwards of 200 new MCIs annually as it sought to build a more modern fleet. Last year, the company made the strategic decision to have much of its fleet refurbished, including installation of new interiors — complete with new passenger seating; a new exterior livery, and retrofitting of wheelchair lifts in hundreds of coaches to bring the company into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. By October, half of Greyhound’s fleet must be wheelchair accessible.

The MCI D4505s that Greyhound is adding are an updated, restyled version of the industry’s all-time, top-selling coach, the D4500. Greyhound’s new D4505s will be equipped with Detroit Diesel Series 60 engines and ZF AS-Tronic transmissions. Greyhound reportedly likes the fuel economy of the ZF.

MCI will deliver 30 new D4505s to Greyhound Canada and 6 D4505s to Greyhound Lines in the U.S. by June 30.

“We’re very pleased with Greyhound’s decision to add the D4505 to its fleet,” said Tom Sorrells, MCI president and chief executive. “The D4505 provides the kind of operating efficiency and superior performance that this carrier has come to expect from our D-series coaches.”

Meanwhile, double-digit, first-quarter sales gains have prompted MCI to boost production and hiring. “Sales of our D4505 have exceeded our expectations and complement the continued popularity of the J4500,” said Sorrells. “We’ve planned carefully and we anticipate a robust manufacturing schedule through at least 2007 — as private operators and public agencies replace aging equipment or add newer, technologically advanced models.”

At its plant in Winnipeg, Manitoba, MCI has added nearly 130 employees, reported Mike Cuma, executive director of human resources. “We still have key staff positions open and are looking for qualified candidates,” Cuma added.

MCI’s plants in Winnipeg and Pembina, N.D., have increased line rates by 14 percent this quarter and expect an overall increase of roughly 20 percent for the year, according to Rob Perry, MCI vice president of operations.

Perry noted that MCI met all promised delivery dates last year and is “committed to matching that achievement in 2006.”
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FMCSA CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
safety) grant funds to revise their commercial vehicle safety plans to include a bus inspection program.” She said she expects states to begin acting on the request this year.

The states that do not have formal bus inspection programs are: Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri and Montana.

Also, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North and South Carolina, North and South Dakota, Oregon, Tennessee, Washington and Wyoming.

Sandberg told the House committee that bus fires “are a chronic problem throughout the entire industry.” She reported the problem of coach fires “is not limited to curside (cut-rate linehaul) bus companies.”

There have been a handful of highly publicized bus fires in recent months involving Chinese-American-owned bus companies.

ADA CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
“Based on the hundreds of telephone calls FMCSA receives from bus companies about ADA regulations, we have found they frequently do not understand their responsibility to provide timely, accessible bus service to individuals with disabilities,” Sandberg told members of the committee.

The sweep by the FMCSA in December was part of a bigger crackdown by the agency on interstate operators — low-fare lines, tour-and-charter carriers and others — that flout federal safety regulations.

All told, the compliance reviews found 176 alleged violations, most for safety-related infractions, such as failing to conduct health examinations of drivers and alcohol tests on drivers, officials said.

Those reviews followed surprise inspections of 403 buses — mostly operated by cut-rate linehaul operators — in October that turned up more than 500 alleged violations, including speeding, bad brakes, falsifying records that document how long drivers had been on the road, and drug and alcohol testing regulations. (See Dec. 15 Bus & Motorcoach News.)

Following the October inspections, the FMCSA ordered 56 buses and 13 drivers out of service.

However, the out-of-service rate for the coaches that were inspected was not abnormally high. Based on figures released by the FMCSA, the out-of-service rate for the coaches was 14 percent and 3.25 percent for drivers.

By comparison, the out-of-service rate for the 860 motorcoaches stopped during Roadcheck 2005 last June was 11.7 percent and 2.7 percent for drivers. That means the out-of-service rate for the cut-rate operators was 2.3 percentage points higher than the operators stopped during the Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance roadside safety blitz in June, which is well publicized.

Still, the FMCSA has come under criticism from people both inside and outside the bus industry for not doing enough to assure operators are complying with federal safety regulations.

“News reports, police accident reports and passenger complaints all present the picture that these curside operators lack the proper equipment, trained drivers and the necessary safety protocols,” Peter J. Pantuso, chief executive of the American Bus Association, told a Congressional hearing earlier this month. (See related story on Page 1.)

Cheek Horan, the FMCSA’s enforcement and compliance director, told the Post that hurricane "We do not want to be targeted just because we are threatening the bottom line of the big bus companies.’’

Hurricane CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
Although the federal government put out the call for the buses, it passed the work of rounding them up to Landstar Systems, a trucking logistics company that has had a long standing transportation contract with the government.

Landstar, in turn, subcontracted with Transportation Management Systems and Bus Bank to bring in additional coaches.

Motorcoach operators began complaining short after the bulk of the work was completed, saying they were not getting paid on a timely basis.

Finally, payments are starting to arrive, companies that have been waiting the longest . . . and they are owed.”

Pat Wessinger of Get A Way Charters in Woodland, Wash., said she has received only about one-half of the $500,000 she is owed, and she’s continuing to push the private companies and the government for her money. She has flooded federal agencies and congressional offices with telephone calls in hopes of stirring things up enough to get the rest of her money. “As soon as I started rattling the cages, they started coming up with some money,” she said.

Scott Fletcher of Tri-State Charters in Murphy, N.C., said his payments have reached about $70,000, which is less than half the $200,000 he is owed. “That’s OK, now, but it certainly is not good enough,” he said. “We’ve carried this about as long as we can and we need our money because we still have fuel to buy, insurance expenses to pay, and bus payments to make.”

Much of the operators’ criticism has centered on the federal government allowing so many private companies to take part in the hiring of the buses and the contractors’ abysmal record of communicating with the coach companies.

“Had they gone only with Bus Bank and TMS there probably would not have been very many problems,” suggests Wessinger.

Fletcher agrees, saying that he had little trouble dealing with TMS, maintaining that the problems were “higher up” in the system. “I believe that when TMS got its money, it passed it on to the operators,” he said.

Much of the criticism has focused on Carey, which many believe has been the primary bottleneck. Carey’s reputation has suffered badly in the motorcoach industry.

Winston indicated things might have worked better, too, if all of the companies involved in the hiring of the buses had communicated better with each other and with the operators. “The communications were awful . . . there weren’t any,” she stressed.

Polzien said there were too many layers of brokers between the government and the operators for the operation to work well.

“The government was paying $1,515 a day and the brokers were taking out 50 percent and paying the operators $700, and that’s ridiculous,” he said. “The money should have gone to the people who were taking the risk and doing the work.”
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SAINTE-CLAIRE, Quebec — Prevost Car has named a new national manager of its pre-owned bus sales unit, expanded the territory of one of its veteran sales managers, and announced the hiring of a long-time coach industry sales executive.

Dan Marrazzo is the new national manager of the Prevost pre-owned coach division. Dan joined Prevost six years ago as a regional sales manager and was promoted to national sales operations manager a year later. Marrazzo has more than 15 years of bus industry experience.

Anthony Febbo, Prevost’s northeast regional sales manager for the past two years, has had his territory expanded to include all of New England. Febbo began working at Prevost in the 1980s in the parts division. He moved to sales 10 years ago as the first pre-owned coach sales manager in the U.S. He has more than 15 years of industry experience.

Mark Lein joins Prevost as pre-owned coach regional sales manager for the West Coast. He will be responsible for pre-owned vehicle sales in Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. Lein started in the bus industry 25 years ago as a service technician and went on to sell used and new motorcoaches and transit buses. He is a former regional sales manager at MCI.

Lein can be contacted at the Prevost Mira Loma, Calif., branch at (800) 421-9958 or at 951-314-4406. Reach Marrazzo at (856) 986-7552, and Febbo at (201) 410-0670.

DaimlerChrysler honors sales pros

GREENSBORO, N.C. — DaimlerChrysler Commercial Buses North America has presented its 2005 Salesperson of the Year awards to Don Jensen of Setra, Bob Sonia of Orion, and Janet Cathey of Dodge Sprinter.

Jensen, northwest regional sales manager for Setra, also was recognized for his 25 years of service with the company.

Sonia, northeast regional sales manager for Orion, has been with the company for 24 years.

Cathey, national accounts sales manager for Sprinter, has more than 18 years of industry experience.

“Don, Bob and Janet exemplify the key attributes that our organization works to achieve on a daily basis in the areas of customer service and professionalism. We appreciate their efforts,” said Patrick Scully, chief commercial officer for DaimlerChrysler Commercial Buses.
Drivers are honored for safety, skill

Two drivers for Holiday Tours in Randlemann, N.C. have been honored for their safe driving, while a driver for Discovery Coach in Sheboygan, Wis., has been recognized for his professionalism.

At its annual Employee Appreciation Dinner, Holiday Tours honored drivers Albert W. Johnson of Winston-Salem, N.C., and Kenneth B. Morrow of Mt. Gilead, N.C., for achieving one million miles of safe driving.

“This is a rarely achieved milestone by two professional drivers faced with the challenges of meeting deadlines, heavy traffic and unfamiliar landscapes,” said Holiday Tours President David Brown.

In addition to being recognized at the company event, Johnson and Morrow are being awarded Caribbean cruise vacations with their spouses “as a reward for jobs well done,” said Brown.

David Kirchstein, a driver for Discovery Coach in Sheboygan, was named motorcoach Operator of the Year by the Guild of Professional Tour Guides of Washington, D.C.

Kirchstein was chosen for his overall professionalism, including his driving skill, respect and politeness in dealing with passengers and guides, knowledge of Washington, and concern for safety.

Kirchstein has been driving for Discovery for 12 years.

Industry publisher marks milestone

POLO, Ill. — Veteran publisher Larry Plachno marks a significant milestone in June, with the publication of the 500th bus industry magazine he has edited and issued.

“This is a major milestone for any company and one that reflects well upon our entire industry,” said Karin Walk, marketing manager at National Bus Trader, the flagship magazine published by Plachno.

The June issue of National Bus Trader will be the 500th bus magazine produced by Plachno and much of the “celebratory” issue’s content will be devoted to messages of congratulations to Plachno.

Individuals interested in submitting congratulatory notes can send them to National Bus Trader at 9698 W. Judson Rd., Polo, IL 61064-2341. Messages also can be faxed to (815) 946-2347 or sent by e-mail to adv@busmag.com. The deadline is March 31.

Plachno has published National Bus Trader for 29 years. He also produces Bus Tours Magazine and publishes historical transportation books.
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