

# Bus & Motorcoach NEWS

WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE BUS INDUSTRY

## FTA may withhold \$600,000 from charter rules violator

### Akron Metro transit used sham operator

AKRON, Ohio — Akron's public transit agency violated federal charter rules at least 475 times during a three-year period and should lose \$622,500 in federal funding, a regional administrator for the Federal Transit Administration has ruled.

The landmark decision has profound implications for private bus operators, as well as public transit systems, all across the U.S.

It marks the first time the FTA has used new federal legislation, signed into law by President Bush in August, giving the FTA the power to both withhold federal

money and fine a public transit system that engages in a pattern of charter rules violations.

"This will embolden private carriers to take on transit agencies because now we know there are realistic penalties available to us," said Richard P. Schweitzer, general counsel for the American Bus Association and the driving force

behind the allegations that resulted in the important ruling.

Schweitzer told the *Akron Beacon Journal* newspaper that the decision "is a tremendous precedent for the entire private bus industry."

The FTA ruling was welcome news at Lakefront Lines of Brook Park, Ohio, the largest private

operator in the state and one of the many bus company victims of the illegal charters operated by Akron Metro Regional Transit Authority.

"We applaud the decision and hope it stops them," said Thomas Goebel, president of Lakefront.

In his ruling, the FTA regional administrator in Chicago said

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## Coach USA to launch low-fare service

On April 10, Coach USA will begin cut-rate, curbside intercity bus service between Chicago and nine Midwestern cities. Called megabus.com, the Internet-driven express service will offer cheap rides to and from Chicago and Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Indianapolis, Milwaukee,

Minneapolis, St. Louis, and Columbus, Ohio. The lowest one-way fare will be \$1, plus a 50 cents reservation fee. Three or four seats on each one-way trip will be available for \$1. Most one-way fares will range from \$9 to \$27.50, depending on the destination. See complete story on page 3.

## 800-900 (legal) parking spaces for motorcoaches now open in Washington

WASHINGTON — Starting April 1, upwards of 800 to 900 close-in parking spaces will be available exclusively for tour and charter buses visiting the nation's capital.

Yes, hundreds of legal parking spots that are roughly seven minutes away by coach from the Washington Mall.

Here's the deal: The DC Sports & Entertainment Commission announced late last month it will begin providing daily parking for motorcoaches at Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) Memorial Stadium.

Stadium Lot 8 has been designated exclusively for motorcoaches on a daily basis, and Lot 6 will be used by coaches on those days when the Washington Nationals Major League Baseball team or DC United professional soccer team have day games. Roughly

half of the Nationals' day games are on weekends.

The RFK parking lots will be staffed from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and motorcoaches will have easy access via the SE/SW (Eisenhower) Expressway, allowing quick trips to and from downtown and other tourist areas.

The all-day parking rate for RFK has been set at \$30, with in-and-out privileges.

The sports commission's milestone announcement comes nearly four years after a concerted effort was begun by District of Columbia officials, private businesses and motorcoach industry groups to find workable solutions to the decades-old problem of tour bus parking that's convenient for groups visiting downtown Washington, the Capitol and memorials

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## Bus fires are Topic A in industry and at ABC workshop

WINTER GARDEN, Fla. — Bus fires continue to be a critical issue in the motorcoach industry.

While most people — operators, insurers, manufacturers, safety experts and others — have worried about them for years, heightened interest in fires is now turning up seemingly everywhere, from casual

conversation, to formal meetings and seminars.

The cause and impact of bus fires was issue No. 1 last month at the 2006 ABC Companies Collision Workshop, with almost all of the topics on the day-long agenda touching on the problem.

ABC bases the agenda for the

workshop series it has been conducting annually for seven years on what those attending want most to hear and talk about. The workshops usually draw more than 50 people from throughout the country.

"We try to respond to what you people want us to present," Greg Dotseth, an ABC operations man-

ager, told the group that gathered for this year's workshop at the company's sprawling service and sales facility outside of Orlando.

A seeming rash of high-profile bus fires, including the incident that killed 23 people during last year's hurricane evacuation effort in Texas that grabbed national

media attention for several weeks, has sparked increased interest in the issue by Washington regulators, safety officials, insurance companies and operators.

The interest even extended beyond the scheduled agenda of the ABC workshop. One insurance

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# Coach USA plans low-fare, curbside service from Chicago



Curbside pick up will be a hallmark of the megabus.com service

CHICAGO — Coach USA is launching a Chicago-based, cut-rate intercity bus service based on the successful similar service its parent company began between major cities in Scotland about three years ago. That service has expanded to 40 locations throughout the United Kingdom.

Called megabus.com, the Internet-driven, curbside service will offer cheap express runs between Chicago and Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, St. Louis, and Columbus, Ohio.

The service, which begins

April 10, also will operate direct service between Indianapolis and Cincinnati, and Indianapolis and Columbus.

The lowest one-way fare will be \$1, plus a 50 cents reservation fee. At least three or four seats on each one-way trip will be available for \$1. Most one-way fares, however, will range from \$9 to \$27.50, depending on the destination.

When megabus.com was launched by Stagecoach Group in Scotland in September 2003, the lowest fare was one British pound, or roughly \$1.66. (See Oct. 15, 2003, *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

The highest prices at the time were between \$5 and \$6.65 (U.S.). Today, one-way fares for a 200-mile trip in the UK average the equivalent of \$10 (U.S.).

In the UK, megabus.com yield manages its seats just like airlines, meaning last-minute ticket buyers typically pay more.

The trips for the Chicago-based megabus.com service will range from 92 miles (Chicago to Milwaukee), to 409 miles (Chicago to Minneapolis). Six of the service's eight trips are more than 285 miles.

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## Insurance market softens but rates aren't expected to turn down, say experts

Earlier in this decade, one of the true hot-button issues among motorcoach operators was insurance premiums. The complaints from operators were loud... and they were often.

The grumbling has softened, just like the insurance market.

Depending on which motorcoach industry insurer you speak with, rates have either "softened" or "stabilized," and the difference may be more than semantics. Regardless of the term, however, the bottom line with insurance rates these days is an operator's loss record.

Good record?

Better rates.

Still, for those operators who've recorded claims that generally impact rates, insurers have a suggestion or two for things that can be done to ease the financial pain.

Michelle Silvestro of National Interstate Insurance, the No. 2 bus industry insurer, is among those who say the market is softening, primarily because of increasing competition. The number of insurance companies in the market is on the rise, and prices are decreasing or holding steady, she says.

"Let me qualify that," Silvestro adds. "Companies are still underwriting the industry, but if an insured had an adverse loss experience, that (operator) won't see pricing go down. We're still looking at pricing on an individual basis, account by account."

But Silvestro says that even with softening, she doesn't expect to see a price war like the industry experienced in the late 1990s. "It's getting very competitive and companies are willing to go the extra mile to keep and write good accounts," she says.

Because there has been a degree of softening, Silvestro says some insurers are becoming more aggressive, particularly in the Northeast. "They got out of the market and now they're getting back in."

Philip Love of Rodes-Roper-Love Insurance of Melbourne, Fla., says operators that have good safety programs and watch their losses can find good insurance deals today. "I see the market softening up a little bit," he says.

Fran Walsh, vice president of Lancer Insurance Co., the largest insurer of motorcoaches, is in the camp of those who say the market is stable.

"Based on over 21 years that we have been a major bus and motorcoach insurer, the current market is as stable as ever," Walsh said.

"The insurance companies that are truly committed to the bus and motorcoach industry have successfully stabilized the market after enduring the severe price fluctuations caused by the entry and claims-related exit of several naïve multi-line insurance companies in the late 1990s and early 2000s," she said.

A tried-and-true tip Walsh offers for getting a good deal on insurance, regardless of past claims, is to adopt a higher deductible on liability and physical damage premiums. "It's quick, it's easy and it's very effective," she says.

"By doing a little homework and using loss runs from the past five years, good operators can draw a line between the predictable losses and fund them internally through deductible use, and use their insurance premiums to pay for the

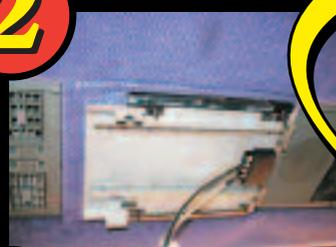
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# THE DOCKET

## Diesel, gasoline to remain pricey

WASHINGTON — The price of diesel fuel is projected to average \$2.49 per gallon this year and slip slightly to \$2.42 next year, the U.S. Department of Energy forecasts.

Demand for diesel is projected to grow by nearly 4 percent both this year and next as the economy continues to expand and as fuel prices ease slightly, DOE's Energy Information Administration reported.

Last month, the price of diesel fuel moved past \$2.50 a gallon for the first time this year in the DOE's weekly survey, rising by month's end to more than \$2.58 a gallon.

Gasoline prices this summer are expected to rise above \$2.50 per gallon. Retail regular gasoline is projected to average \$2.42 this year, 15 cents above last year, and \$2.36 per gallon in 2007, the agency said.

The price of diesel fuel is currently roughly 34 cents a gallon higher than it was this time a year ago.

## Senators push new biodiesel bill

WASHINGTON — Two U.S. senators have introduced legislation designed to push development of alternative and renewable fuel technologies to decrease American dependence on foreign oil.

Included in the bill is a provision that would create an alternative diesel standard in the U.S. that would require two billion gallons of biodiesel be mixed into the 40 billion gallon annual national diesel pool by 2015.

The legislation, put together by Senators Barack Obama, D-Ill., and Richard Lugar, R-Ind., is called the American Fuels Act of 2006 (S. 2446). It proposes a four-step approach to reducing imports of foreign oil.

First, it would spur investment in alternative fuels by increasing the production of cellulosic biomass ethanol to 250 million gallons by 2012. And it would require that 5 percent of the diesel fuel sold in the U.S. in 10 years contain biodiesel.

Second, the bill would give a 35-cents-per-gallon tax credit for E85 fuel and give automakers a \$100 tax credit for every E85-capable vehicle they produce.

Third, it would require the U.S. government to allow public access to alternative and renewal fuel stations on federal property, and require that only "clean buses" be eligible for federal cost sharing.

Finally, the legislation would create a director of energy security "to oversee and keep America focused on its goal of energy independence."

### Washington adopts biodiesel measure

OLYMPIA, Wash. — The state senate in Washington has approved a bill to boost the use of 2 percent biodiesel fuel, and the measure is likely to be signed into law.

Under the bill, by December 2008, 2 percent of all diesel sales in the state must be biodiesel and all gasoline sold in Washington

state must contain least 2 percent ethanol.

Gov. Christine Gregoire is expected to sign the measure. It is estimated that Washington will require up to 21.2 million gallons of biodiesel annually for in-state use.

### Michigan bill seeks biodiesel tax breaks

LANSING, Mich. — The Michigan House has approved a bill that would provide bus operators and other motorists a tax break for purchasing fuel with biodiesel and higher ethanol.

Under the bill, the state tax would be 12 cents a gallon on those fuels, compared to the current 15 cents per gallon for regular diesel fuel and 19 cents for regular gasoline.

The incentive in Michigan covers 5 percent biodiesel, which is higher than requirements adopted in Minnesota and Washington state, which are phasing in 2 percent biodiesel mandates.

## Calif. diesel bill worries operators

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — A worrisome new bill that creates a diesel particulate monitoring program at airports and elsewhere is making its way through the California legislature.

The measure, dubbed the "magnet bill" because it contends that certain facilities attract diesel particulate emissions like magnets, would require airports, ports and rail yards to monitor emissions at their facilities, designate sources of emissions, and develop and implement mitigation plans to reduce emissions.

The California General Assembly passed the measure in January and it has been assigned to the Senate transportation committee.

Trucking groups worry the bill will provide regulatory authority to local air districts to control mobile diesel sources, resulting in a patchwork of local, facility-specific requirements, thereby creating widely varied regulations.

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## Study says driver behavior causes most truck crashes

WASHINGTON — A “two-year study” that took the federal government more than five years to complete, has found that drivers of large trucks and other vehicles involved in truck crashes are nearly 10 times more likely to be the cause of the crashes than anything else.

While the study’s principal finding is not a major surprise, it still is expected to lead to additional federal regulatory focus on truck and bus drivers, plus trigger a new round of driver-related studies.

The Large Truck Crash Causation Study was initiated by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in January 2001, and was to be completed in two years.

The FMCSA commissioned the study to find the causes of and contributing factors for crashes involving large, over-the-road rigs. While previous studies focused on specific crashes and individual causes of crashes, the large truck study was the first nationwide examination of “all pre-crash

factors.”

The FMCSA says it now will begin to analyze such driver factors as use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs, speeding, fatigue, inattention, distractions, work environment and unfamiliarity with the road.

“This study makes it clear that we need to spend more time addressing driver behavior, as well as making sure trucks and buses are fit for the road,” said FMCSA Administrator Annette M. Sandberg in announcing the study results.

“The multitude of data now available will allow us to analyze specific areas of behavior and work with our industry and safety partners to develop an agenda on driver safety that will improve commercial motor vehicle driver performance,” she added.

Victor Parra, president and CEO of the United Motorcoach Association, was troubled that Sandberg included the bus industry in her remarks about the study.

“I’m concerned that Sandberg includes ‘buses’ in her comments, despite the fact that the research reviewed only truck accidents,”



Annette Sandberg

said Parra. “No crashes involving buses were examined in the study,” Parra observed.

The FMCSA has a separate study under way of bus crashes (see story at right).

The truck study investigated hundreds of fatal and injury crashes between April 2001 and December 2003 in 17 states. Each crash involved at least one large truck and resulted in at least one fatality or injury. The total sample of 967 crashes included 1,127 large trucks, 959 non-truck motor vehicles, 251 fatalities, and 1,408 injuries.

Action or inaction by the driver of either the truck or other vehicle was the critical reason for 88 percent of the crashes.

For copies of the report, go to [www.fmcsa.dot.gov](http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov).

## Oops. FMCSA is forced to widen bus crash study, comes up short on data

WASHINGTON D.C. — A federal study into the causes of bus crashes that was criticized for not being broad enough to obtain meaningful results has been extended by a full year and expanded to cover a wider area.

The Bus Crash Causation Study that the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration began in January 2005 now will continue toward the end of 2007, at least 12 months longer than initially planned.

In addition, the geographical area in which accident information is being gathered has been broadened from the northeastern part of New Jersey to the entire state.

Despite the move by the FMCSA to expand the area and length of the study so it can come up with sufficient information, the agency failed to quell criticism, with a warning the study still is not broad enough to produce enough information to reach valuable conclusions.

“It’s still doomed to failure,” asserts Norm Littler, the new vice president of regulatory and industry affairs at the American Bus Association and executive director of the Bus Industry Safety Council, a unit of the ABA.

Littler’s comments were made before he left his job last month as senior vice president of the United Motorcoach Association. He was one of the study’s earliest critics.

FMCSA spokesman Ian Grossman said the agency had hoped to study between 50 and 100 serious accidents in 2005, but found only 23 crashes by the end of the year.

“The timeline was extended because there were not as many bus crashes as we had anticipated, which, of course, is great news,” he said. “But that means we needed to extend the data collection period to have an appropriate set of data.”

He said extending the collection period from one year to two and expanding the study area should put the accident count over 50 by the end of the year. After that, he said, researchers are expected to take several months to review and evaluate the data and should issue its findings sometime late next year.

Grossman said the cost of the study has been increased to \$500,000 from \$450,000 because of the new timeline.

In addition to studying new accidents occurring in New Jersey, researchers are looking at accident databases and insurance information on past accidents. The review

of the new accidents includes a look at possible causation indicators such as a carrier having high numbers of previous accidents, moving violations and out-of-service safety infractions.

The study, mandated by the Motor Carrier Safety Improvement Act of 1999, came under heavy fire from the motorcoach industry at the outset. Industry executives maintained the target area was too small to produce results that would reflect what actually is happening throughout the country. (See Dec. 15, 2004, and March 1 and June 1, 2005, issues of *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

Littler, one of the harshest critics, contended the study would be further skewed because New Jersey has a robust bus safety enforcement program. And, he said, there is ample evidence that states with strict bus enforcement programs are the least likely jurisdictions to have high crash occurrences.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety also complained to the FMCSA about the study methods, warning the results would be rejected by safety organizations and others.

The FMCSA defended its initial plans, saying that historically New Jersey has enough bus accidents to provide researchers with sufficient data to reach reliable conclusions on the causes of crashes. Additionally, it held that the state also has a variety of bus operations — private church transportation, commuter runs, inner city transit, and professional motorcoach tours and charters — that would add valuable input to the study.

Littler said the only reasonable way to obtain results that would be valuable to the industry is to study accidents in all 50 states. “You have to cast the net wide so you can do some comparisons,” he said. “We should see how the accidents compare in states with safety programs and states without them, and if the accidents occurred on highways or secondary streets or in urban areas or in rural areas.”

He stressed that the problems the agency is now having with the study could have been avoided had the FMCSA sought the advice of industry representatives during the planning stages of the study. “Had we been part of it, we would have pointed some of those things out,” he added. “Now it looks like no one is willing to admit that they made a mistake.”

## Operators urged to plan for pandemic

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Transportation is recommending that bus and truck operators begin immediately developing plans for dealing with the threat of a worldwide pandemic flu.

Companies should take steps that will help protect employees’ health and safety, plus limit the negative impact of a pandemic on their operations and business, say USDOT officials.

Last month, administrators from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration and the Federal Railroad Administration briefed top executives from the United Motorcoach and American Bus associations and the American Trucking Associations on plans the USDOT is making to deal with a possible pandemic influenza.

The federal administrators also wanted to explain how DOT’s essential services would continue to function and the agency would be the primary source of industry information in the event of a pandemic.

Those briefing the association executives were Joel Szabat, program manager at the Federal Railroad Administration; John Hill, FMCSA assistant administrator/ chief safety officer, and William A. Quade, director of the Office of Safety Programs at the FMCSA.

“Basically, they wanted to convey their goals, which were — should a pandemic flu hit the US — to make sure the surface transportation systems continue with minimal disruption and the DOT’s essential services continue,” said Victor Parra, president and CEO of the UMA.

Other key points made during the briefing include:

1. The government is working on a national pandemic flu plan that is nearing completion.
2. It is estimated that if pandemic flu hits the U.S., it will result in a near 30 percent absentee job rate and 5-11 percent drop in the U.S. Gross Domestic Product.
3. Everyone in the ground

transportation industry needs to be aware of the potential problem and prepare for it.

4. Operators should have a company hygiene and business continuity plan in place.

5. Owners and managers should go to [www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/](http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/). At the Web address, click on the “Business” link that leads to a page with a link to several “planning checklist(s)” that identify specific steps and tasks companies should implement.

For example, there are checklists for planning for the impact of a pandemic on your business and another for the impact on employees and customers. There also is a checklist for policies that should be developed during a pandemic, the location of resources to protect employees and customers, and communicating and coordinating with others during a pandemic.

“They also wanted us to know that guidance is coming,” said Parra.

## Vermont House OKs hike in state diesel fuel, gas tax

MONTELIER, Vt. — The Vermont House has approved a transportation budget that includes a six-cent-a-gallon increase in the state diesel fuel tax.

Under the plan, the diesel tax would increase to 32 cents, and the

gasoline tax would increase by 4 cents to 24 cents.

It is unclear whether the plan will pass the state Senate or whether Gov. James Douglas would approve the idea.

Studies have estimated the state

is \$24 million short on funds to pay for the state Agency of Transportation and to raise enough money to qualify for \$300 million in federal money for road projects through 2009.

## Cuts of Katrina

Sure, the feds had to hire help quickly as they worked to relieve the suffering caused by Hurricane Katrina. But that haste doesn't begin to explain away the layers of contractors that The Washington Post discovered were taking pieces of federal hurricane recovery contracts in Louisiana.

An article carried by The Charlotte New & Observer portrays an unmanageable web of contractors called out to clean up after disasters. Besides being expensive, this so-called system has rewarded contractors for doing little to help other than paperwork. What happens is that federal agencies in charge of disaster-related contracts turn first to prime contractors large enough to carry the necessary insurance. The primes are legally free to hire subcontractors, and they do.

One particularly galling example is Landstar Systems Inc., a \$2 billion company hired for the bus evacuation of New Orleans. Landstar, a transportation broker, has no buses. And people had already been stranded at the New Orleans Superdome for 48 hours when the Federal Emergency Management Agency called on it.

Landstar then subcontracted with another company (Carey Limousine), which hired two other outfits (Bus Bank and Transportation Management Systems) to hire charter bus companies. Everybody got a cut.

Hundreds of buses eventually made it to New Orleans, earning Landstar \$1,200 a bus — nearly double (what it paid) the charter companies.

Landstar is far from the only example of contractors feeding at the federal trough. In fact, the Post found that the difference between the actual cost of Katrina cleanup jobs and the price charged to taxpayers ranged from 40 percent to 1,700 percent. That difference equals waste, pure and simple.

It's waste the hurricane-ravaged areas can't afford. New Orleans, for example, needs \$3 billion for levees strong enough to encourage displaced residents to rebuild devastated neighborhoods, but Congress has diverted half the money.

The House Government Reform Committee expects to hold a hearing on Katrina waste this month. A parade of contractors and subcontractors testifying under oath may be what it takes to begin reining in these runaway costs. When even middlemen have middlemen, it's time for Washington to put a stop to it.

Reprinted from *The News & Observer*, Charlotte, N.C.

## Truckers hotly debate governing speed

A fierce debate among truckers — that easily could spill over into the over-the-road bus industry — has erupted over the idea of limiting the top speed of tractor-trailers to 68 miles per hour.

Leading the charge among truckers to restrict the highway speed of 18-wheelers is the industry's largest trade group, the American Trucking Association.

The ATA board has formally adopted a speed-limiting policy and, in the process, touched off an emotional and polarizing industry debate.

As Dave Osiecki, ATA's vice president for safety, security and operations, put it: "There doesn't seem to be anybody in between on this one."

The rationale behind the concept appears altruistic and, in the main, logical: Growing congestion in more and more areas of the U.S. seems to be fueling a rise in speeding, with more vehicles driving over the posted limits, and by more miles per hour. This seems especially prevalent when congestion starts to thin and drivers jam the accelerator out of frustration and a desire to make up time.

Advocates also say way too many people are still being injured and killed each year in all kinds of highway crashes, most of which — by the way — don't involve trucks, and limiting top speeds could reduce the death toll.

"There has been a growing sense within the trucking industry for the need to slow down the large truck population, as well as all traffic," ATA President Bill Graves said after the ATA board adopted

the policy. "With speeding as a factor in one-third of all fatal highway crashes, it makes all the sense in the world to work to reduce this number."

The debate among truckers also is taking place in Canada. The Canadian Trucking Alliance, that country's largest trucking association, has endorsed legislation to mandate that all trucks of more than 24,250 pounds there have speed governors that would limit them to 105 kilometers per hour, about 65 mph.

David Bradley, CEO of the Canadian trucking trade group, said that while truck drivers are — as a group — the country's safest drivers and the least likely to be excessively speeding, his association wants to "eliminate speeding altogether; the environmental and safety benefits are simply too significant to ignore."

The move by the trucking alliance follows a call by the Ontario Trucking Association in November for speed limiters on all trucks that operate in that province, Canada's largest by population. Bradley also is president of the OTA.

Initially, the ATA strategy in the U.S. is to encourage the makers of diesel engines and over-the-road trucks to limit the top speed of trucks to 68 mph. However, many advocates think legislation may be necessary to limit speeds to 68. But first, ATA says it will talk with fleets and the truck and engine makers to see if a consensus can be reached on the issue.

Such a consensus seems a long way off, judging by the number and content of letters to the editor in trucking publi-

cations.

Those opposed to the idea reject the concept on grounds it doesn't make economic sense, is impractical, and is fraught with potential legal problems.

"When it makes my truck payment and (pays for my) fuel, the ATA can come set my trucks up the way it wants to. Until then, while I write the checks, my trucks will be set up to run the speed that is posted in the state they are operating in," the owner of a trucking and towing company wrote in the trucking newspaper *Transport Topics*.

The same tow-truck operator said he was once called out to help a trucker trapped in his rig as a result of an accident. "I was given a police escort for 35 miles. If my tow unit only ran 68 mph, the trucker would not be living today."

An industry consultant worries that a 68 mph speed limit on new trucks would leave a wide hole for opportunistic attorneys to sue every small trucker and trucking company that exceeds the limit.

While saying he agrees with what ATA is trying to do, the consultant insists the initiative is not needed for the majority of responsible carriers who follow common-sense rules. "In fact, most well-run carriers limit road speed to 65 mph, and whether trucks go 50 mph or 100 mph, there are many variables besides speed that contribute to accidents."

A Tennessee trucker said that for its 2006 new truck order the engine-control modules would be programmed to have a top speed of 65 mph, with an option that gives drivers an extra 3 mph if they achieve a specific mile-per-gallon target.

## Volvo plans diesel hybrids for heavy-duty use in 2009

GOTEBERG, Sweden — Volvo AB, one of the world's largest manufacturers of heavy-duty diesel engines and trucks, says it plans to introduce diesel-electric hybrid power systems for over-the-road trucks.

Volvo said it would begin selling hybrid-powered Class 8 vehicles to the on-highway market by 2009, marking the first time a leading global manufacturer of heavy-duty diesel engines and trucks has aimed the technology to that segment

of the industry.

Volvo, the Swedish parent of Volvo Trucks North America and Prevost Car, said the hybrid power plants could cut annual fuel use by 35 percent, depending on the application.

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## Bus & Motorcoach NEWS

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# FMCSA to resume publication of bus, truck safety scores

WASHINGTON — The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration is getting ready to start putting fleet safety ratings, compiled for its SafeStat program, back on its Web site.

The FMCSA removed the SafeStat data from the Internet two years ago after the U.S. Department of Transportation Inspector General criticized the accuracy of the information and how bus and truck companies were ranked.

"We have been getting ready to repost those scores," said an FMCSA spokesman. They will return, he noted, "probably within the next few weeks."

The FMCSA's decision was immediately criticized by the American Trucking Associations, which says the program remains fraught with problems. The ATA contends the FMCSA is leaving the job of fixing the system "half done, at best; or, more accurately, half undone."

Truckers and safety experts in the motorcoach industry were pleased in 2004 when FMCSA Administrator Annette Sandberg acknowledged flaws in the safety-rating system and pulled it off her agency's Web.

Now Sandburg and her agency are being criticized for reactivating the system before it has been completely fixed.

The FMCSA reportedly has become convinced that it's now getting accurate accident reporting data from most states. However, research by the ATA paints a different picture.

"FMCSA now believes it is receiving 99 percent of crashes required to be reported." However, a detailed study of nine states by the University of Michigan showed "the average underreporting percentage ... [of accidents] is 50 percent," ATA President Bill Graves wrote to Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta.

The ATA and other critics maintain that without accurate data, it is impossible to apply a uniform rule with which to rate the safety records of bus and truck operators. In addition, there are concerns about the validity of the algorithm used to generate the scores assigned to carriers.

After the critical DOT IG analysis in 2004, the FMCSA had an independent assessment done of SafeStat data by the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. In a report

issued last year, the Oak Ridge lab found that "about 90 percent of the carriers identified as at-risk ... (by the SafeStat algorithm) did not have a high crash risk in the post-selection period."

FMCSA has decided, a spokesman explained, to treat the algo-

rithm concerns as "a separate issue," to be addressed after the SafeStat data is reposted.

Among other things, SafeStat is supposed to assure that more regulatory attention is paid to carriers that are involved in more accidents than the norm.

Bus and truck safety experts worry that continued use of flawed or incomplete data will not only severely undermine SafeStat's credibility but also unfairly punish carriers with good safety records, while letting others with lousy safety records escape scrutiny.

## Regulators expand inspections

WASHINGTON — A new report says federal and state inspectors conducted more compliance reviews of bus and truck operators last year but initiated fewer enforcement actions.

There also was a big jump in safety reviews of new over-the-road bus and truck operators, called new-entrant inspections.

The report by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration said there were 7,998 compliance reviews in 2005, 361 more than the previous year. At the

same time, 4,593 state compliance reviews were conducted, 848 more than in '04.

The number of unsatisfactory or out-of-service orders increased from 415 to 596. But the number of enforcement cases begun during the year dropped, from 5,192 in 2004, to 4,427 in 2005.

The total number of new-entrant safety audits increased from 25,316 to 34,121.

The average time to upload a crash to the FMCSA database improved from 84 to 57 days.

## USDOT announces \$22 million for 207 scenic byways projects

WASHINGTON — Communities in 42 states will share more than \$22 million in federal grants for 207 projects that improve and promote highways designated as scenic byways.

The U.S. Department of Transportation grants will be used for projects such as scenic overlooks, visitor information centers, pedestrian trails, bike paths, safety upgrades and educational and promotional materials.

"This investment ensures that we can protect and promote the roads that make America great," said Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta.

The Federal Highway Administration's National Scenic By-

ways Program recognizes and enhances selected roads based on their archaeological, cultural, historic, natural, recreational or scenic qualities.

Since 1992, the program has awarded more than \$250 million in grants for more than 1,800 byway projects.

"The grants we're announcing today will help preserve and promote a collection of diverse American roads that provide unique travel destinations and support countless small businesses," said Richard Capka, acting federal highway administrator.

For a state-by-state list of official byways, go to [www.bywaysonline.org](http://www.bywaysonline.org).

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# President Bush signs law to stop parts counterfeiting

WASHINGTON — President Bush signed into law a measure designed to help stop the increasing number of counterfeit heavy-duty truck and bus parts that are flooding into the U.S.

The Stop Counterfeiting in Manufactured Goods Act, which covers all fake manufactured goods in all industries, “strengthens penalties for counterfeiters and gives prosecutors new tools to stop those who defraud American consumers,” Bush said at the bill signing ceremony.

Product counterfeiting is estimated to cost American auto, bus and truck suppliers approximately \$12 billion in lost sales annually.

There also is growing concern about the safety risks associated with using counterfeit parts. The largest problem in the heavy-duty truck and bus market is counterfeit brake components. Drive train and suspension components also have become more commonplace.

A knock-off brake valve that looks almost identical to a genuine Bendix brake valve has a valve wall that is 56 percent thinner, according to Bendix. Testing by Bendix indicates that using a look-alike part in the braking system can increase stopping distances by 25 to 30 percent.

Among the new law’s long list of provisions is one that closes a

loophole, making it illegal to ship imitation goods.

The legislation also requires courts to order the destruction of equipment used to manufacture knockoffs, and requires that counterfeiters surrender any profits from the sale of imitation goods. The law says that those convicted of counterfeiting must reimburse the legitimate businesses they exploited.

The new law criminalizes the production of stickers, tags, boxes or other items used to traffic fake products.

Plus, it expands the definition of trafficking to include the import and export of counterfeit goods,

and clearly specifies it is illegal to give away counterfeit goods in exchange for some future benefit — in effect, the “bartering” of counterfeit goods. Networks of counterfeiters have used these loopholes to frustrate investigation and prosecution under current law.

“These commonsense reforms will help law enforcement to crack down on this serious crime. We’ve got to get the counterfeiters and

their products off the streets,” said Bush.

Business groups, like the Motor and Equipment Manufacturers Association, hailed the bill’s signing as a positive step to protect U.S. businesses and consumers.

The bill was introduced by Rep. Joe Knollenberg, R-Mich., at the beginning of the 109th Congress. It passed in the House last month and the Senate in February.

## Diabetes rules for drivers may be changed

WASHINGTON — The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration is considering making more changes to the federal rules that restrict drivers with insulin-treated diabetes from operating bus and trucks in interstate commerce.

The agency has published an advanced notice of proposed rule-making to begin re-evaluating the rule. The agency says it wants public comments on whether it should

change its medical standards, and if so, to what extent.

Most recently, the FMCSA revamped its insulin-treated diabetes exemption program in summer 2005.

Evaluating potential changes to the existing driver diabetes rules will be one of the first issues to be tackled by the newly appointed FMCSA Medical Review Board. (See story on page 9.)

Currently, drivers with insulin-treated diabetes mellitus may only operate commercial vehicles in interstate commerce if they obtain an exemption from the FMCSA.

However, getting an exemption still can be a lengthy process because prior to granting the exception the agency is required to examine each applicant’s medical circumstances and publish their names in the Federal Register for public comment.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9

## 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 charter operators step forward to offer their service, or to bid on contract opportunities.

Operators are urged to take the time to respond to these public notices.

**Beaumont, Texas.** Deadline: April 13, 2006. Write to: William J. Munson, General Manager, Beaumont Municipal Transit System, 550 Milam St., Beaumont, Texas 77701. Phone: (409) 835-7895.

**Clinton, Mich.** Deadline: April 17, 2006. Write to: Clinton

Area Transit System, 304 Brush St., St. Johns, MI 48879. Phone: (989) 224-8285.

**Auburn, Maine.** Deadline: April 24, 2006. Write to: Glenn Gordon, Director of Community Relations, West Maine Transportation Services, 6 Washington St., Auburn, ME 04210. Phone: (207) 784-9335.

The Greene County Transit Board in Xenia, Ohio, has issued a request for proposals to operate and maintain its transit service, called Greene CATS. To request an RFP, write or call Rich Schultze, executive director, Greene CATS, 245 Valley Rd., Xenia, OH 45385. Phone: (937) 562-6522. Deadline: April 24, 2006.



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# FMCSA appoints medical panel to review driver rules

WASHINGTON — The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration has appointed five physicians to look over a range of medical issues that affect commercial bus and truck drivers.

The new Medical Review Board will examine such conditions and issues as diabetes and cardiovascular disease that may prevent truckers from getting or retaining a commercial driver's license.

The board also will help the FMCSA revamp its physical qualifications for commercial motor vehicle drivers, and provide guidance on scientific and medical standards. In particular, the panel will help FMCSA decide whether its regulations need adjusting based on new research.

Some of the agency's current rules are based on studies that were done more than 30 years ago. Drivers who have been disqualified because of their medical condition say the agency's regulations are out of step with current treatment regimes and modern medicine.

U.S. Department of Transportation agencies have been successfully sued on several occasions over its medical exemption programs.

During the past 20 years, FMCSA and its predecessor agencies have appointed medical review boards to look at specific issues. But the new board will serve two years and look at all of the agency's medical programs and regulations.

First on the agenda: diabetes and drug and alcohol issues. (See related story on page 8.) Addition-

## Diabetes

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

The United Motorcoach Association will be among those organizations submitting comments. UMA President and CEO Victor Parra said he would recommend to UMA's legislative and regulatory committee that the current rules not be changed.

"The waiver program should be maintained for those who can pass rigorous review," said Parra. "However, no previous experience of driving a commercial motor vehicle should be required to qualify for (a waiver), only previous driving experience in any vehicle for at least five years," he said.

Public comments on the advanced notice of rulemaking may be submitted to the U.S. Department of Transportation rulemaking docket by visiting the USDOT Docket Management System Web site, <http://dms.dot.gov>. The docket number for the rulemaking is FMCSA 2005-23151 and the deadline for submitting comments is June 15.

ally, the board will study sleep issues in the second quarter of 2006 before moving on to cardiovascular, vision and hearing qualifications.

The panel includes doctors with a range of specialties from toxicology to neurology. The appointees are:

- Dr. Gunnar Andersson, senior vice president for medical affairs and professor and chair of orthopedic surgery, Rush University Medical Center, Chicago.

- Dr. Michael Greenberg, associate director for medical toxicology and director of the Medical Toxicology Fellowship Program,

Drexel University College of Medicine, Philadelphia.

- Dr. Kurt Hegmann, director and associate professor of the Rocky Mountain Center for Occupational and Environmental Health at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

- Dr. Barbara Phillips, chair of

the National Sleep Foundation and professor of pulmonary and critical care medicine at the University of Kentucky College of Medicine in Lexington.

- Dr. Matthew Rizzo, professor of neurology at the University of Iowa College of Medicine in Iowa City.

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**New Orleans, La., Thursday, April 27**  
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**Orlando, Fla., Wednesday, May 3**  
 RSVP: Leslie Eberline 407-246-1414, ext. 14

**Blackwood, N.J., and Atlantic City, N.J., Wednesday, May 10**  
 RSVP: Teresa Neris 856-401-2229

**Montreal, Canada, Wednesday, May 17**  
 RSVP: Elaine Payette 514-938-4510, ext. 10

**Toronto, Canada, Tuesday, June 6**  
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 3131 Highway 7 West  
 Concord, Ontario, Canada  
 RSVP: marketing@mclcoach.com

**Des Plaines, Ill., Thursday, June 8**  
 RSVP: Sue Nay 847-285-2180

**Calgary, Alberta, Canada, Tuesday, June 13**  
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**Vancouver, B.C., Canada, Thursday, June 15**  
 Western Bus Parts and Service  
 95 Philip Avenue, North Vancouver, B.C.  
 RSVP: marketing@mclcoach.com

**Minneapolis, Minn., Tuesday, June 27**  
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# Setra partners to expand service, sales in the West

RIVERSIDE, Calif. — Setra is bringing its sales and service network to the West Coast.

Setra, the North American motorcoach division of DaimlerChrysler, said it will partner with Complete Coach Works of Riverside, in the operation of a facility that will offer mechanical and body repairs, parts and pre-owned coach sales.

The company currently has two other combination facilities, both on the east side of the country — one at its headquarters in Greensboro, N.C., and the other in Winter Garden, Fla., just outside of Orlando.

However, it does partner with several private repair shops across the U.S. that give the company a network of 20 repair-only facilities, three of which are in California.

It also has a regional operation for the sale of new coaches, including two salesmen who cover the West Coast as part of their territory.

The new combination facility in Riverside, about 60 miles east of Los Angeles, is expected to be ready to go sometime in May — after service technicians at the repair center are trained on Setra's

line of coaches, according to company spokesman Bryan C. Allen.

He said the facility will continue to carry the Complete Coach Works name, but Setra signage will be added so customers and drivers know the facility offers full Setra service.

Patrick Scully, chief commercial officer of Setra, said the move to the West Coast stems from a vow the company made when it introduced its S 417 model to the North American market that it would be committed to the product and the success of its customers.

"With the growing number of West Coast Setra operators, we are ensuring the infrastructure is in place to support our customers," he said. "By partnering with a reputable service center, ensuring our strict requirements are upheld, and providing constant training and resources, Setra will remain a leader in service and support throughout North America."

The announcement comes just days after Setra showcased its inventory of about 50 used coaches at what it said was a successful "Spring Fling" at its CoachWorld



Setra is expanding its service centers beyond its CoachWorld facility near Orlando

service, parts and sales center in Winter Garden. The activities included tours of the repair facility, which features the latest diagnostic equipment and one of Florida's largest fully enclosed, heat-fired paint booths.

Technicians not only work on

## DaimlerChrysler truck, bus sales surge in '05

STUTTGART, Germany — DaimlerChrysler AB Sold a record number of commercial vehicles last year.

Sales rose 16 percent to 824,900 trucks and buses, from 712,200 vehicles in 2004, the company reported.

all types of coaches at the facility, but they also service large recreation vehicles and other types of vehicles, including a fleet of ambulances owned by a nearby hospital. "It's nice to be able to help out your neighbors," said Jack Farrell, general manager of CoachWorld.

He said the company puts a premium on its mechanics and body repair technicians being certified in a variety of areas and offers each of them 50 cents an hour more in pay for each certification they obtain. "They can do real well here if they get their certifications," he noted.

Demand in areas outside of its main markets of North America, Europe and Latin America rose 31 percent to 266,900 units.

Growth at the commercial vehicle division of DaimlerChrysler has helped the German firm blunt the

effect of falling earnings at its Mercedes auto division.

DaimlerChrysler is the parent of Setra, Thomas Built Buses, Orion Bus, Detroit Diesel Corp., Freightliner, Sterling Trucks and Western Star Trucks.

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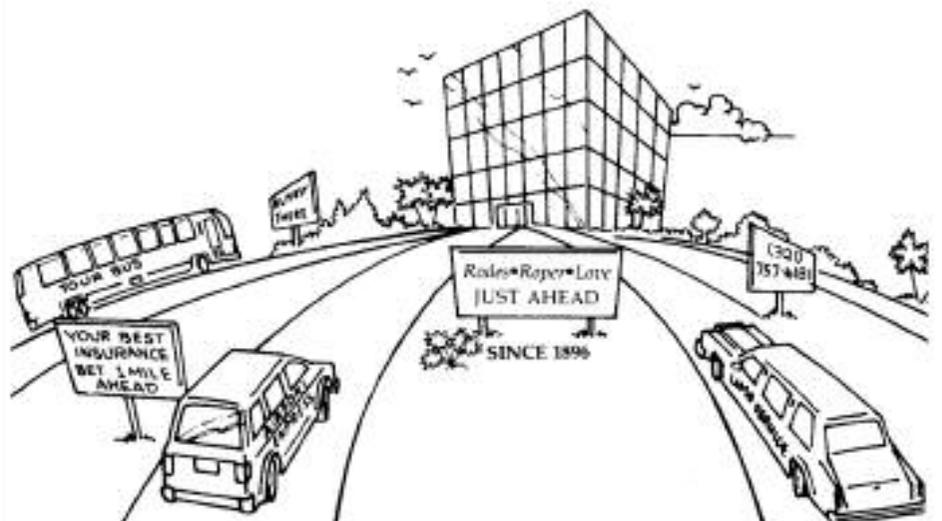
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# Operators are slow to switch to super-width tires

Hundreds of 18-wheelers are running U.S. and Canadian highways a few wheels short these days.

Instead of relying on the traditional 18 tires and wheels, they've swapped eight of them for four "wide-base" single tires, sometimes referred to as super singles.

It's a switch many of them say reduces vehicle weight, improves fuel economy, makes maintenance easier, and provides a smoother ride.

Some also claim the tires last longer because of better resistance to cutting, chaffing and scuffing.

Introduced by Michelin six years ago, the X One 17-inch wide tires — that's close to twice the width of a regular single commercial vehicle tire — have caught on so well that the tire maker recently announced a \$92 million expansion that will allow it to begin manufacturing them at a second plant.

"They're here to stay," insists Michael Burrughs, the company's truck product manager.

While truckers seem to like the idea of replacing two tires with one wide one, the idea has yet to capture the fancy of the motorcoach industry.

Only Prevost Car offers them on some new H3-45 coaches and, so far, only a couple of carriers in the United States and Canada have opted for the wide tires.

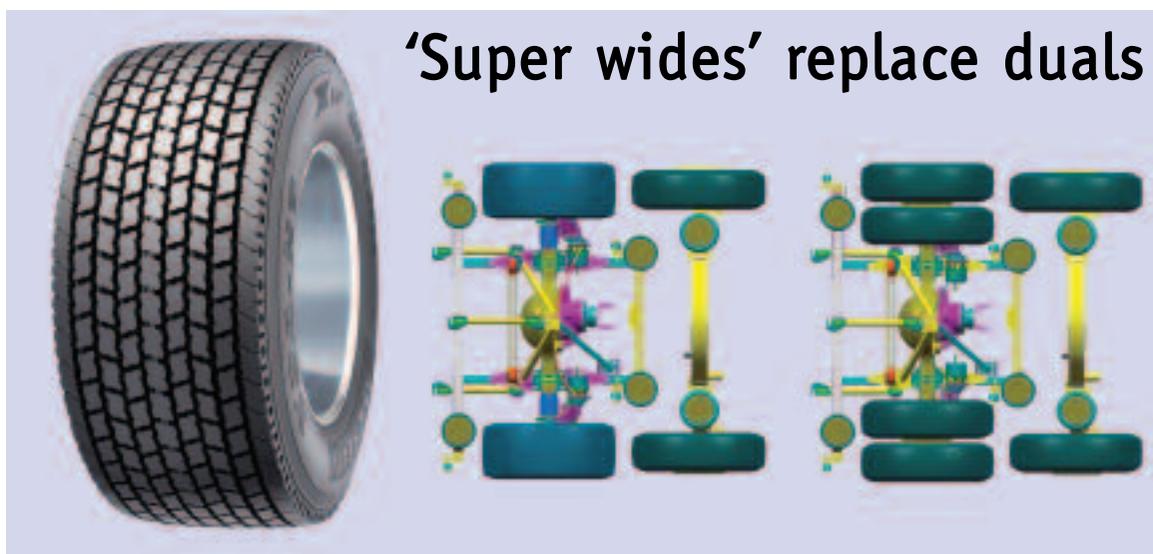
The reason for the cold shoulder, suggests Burrughs, is fear of trying something new.

"There is a natural reluctance to embrace radical change, and this is a radical change," he readily admits. "But that will change over time as the motorcoach industry sees the benefits of these tires."

Coach operators who are using them say they like what they've seen so far, but they want to test them a while longer before deciding whether to include them on other new coaches.

"I'm very pleased with them so far. In fact, I really like them," said Jimmy Beardsley, president of Enchanted Tours of Eastchester, N.Y., who has been running the wider tires on one of his four coaches since last October. "I think their handling on the coach makes the ride 10 times smoother and better."

Frank Barrette, director of operations at Autobus Maheux in Rouyn-Noranda, Quebec, who also has the wider tires on one of his coaches, agreed with the comfort assessment, noting that even passengers have noticed the difference. In addition, he said he has



gotten the advertised boost in fuel economy with a 4- to 7-percent gain. "We wanted to try them because we were expecting better fuel consumption and we got it," he said.

In addition to the smoother ride and better fuel economy, Beardsley and Barrette said the wider tires cost about \$300 less than two singles, a savings of \$600 per coach.

Still, the wide-base tires are not without drawbacks.

Both operators said the tires seem to be more slippery in snow than standard duals. "They are not traction tires but highway tires. But once you get moving it is fine and then it handles beautifully," said Beardsley.

Burrughs said although other tread patterns now are available on the wide-base tires, he believes the concern about traction may be one of perception rather than reality. "The rib tires are very good and, in my opinion, the feeling of being slippery is subjective, and they may only seem to have less traction and be slippery when they actually aren't," he said. "It is a personal perception."

While neither operator has had problems with flats on their wide-base tires, they say the possibility does raise a red flag because the tires are so large that there is no room on a coach for a spare.

Barrette said he addressed the problem by stocking a spare at sev-

eral service centers along the 400-mile route that the coach with the wider tires used most often. Beardsley, who has taken his coach equipped with the wide-base tires up and down the East Coast numerous times, said he is simply chancing it.

If a wide-base tire goes flat, it could be replaced with the tag-axle tire and the standard spare can be put on the tag axle. The wide-base tire then could be transported to a repair facility by the mechanic who was called to the scene to change the tires.

Michelin is aware of the concerns, says Burrughs, and has been working with dealers throughout the country and with travel plazas

along the nation's interstate system to stock the tires so they are available most anywhere. "So, replacement of the tire is actually very good," he added.

He pointed out, too, that most flats occur because of improper inflation, which can be a problem with dual tires because it is very difficult to check the tire pressure of inside tires due to the valve stem being hidden behind the outside tire. That's not a problem with a wide-base tire, he said, because it has only one valve stem that is easily accessible, allowing the driver to check the pressure regularly.

"We have a waste company that's using those tires on all of its trucks and they have dropped their number of flats down to six a day from 20," he noted.

Despite the cool reception the wide-base tires have gotten so far from the motorcoach industry, Michelin plans to continue to pursue the use of the X One on coaches and is confident they'll eventually take hold.

"We now are in the forefront with motorcoach usage of the wide-base tires, and it may take a pioneering operator with an entrepreneurial spirit to embrace this radical change," he said. "But we remain convinced there is a market for the tires in the motorcoach industry."

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

severe, unpredictable losses," she explains.

One of main reasons the bus industry insurance market has not softened to a greater extent, say the experts, is because reinsurers are holding firm on pricing.

And Walsh contends that the outlook for the reinsurance market is glum. "That sector of our industry had to absorb the major financial impact of the past two devastating U.S. hurricane seasons and is certainly anxious over this year's active hurricane season predictions," she noted.

The reinsurance industry ran at a 155 percent combined ratio last year, meaning it paid out \$1.55 for every \$1 collected in premiums — not a solid model for long-term business success.

So, rate relief led by reinsurers is not something likely to affect the bus — or any other — industry that relies on reinsurance anytime soon, says Walsh.

Looking ahead, Walsh predicts that several insurers will "either withdraw completely or scale back significantly in the pursuit of new bus accounts. The industry's

mandatory \$5 million liability limit and the increased claim severity in a relatively small insurable universe can easily discourage new entries from entering into the market," she says.

Adds Silvestro: "They (reinsurers) are usually at the back end of softening. If we reduce prices, we hope they will, too."

Tim O'Bryan of Service Insurance Agency also sees the reinsurance picture as mitigating any significant softening of bus industry insurance. "I don't see it dropping exceptionally fast because of the reinsurance thing," he said.

"Reinsurance is not allowing rates to drop so much. There is some pressure for the insurance market to drop because the stock market is doing better."

According to O'Bryan, there are pockets in the Southeast and Midwest, mostly in rural or suburban areas, where more companies are willing to write insurance. "They stay out of urban areas — too many cars and not enough pavement. Besides, urban areas are more litigious."

He sees a softening of rates only for operators with few claims. A softer market, he says, can lead to longer-term rate protection for

## National Interstate profits climb

RICHFIELD, Ohio — National Interstate Corporation has reported sharply higher earnings for 2005, despite a slight increase in accident-related losses last year.

National Interstate Corp. is the parent company of National Interstate Insurance Co., the No. 2 insurer of motorcoaches in the U.S.

Net income for the company last year was \$30.3 million, up 33 percent from 2004 net income of \$22.8 million.

On a per-share basis, 2005 diluted net income was \$1.60, up about 9 percent from the \$1.47 per-share diluted earnings in 2004. The reason for the significant difference in percentage gains for net income vs. earnings per share is because National Interstate had roughly 23 percent more shares

outstanding last year as a result of a public stock offering in February.

For the fourth quarter of last year, National Interstate had net income of \$7.92 million, up 19 percent from four-quarter 2004 earnings of \$6.665 million. On a per-share basis, fourth-quarter 2005 earnings were 41 cents per share diluted, compared to 42 cents per share diluted for the fourth quarter of 2004.

The fourth-quarter income gain reflects a 22 percent increase in earned premium and a near 46 percent increase in net investment income. Losses and loss-adjustment expenses, however, rose 27 percent during the quarter, which the company said was in line with expectations.

"We are very satisfied with the results from both the fourth quarter

operators of two or three years. In a hard market, like immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, insurers were offering one-year rates, O'Bryan noted.

With an insurance price war unlikely, most coach industry insurance experts are predicting

stability and continued emphasis on each company's safety and loss record.

Dave Dunn, president of RLI Transportation, a division of RLI Insurance, said insurers look at each account on its own merits. Rates depend on the caliber of the

and full year of 2005, and the successful completion of our first year as a public company," said Alan Spachman, chairman and president of National Interstate.

"Our people took advantage of the available opportunities to grow profitability and these efforts led to another record year for sales and profits," Spachman added.

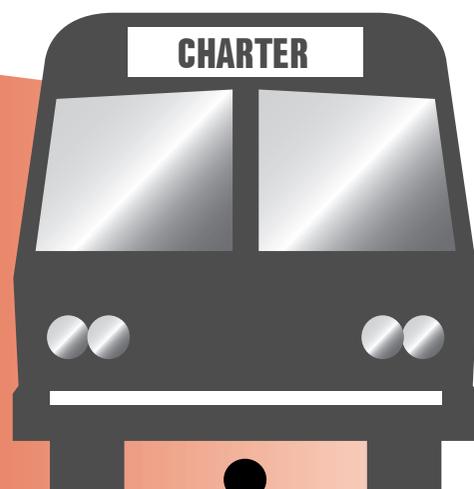
Separately, National Interstate announced that neither Spachman, who owns 16.2 percent of the company, nor Great American Insurance, which owns 53.4 percent of National Interstate, have any plans to sell their shares. National Interstate has roughly 19.2 million shares outstanding.

The pro-forma announcement satisfied a legal requirement of the company's public stock offering last year.

customer, he said.

Right now, the overall insurance market is stable, with some pockets of softness. "That's normal for insurance industries. Rates mostly depend on the account and who wants to write it that day," he said.

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# Circulator is being expanded along Washington Mall

WASHINGTON — The D.C. Circulator, a public bus system that has been providing frequent service in downtown Washington for the past nine months, has started a new route around the Mall, just in time for the tourism season.

Circulator buses have begun operating a continuous loop on the streets bordering the Mall, stopping at each of the Smithsonian museums, as well as the two National Gallery buildings.

Like the original circulator

routes, the new loop's buses run every five to 10 minutes and cost \$1 a ride, making the fare the cheapest public transportation available in downtown Washington. The service runs so often it does not have a posted schedule.

The route was begun just before the March 25 start of the annual Cherry Blossom Festival, which District of Columbia officials expect will draw about one million people to the city this year.

The additional circulator route

is designed to eliminate some of the long hikes between popular buildings and sites, like the National World War II Memorial on the Mall's west side.

The Smithsonian and the National Gallery are adding circulator brochures at their information desks and will be including information about the service on their Web sites.

The district launched the circulator in July with two routes: an east-west line between Union Sta-

tion and Georgetown via the Washington Convention Center and K Street, and a north-south segment between the convention center and the waterfront via Chinatown and the Mall. (See June 1, 2005, *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

The circulator's red-and-black Van Hool A330 buses were picked for the service because of their ease of boarding and large windows.

The district, federal government and private sector are providing \$6 million in operating subsi-

dies for the service.

The expanded service was not welcome news to Tom Mack, owner and chairman of Tourmobile Sightseeing Inc., the private company that has held exclusive rights to provide the sightseeing transportation on the Mall under agreements with the National Park Service dating to 1969. The average adult fare is \$20 for the day.

The new route, he told the *Washington Post*, could damage — and possibly destroy — his business.

## Parking

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

and museums along the Mall.

"This is BIG news," said an elated Victor Parra, president and CEO of the United Motorcoach Association.

Now, operators have a reasonably priced alternative to searching endlessly for parking spaces, parking illegally, or idling illegally on district streets, said Parra.

The parking at RFK also will be a welcome option for operators whose drivers are constantly told to move their coaches or get ticketed because they couldn't find a legal space.

During Washington's peak

tourism season upwards of 1,000 tour buses descend on Washington daily, extracting a heavy toll in terms of congestion, pollution, noise, intrusion into neighborhoods and blocking sight lines.

At the same time, those buses and the people on them are absolutely crucial to both the economic life of the city and its role as the nation's capital.

The parking announcement contained other bits of good news for coach operators.

In an effort to reduce the number of cash transactions and expedite the parking process, the stadium's parking contractor, Impark USA, will be offering pre-paid parking vouchers. Drivers will be

able to use the vouchers instead of having to come up with \$30 in cash. Credit cards cannot be used for payment.

By the end of May, those involved in the parking program expect to have a drivers lounge open on Lot 8 at the stadium. The lounge will offer a number of amenities and services to drivers, including cable TV, desk space, tables for games or using a laptop computer, and vending machines.

Officials had hoped to get the lounge open at the same time the parking lots became available but installation of utility lines delayed the process.

Within a short time, information and maps for the parking lots

will be posted on Web sites for the District Department of Transportation ([www.ddot.dc.gov](http://www.ddot.dc.gov)), and the DC Sports and Entertainment Commission ([www.dcsec.com](http://www.dcsec.com)), plus UMA and ABA.

Information about parking vouchers can be obtained from Ben Yohannes, site manager at RFK Stadium for Impark USA, via email ([byohannes@dlcpark.com](mailto:byohannes@dlcpark.com)), phone (202) 608-1113, or fax (202) 544-2689.

Finding the RFK Stadium solution was the handiwork of D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams' Downtown Congestion Task Force, the District's Tour Bus Management Working Group, the D.C. City Council, the National Capital

Planning Commission, the Metropolitan Police Department, the district Department of Transportation, the Downtown Business Improvement District, the Washington Convention and Tourism Corporation, the National Park Service and at least three-dozen other groups, including UMA and the American Bus Association.

Playing particularly important but unsung roles were 6th Ward D.C. City Council Member Sharon Ambrose and her research assistant Skip Coburn. Vetting the program for Coburn were Chuck Andrews of World Strides and UMA board member Dave Bolen, owner of New World Tours in Bristow, Va.

## ABC

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

adjuster, while listening to a speaker, played with some figures on a piece of paper and calculated that of the 70 bus accidents he worked last year, 59 were fire related. And, another adjuster took a telephone call during a session in which he was informed that one of his client's buses just had a fire while on a charter run.

Among those attending the workshop were members of the National Truck and Heavy Equipment Claims Council. The association, which is composed primarily of insurance claims adjusters specializing in heavy equipment damage claims, is a long-time supporter of the ABC event.

The workshop itself covered fire-related subjects ranging from where they appear to occur most often, to aftermarket equipment that can be installed on buses to detect and extinguish fires.

### Maintenance watchouts

Dotseth told the group that engine compartments and wheels remain the critical spots for most catastrophic failures and fires. Worn electrical wiring, exploding batteries, malfunctioning alternators, aging electrical cables, under-

and over-inflated tires, and over-worked wheel bearings all contribute, he said.

Having a good maintenance program and using only reputable shops, he suggested, could go a long way to preventing many problems.

Dotseth urged bus maintenance personnel to pay careful attention to axle bearings because when they fail, they not only can cause serious damage to wheels, brakes and other critical parts, but they have a high potential of starting a fire as well. "As new technology advances, mechanics are going under the buses less and less," he said. "We really need to do more of that."

Turbo engines require special attention, too, in order to avoid breakdowns and fires, according to Bob Bertsch, an ABC Companies operations manager and former truck and bus mechanic.

He recommended that technicians who work on turbo engines follow the three "Cs" of complaint, cause and correction to assure that the repair work they are doing gets done properly.

### Finding the cause

Too many mechanics, he maintained, repair or replace broken parts without first finding out what actually caused the breakage or

failure, and fix that problem as well — a bad habit he said leads to more breakdowns, more costly repairs and sometimes fires.

"It is very important to follow the Cs," he emphasized. "You really have to do it."

Bertsch said that only about 20 percent of turbo engine failures are due to the engines themselves, while the vast majority are caused by the performance and habits of the people who drive the buses and work on the engines.

Cold starts that prevent oil from warming enough to properly lubricate engine parts, not paying attention to air filter service requirements, and failing to keep exhaust systems clear are among the leading causes of turbo engine failures, he said.

The maintenance on exhaust systems is critically important because even a small amount of blockage can plug the system and cause a fire, Bertsch said, adding that a bus in Minnesota recently caught fire after a driver backed into a snowbank, clogging the exhaust. "Their maintenance is very, very important," he stressed.

### Aftermarket help

While good maintenance programs, well-trained mechanics and respected repair shops can reduce



Louis Hotard of ABC Companies presents during workshop

the potential of roadside mechanical breakdowns and fires, motorcoach operators were urged to also look into the array of aftermarket fire protection devices for further protection.

Among those highlighted at the workshop were a fire-detection and suppression system developed by Kidde Technologies Inc.; fire-resistant power steering fluid made by Citgo Petroleum Corp., and a sensor system that constantly monitors tire pressure that is manufactured by SmarTire Systems Inc.

Kidde's offering not only alerts the driver when a fire is detected in the engine compartment, but it also activates a fire extinguisher that immediately coats the engine with a thick powder that quickly snuffs out the fire, according to company representative Joey Peoples.

Some fire suppression systems available for motorcoaches also extinguish wheel-well fires.

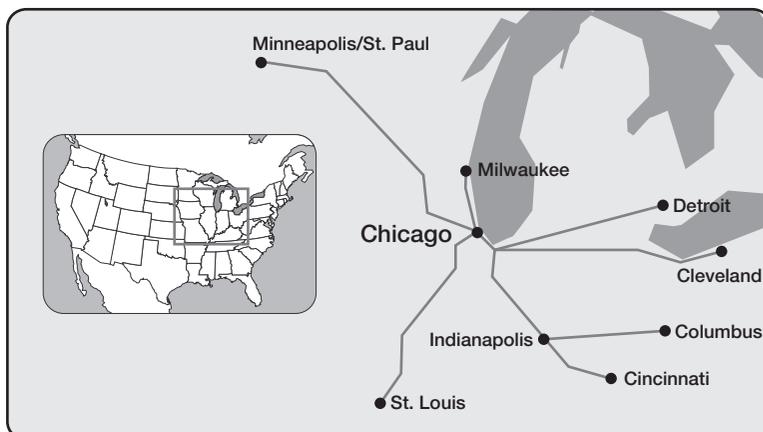
Peoples said small sensors placed at various spots in the engine compartment — some of them even wrapped around starter and alternator cables — are the key to the system. They detect a fire, alert the driver by setting off an alarm and flashing light on a dash-mounted monitor, and then trigger the extinguisher, all within seconds.

### Price of protection

The systems cost between \$3,500 and \$5,000 and are in use in about 7,000 transit buses and motorcoaches throughout the country. New York City Transit has put them on about 2,000 of its buses, and workers were in the process of



*megabus.com* brought a coach load of seniors and young adults from Milwaukee to Chicago for the news conference announcing its new service. A hub-and-spoke arrangement (at right) has been adopted for the initial *megabus.com* service in the U.S.



## Megabus.com

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Target markets for the service will include college students and other young people, leisure travelers, seniors and commuters.

Brian Souter, CEO of Stagecoach Group, which owns Coach USA, said that *megabus.com* "has transformed intercity travel for millions of people in the UK where our commitment to innovation has successfully established a market-leading brand.

"We believe there is significant potential to develop the brand and attract large numbers of passengers to the service in North America, as part of our continuing organic growth strategy for the (Stagecoach) Group."

The U.S. *megabus.com* serv-

ice, which will be operated using 55-seat, E4500 MCI coaches, will compete head-on against budget airlines and existing coach and rail services, said Souter.

"We will be cheaper than any other fare on any other form of transportation," Souter told the news conference at Chicago's Navy Pier.

Attending the press event were the reigning Miss USA, Chelsea Cooley; Jonathan Darby, the deputy consul general at the British Consulate in Chicago; Dot Coyle, director of Chicago's Office of Tourism, and Dale Moser, president and COO of Coach USA.

*megabus.com* is using 18 E-coaches that have been given a

bright blue and yellow livery, featuring the service's signature "Megadrive" character on the back.

The UK *megabus.com* service carries around 2 million passengers annually. It was started using 94-passenger, double-decker buses.

Bookings for the U.S. and UK services are via an attractive Web site at [www.megabus.com](http://www.megabus.com). The secure e-portal provides information on arrival and departure times, and the curbside pick-up and drop-off points that'll be used by passengers. There also are easy-to-read maps for each location.

In Chicago, *megabus.com* passengers will board the buses along the curb on south Canal Street, between Jackson Boulevard and Adams Street. The location is across the street from Union Station.

In Minneapolis, one drop-off/pick-up point is at the University Avenue Ramp on the south side of University Avenue near Walnut Street, adjacent to the University of Minnesota Aquatic Center. Another Minneapolis location will be on the west side curb of North 3rd Avenue at the 4th Street Parking Garage.

The Web site also contains information for disabled passengers and those who have luggage, including the baggage allowance. Service advisories will be posted on the Web site.

Passengers can book travel and purchase tickets via a personal computer, laptop or wireless handheld device.

Interested in checking out the service? Reservations are now being taken.

## FTA

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Akron Metro should lose federal funds equal to one and one-half times the amount of revenue it gained through the illegal charters it operated between 2002 and 2005.

Federal charter rules say public transit agencies receiving federal grants may not provide charter bus service when a private operator is willing and able to do it.

Not only did the ruling say Akron Metro should be barred from receiving \$622,500 in future funding but it also said the FTA has the authority to require the transit system to refund federal grant funds already obtained for breaches of federal law.

Another aspect that makes the Akron Metro case particularly significant, as well as intriguing, is the allegation that the transit agency operated the illegal charters by entering into sham contracting arrangements with a company called Vance Charters.

Vance Charters was incorporated 14 years ago by Bernard Burkett, a Metro employee and president of the local Transport Workers Union.

Whenever Akron Metro got a request for a charter it would refer the trip to Vance Charters, which would arrange the service on Metro buses. After getting the particulars for a trip, Burkett would simply send an e-mail to Akron Metro, telling it where to send its buses. He even would request specific Metro drivers for certain groups or events.

There also is evidence that Burkett collected a fee for functioning as a middle man in arranging the charters.

Almost all of the illegal charters conducted by Akron Metro — 469 of 475 — were run through Vance Charters, which used several other names — Absolute Charters, Abbie Charters, A Charter 4 U and A-1 Charters. Schweitzer contends Vance Charters is a fictitious entity that had neither operating authority nor buses.

In the complaint filed by Schweitzer on behalf of the ABA in June, the attorney found that Akron Metro provided charter bus service for everything from weddings, to family reunions, to school and university trips, to dinner theater outings, to shuttles between the convention center and local hotels.

It even helped out one of Akron's signature events, the Soap Box Derby, plus local golf tournaments, marathon races and Founders Day celebrations.

Jeff Iula, general manager of

the Soap Box Derby, told the *Beacon Journal* he is worried that if he has to hire private operators, transportation costs for the derby will climb. Last summer, Akron Metro provided charter service for the derby, taking racers to Geauga Lake during the week and to Derby Downs on race day.

Iula said he regards it as Metro's "civic duty" to help promote the derby, which in its 69th year will attract at least 325 racers.

Schweitzer's research of 4,000 Akron Metro documents, obtained under open-records laws, turned up 187 illegal charters in 2002, 140 in 2003, 118 in 2004 and 30 in the first four or five months of last year.

The FTA ruling says it is referring the information about the sham relationship between Akron Metro and Burkett to the U.S. Department of Transportation Office of Inspector General. That may be a tip off the FTA suspects criminal wrongdoing.

It is abundantly clear from Schweitzer's research that the sham arrangement between Akron Metro and Vance Charters goes back much further than 2002.

After probing three years worth of documents, he decided he had seen enough and did not extend his research into earlier years. However, he said in his complaint there was information that Akron Metro had provided service on behalf of Vance Charters as far back as 1998.

Whether the FTA will use the evidence developed by Schweitzer to really dig into Akron Metro's past and penalize it for earlier illegal charters is problematic. The Akron Metro mess will be a clear test for FTA resolve.

Akron Metro Executive Director Robert K. Pfaff told the *Beacon Journal* his agency would appeal the FTA ruling. It has 10 days to do so.

"As far as we're concerned, it's an excessive penalty, and moreover, we don't feel that we violated any of the charter regulations," Pfaff told the newspaper.

The ruling could not have been better timed as the private bus industry prepares to head into what are sure to be contentious negotiations with public transit agencies over key aspects of the federal charter regulations that Akron Metro blatantly violated.

Within a matter of weeks, the FTA will begin a negotiated process designed to develop new rules covering some of the types of services Akron Metro provided but which it and other public transits think they should be allowed to provide.

## Prizes, prices and pizzazz: MCI Grand Tour hits road

SCHAUMBURG, Ill. — Motor Coach Industries is conducting a rolling series of open houses at its sales/service centers and at other locations across the U.S. and Canada, starting this month and concluding in late June.

Dubbed the Grand Tour, the events will feature activities, information, special pricing on a range of services and products, new and updated coach models, and drawings. Lunch will be provided for attendees.

Highlights include:

- Introduction of The LUXE, the "next stage in tour and conversion shells"
- A briefing on 2007 engine changes
- Special pricing on parts, service, pre-owned coaches

- Drawings for prizes, including registration fees to Motorcoach Expo 2007 in New Orleans
- The grand prize drawing is for a REI retrofit kit, featuring six, 10.4-inch LCD monitors.

The locations and dates are:

- April 5 — Los Alamitos, Calif.
- April 12 — Dallas
- April 25 — New Orleans
- May 3 — Orlando
- May 10 — Blackwood, N.J.
- May 17 — Montreal
- June 6 — Toronto
- June 8 — Des Plaines, Ill.
- June 13 — Calgary, Alberta
- June 15 — Vancouver, British Columbia
- June 27 — Minneapolis

MCI is sending invitations, or interested operators can e-mail [marketing@mcicoach.com](mailto:marketing@mcicoach.com).

## CoachCrafters still growing at 20

NORTHFIELD, Minn. — CoachCrafters, one of the best-known bus refurbishing, retrofitting, repairing, maintaining and selling companies in the Upper Midwest, is celebrating its 20th anniversary.

After two decades in business, the company considers itself a full-service resource for motorcoach owners and transit agencies across the nation.

“We have a dedicated and well-trained staff at our two state-of-the-art facilities — in Northfield and near Orlando, Fla., as well as a field-services team that travels to customer facilities,” said company owner and president Wayne Wolf.



Wayne  
Wolf

In 1986, during its first year in business, CoachCrafters completed its first major bus remanufacturing contract, a project for the city of Detroit. Twenty years later, the company is still taking care of buses for the city.

It also has remanufactured every bus in the fleet of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and installed wheelchair lifts in all but two of the city's buses. Plus, says Bill Hoekstra, transportation and parking director of Cedar Rapids-based Five Seasons Transportation, “we’ve also bought eight used buses from CoachCrafters.”

“Any organization that can go from selling to remanufacturing, from clients with six or seven buses to working with large metro transit agencies — they have something there that everyone wants,” says Hoekstra.

Wolf says CoachCrafters work with a wide range of customers — big and small, private operators and public agencies. And, he says, the company prides itself on coming up with creative solutions that meet customers' needs — whether it results in a sale or not.

“For our smaller customers,” he says, “we take the experience we’ve had working with larger companies, meet with the maintenance director, evaluate their bus fleet and help them determine what needs to be done. They can then take that information and go out for bid.”

One of CoachCrafter's top goals is to eliminate surprises for customers. To help do that, the company uses digital photos of the work in progress and e-mails detailed, visual reports to customers. In Hoekstra's case, that included a

start-to-finish video, from stripping a bus down to its frame, to rebuilding it like new.

The company's signature project was the rebuilding a 1956 General Motors transit bus for the city of Montgomery, Ala., for the 50th anniversary of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

The finished bus was virtually identical to the 1948 GM bus on which Rosa Parks refused to give

up her seat, except for a few cleverly camouflaged additions, including air conditioning and a wheelchair lift. The bus was rebuilt so it could be put in revenue service and today is part of Montgomery's public transit fleet.

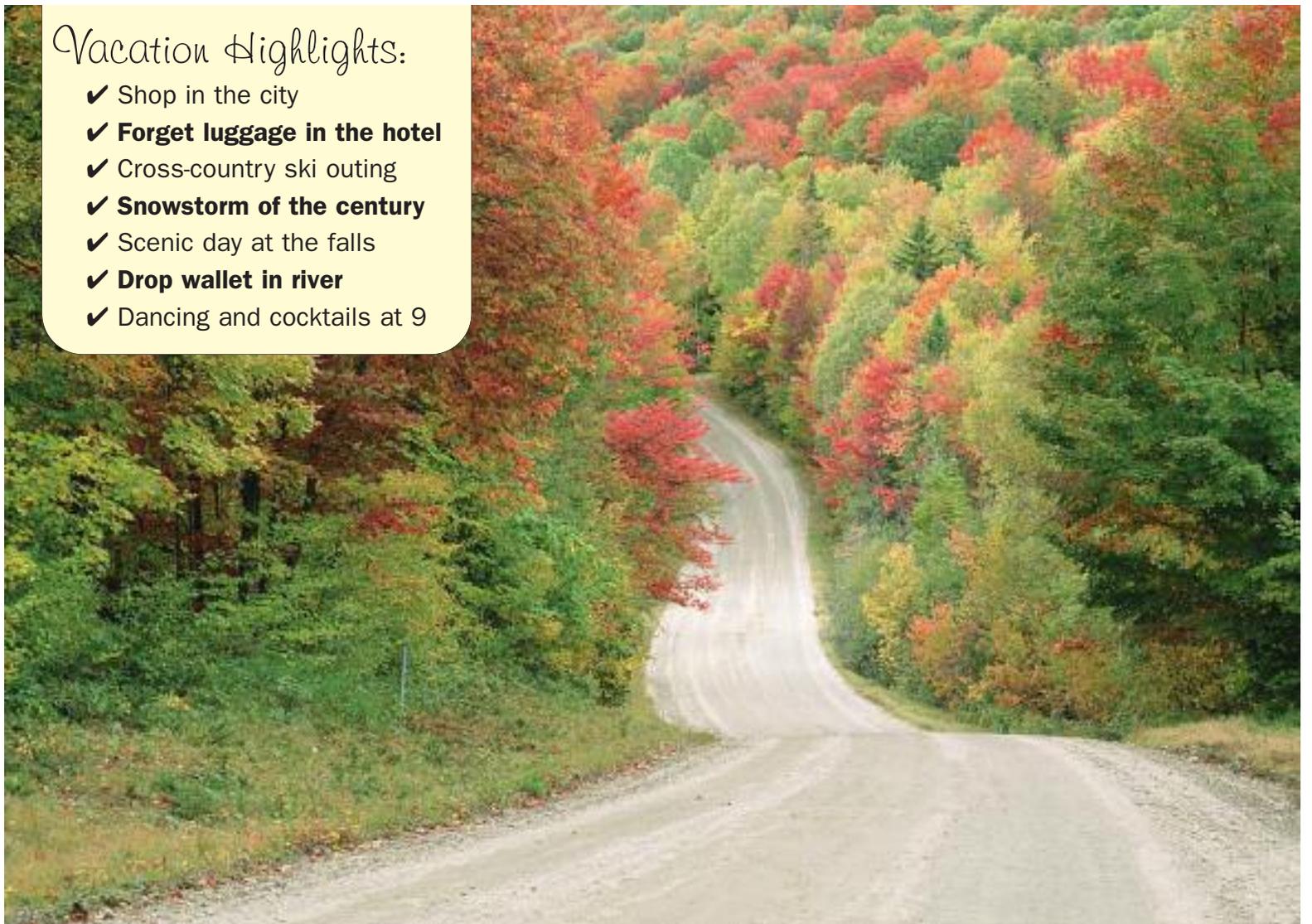
Wolf is proud of that project, just as he is of every job that rolls out the door. “After 20 years,” he says, “I still have my job; I must be doing something right.”



Body repair and rebuilding is everyday stock in trade for CoachCrafters

### Vacation Highlights:

- ✓ Shop in the city
- ✓ **Forget luggage in the hotel**
- ✓ Cross-country ski outing
- ✓ **Snowstorm of the century**
- ✓ Scenic day at the falls
- ✓ **Drop wallet in river**
- ✓ Dancing and cocktails at 9



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# Trident tries hand at 35-footer

CUMMING, Ga. — Trident Industries has become the latest bus manufacturer to try its luck at filling what some operators say is an on-going need in the motorcoach industry — a small bus that performs much like a large one.

The five-year-old company says its 35-foot Spectrum LX just might be the ticket.

"It's a niche in the market that hasn't really been addressed very well and this is our answer to it," said Jason Cash, president of the company that is headquartered in Cumming, north of Atlanta.

In recent years, coach operators have called for a smaller over-the-road bus because their charter customer groups have shrunk. But the smaller groups still want the luxury and comfortable ride provided by 40- and 45-foot over-the-road buses.

While ABC Companies, Krystal Koach and others have responded with conventionally designed upscale cutaways, most OEMs main-

tain that a true over-the-road, 35-foot motorcoach — one that offers essentially the same comfort as the large coaches — would cost too much to produce and ultimately wouldn't pencil out for operators.

The Spectrum LX carries a price tag of \$195,000.

Cash said the coach's 14-gauge galvanized steel structure, full-body sound deadening, urethane insulation and motorcoach-type seats give passengers the comfort and quietness they would experience in larger buses. And "it really rides like a coach," he asserts.

Ithaca Airline Limousine, a charter company in Ithaca, N.Y., lined up early to receive the first production Spectrum LX.

"The 35-foot (Trident) coach is excellent for us. In fact, it's the best thing the industry has come out with since the 45-footer," said company vice president Brad Wintermute. "It's the perfect size for us."

He said he was struck by the

curb appeal of the Spectrum LX and is excited about seeing if it really delivers many of the same amenities offered by large, over-the-road coaches.

"I like that it doesn't look like a traditional cutaway, and now we're hoping it has gotten away from the cutaway ride and it really will ride like a coach," he said.

And if it works out well for his business, he added, the company probably will order others.

The Spectrum LX is a body-on-chassis design, offering a Brazilian-built body that is mounted on an International chassis at Trident's manufacturing plant in Griffin, Ga.

Griffin was once the home of Metrotrans Corp., which at one time was the second-largest cutaway bus manufacturer in the U.S. Metrotrans went belly up in 1999 and closed its doors in 2000. Trident has no connection to Metrotrans but did set up its plant in Griffin because of the availability of experienced workers.

The power train of the Trident uses an International DT466, 210-horsepower diesel engine hooked to an Allison 3000 PTS transmission.

It offers seating for up to 36 passengers.

## ABA grabs Littler; Daecher assists UMA

WASHINGTON — Norman Littler, who has spent the last eight years as the top government affairs executive at the United Motorcoach Association, has been hired by the American Bus Association.

Littler becomes vice president of regulatory and industry affairs at ABA and executive director of the Bus Industry Safety Council, which was created by the ABA and operates under its aegis.

"I am so pleased... Norm Littler is 'coming home' to the ABA," said association Chairman Ron Eyre, president of Eyre Bus in Glenelg, Md. Littler began his trade association career in the 1990s at ABA, before joining UMA.

Meanwhile, the Daecher Consulting Group will provide UMA and its members with expert regulatory, safety and security consulting services while the association searches for a new director of government and industry relations.

The Daecher group is headed by Carmen W. Daecher, the motorcoach industry's best-known safety and security consultant with more than 30 years experience.

"We are pleased to have Carmen Daecher's wide-ranging expertise available to the association," said UMA President & CEO Victor Parra.



The Spectrum LX uses a Brazilian-built body mounted on an International chassis

An optional lavatory can be added to the rear of the bus by removing two seats. The front-engine design allows a large rear luggage storage area of 225 cubic feet. Other features include a Thermo King MRT roof-top A/C unit, individual passenger vents and parcel-rack storage of 55 cubic feet.

Operators who examined an early Spectrum LX expressed concern about the width of the spiral entry stairway, saying it could be tight for some passengers. However, the Trident already has made an adjustment to its design that will open the walkup another four inches.

Cash said 24 of the coaches are

in production — 18 of which are sold — and the company is hoping to turn out as many as 125 by the end of the year.

In addition to the Spectrum LX, Trident has been marketing a 28-foot shuttle bus, but has slowed production of that model so it can concentrate on the 35-foot coach.

"We feel that's where the market is going right now," said Cash, who got into bus manufacturing after working for several years in the financial business.

Trident also operates a finance service — Charabanc Financial Services, which can finance the purchase of its coaches.



Norman Littler

"UMA members needing timely and critical safety, regulatory, security and operational information will receive the same level of service they have been used to getting," said Parra.

During the past 20 years, Daecher has assisted scores of motorcoach operators in the interpretation and implementation of federal regulations; development and refinement of safety and loss-prevention programs, and the assessment of risk-management strategies.

He also has developed and provided hands-on and classroom training to motorcoach operators and their staffs, other commercial transportation providers, insurance companies, attorneys, and various other groups in the areas of safety and loss prevention,

security, operations, regulations, compliance, accident investigation and empathic communication.

Most recently, Daecher conducted a series of 10 workshops on bus industry security and emergency preparedness planning for UMA and ABA. The workshops, held at locations across the U.S., concluded last month in Tempe, Ariz.

Daecher will assist the association until a successor is found for Littler.

"Norm has served the association well, and we wish him the best," said UMA Chairman Brian Scott of Escot Bus Lines in Largo, Fla.

UMA has embarked on a nationwide search to find a highly qualified replacement.

Littler said he was interested in switching jobs because of the challenge of reinvigorating the Bus Industry Safety Council. Plus, "they made me a fabulous offer."

"We are pleased to welcome Norm to our team," said ABA President and CEO Peter Pantuso. "He has a tremendous depth of knowledge, an admirable work ethic, and a passion for this industry."

Littler, a native of Canada, also spent a dozen years working at Motor Coach Industries.

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# N.C., Virginia, Wisconsin associations pick officers

Three state motorcoach associations have made changes to their officers and boards of directors for 2006.

**North Carolina:** Ben Briggs of Brigg's Tours & Excursions in Laurinburg, N.C., has been elected president of the North Carolina Motorcoach Association. He succeeds Mellonee Owenby of Christian Tours & Burke International Tours, who becomes immediate past president and remains a director.

Jim Harris of Cardinal Coach in Warsaw, N.C., replaces Briggs as vice president of the association.

New to the association board is Billy Ray Rhyne of America Charters in Charlotte. He succeeds Louis Wade of Southern Coach Co., who continues as chairman of the association legislative committee.

Ralph Young, who was president of the association two years ago, moves from immediate past president to board member.

**Virginia:** Gwen Elmore of Fun Tours in Virginia Beach has been elected president of the *Virginia Motorcoach Association*. She succeeds James Brown of Magic Car-

pet Tours Bus Service in Richmond, who becomes immediate past president and remains a director.

Larry Williams of L.W. Transportation in Falmouth was selected first vice president of the association, and Robert Quick Jr. of

Quick-Livick in Staunton was chosen second vice president.

New board members are Doris Estes of Newton Bus Service in Gloucester; Scott Merriman of Scenic America in Bristow; Morgan Brown of Magic Carpet Tours in Richmond, and Barry

Shapiro of Martz Group Virginia in Richmond.

**Wisconsin:** Dennis Prigge of Discovery Coach Lines in Sheboygan has been elected chairman of the *Wisconsin Motor Coach Association*. He succeeds Roger Fieck of Have Group Will Travel

Tours in Appleton.

John Meier of Badger Coaches in Madison was chosen vice chairman.

New board members are Keith Drug of Krug Bus Service in Medford and Steve Van Galder of Van Galder Bus Co. in Janesville.

## ABC

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

installing the system on several buses inside the ABC garage during the workshop.

Citgo's Fire Guard power steering fluid helps eliminate fires that usually occur when a hose breaks, spraying fluid over a hot engine. The synthetic- and water-based steering fluid simply will not burn under those circumstances, said Greg Hutchison, a company product specialist. "It's even been tested at the height of a Tucson (Ariz.) summer," he noted.

The SmarTire system uses small sensors mounted on the inside of each wheel to alert the driver over a dash-mounted receiver when a tire's pressure begins dropping from a preset level and when it falls below a second programmed level, according to Brian Phillips, a salesman for the company.

In addition, he said they also monitor the temperature of each tire to detect when it exceeds a certain level. "The sensors even pickup overheated wheel bearings," he said.

Phillips said the monitor, which uses a display panel to identify any problem tire, also records its various readings so company personnel can determine later if the driver had been warned of a tire problem.

The system can be purchased and installed for between \$1,200 and \$1,400.

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