

Bus & Motorcoach NEWS

WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE BUS INDUSTRY

(Still) higher diesel prices are forecast

WASHINGTON — Here's a shocker: The federal government is forecasting the price of diesel fuel will average close to \$4 per gallon this year — \$3.94 to be exact, or a dollar a gallon more than last year's average.

You think there's a chance?

Even scarier is the possibility the latest U.S. Department of Energy prediction could be conservative. After all, it was barely six weeks ago the DOE issued a forecast saying diesel would average \$3.62 a gallon for the year.

The soaring price of diesel has made fuel costs the second-most-important expense item for most motorcoach operators. One modest-size New York operator reports his weekly fuel bill is now well over \$20,000, compared to \$12,000 a week a year ago.

In making its latest projection, the Department of Energy said the increase "reflects global strength in diesel demand that is contributing to a widening of the margin between diesel prices and crude oil costs since last year."

In other words, the price of diesel is rising faster than the price of crude oil because there's heavy demand for diesel overseas as a result of a strong worldwide economy.

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Slipping economy swells ranks of driver applicants

The number of men and women looking for work as motorcoach drivers is on the rise in some parts of the country, but most operators aren't expecting the increase to ease their long-running shortage of over-the-road drivers.

While the numbers of job applicants are up, say coach owners, many of those seeking jobs fall short of the standards they require of their drivers.

Such standards as solid work history, good health, experience working with people, excellent driving record, and pleasant personality among them.

"It's still the quality," said Callen Hotard of Calco Travel in Geismar, La., which just finished a campaign for drivers that drew

34 applicants, but only four hires. "It's not that we didn't want or need more drivers, but those were the only ones who met our qualifications," he noted.

Jack Wigley of All Aboard America in Mesa, Ariz., said while he, too, has seen an increase in driver applicants for his Arizona operations, he continues to be beset by quality issues.

"Seven or eight out of 10 people who apply can't be hired, so right off you lose at least 70 percent of them," he said.

Godfrey Lebron of Paradise Trailways in West Hempstead, N.Y., said he was stunned by the response he received from a recent newspaper advertisement

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Operators are urged to learn charter rule, register for notices

By Laura Mohammad

AUSTIN, Texas — With the new Federal Transit Administration charter service rule in place for a month, industry association executives are pushing private operators to take advantage of potential new dollars.

"This is new business. This is easy business," Steve Klika told motorcoach operators attending a briefing on the charter rule here last month. Klika is president of International Motor Coach Group Inc.

But for those jobs to come your way, it's critical you know the rule and be proactive, said Klika.

The Austin summit was the first in a series of sessions on the rule Klika plans to present with Ken Presley, vice president of industry relations for United Motorcoach Association, and FTA officials.

The rule, which went into effect April 30, is designed to clarify previous FTA charter service rules. It severely limits public transit agencies' ability to pursue charter work. But it largely falls on private operators to assure transit agencies are following the rules and don't take away potential business.

"Some of these transit authori-

ties think they are above the ball game," Klika told about 40 coach operators attending the Austin briefing. "The scams can't continue. All the past sins of the public sector are coming to the surface.

"If we don't get things squared away, we'll go several steps backward. The companies that get behind this issue will be winners," Klika asserted.

Charter executives attending the briefing told horror stories of public transit authorities providing charter services for all sorts of activities, including sporting events and rodeos.

There are even public agencies that may be operating their own charter offices, according to Klika, who is a former public transit administrator.

So, what should operators do and how do they go after the dollars public transit agencies may try to cop?

The first step, say Presley and Klika, is to register online with the FTA. This is critical because public transit agencies only have to notify registered charter operators of their interest in charter work.

If no charter companies respond to agencies' e-mails, or if no

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First Chinese leisure group travelers arrive this month

WASHINGTON — The predicted influx of leisure group travelers from China begins this month when the first entourage arrives here.

The China National Tourism Administration and the U.S. Department of Commerce announced last month that a memorandum of understanding signed by the U.S. and Chinese governments in December is

being initiated June 17, with a tour led by China National Tourism Administration Chairman Shao Qiwei.

Following the arrival of the first group, Chinese leisure group travelers will be able to travel to the U.S., using Chinese travel agents working with U.S. tour operators who are part of National Tour Association's China Inbound Program.

"NTA is both proud and honored to help the U.S. by playing a key role in the implementation of this memorandum of understanding, which is a breakthrough bilateral agreement," said NTA President Lisa Simon, CTP.

The agreement is expected to result in a measurable boost to inbound U.S. tourism. By 2011,

nearly 600,000 Chinese travelers are expected to travel to the U.S. annually, an increase of 81 percent from 2006. (See April 15 issue of *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

NTA is the first and only U.S. organization approved by the China National Tourism Administration to facilitate Chinese inbound leisure group travel to the

U.S. To date, more than 90 tour operators have been approved to work with the new market.

The approved list of tour operators from NTA's China Inbound Program was given to the China National Tourism Administration through the Department of Commerce in preparation for the inaugural tour.

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Operator wins charter decision megabus to halt L.A. runs

ATLANTA — A Florida public transit agency violated federal charter service rules when it hooked up with a nonprofit organization to provide transportation service for special events, the Federal Transit Administration has ruled.

However, in making the ruling, FTA Regional Administrator Yvette G. Taylor opted not to penalize Escambia County Area Transit of Pensacola because there did not appear to be a series of repeat violations by the agency.

“Because FTA finds that a pat-

tern of violations has not been established by complainant, there is no basis to justify the imposition of a penalty,” she wrote in her decision.

Escambia County Area Transit could have been fined and directed to compensate Beach Boy Trolley of Pensacola, which filed the complaint with the FTA last year over violations that it said took place in 2006.

Beach Boy contends it lost between \$30,000 and \$60,000 when the transit agency illegally contracted with Winterfest, a non-

profit festival event-planning organization, to shuttle people to community events held in downtown Pensacola.

The contested agreement involved Escambia County Area Transit providing Winterfest with a used van so it could appear to qualify as a charter company, leasing it a half-dozen trolleys so it could run the shuttle service and giving it a \$20,000 donation to help operate the shuttles.

The case was processed under the old charter service rules, which

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LOS ANGELES — megabus.com is suspending its West Coast operation later this month because of poor ridership.

The pull out comes less than a year after megabus.com began its curbside operation from Los Angeles to San Francisco, San Jose, San Diego and Las Vegas.

“Our approach has been to go into different markets and give it a shot and see how they’ll develop,” said megabus.com President Dale Moser. “If they develop quickly, we’ll certainly sustain it. But in this case, the ridership trends aren’t growing enough.”

megabus.com, a subsidiary of Coach USA, will end service from Los Angeles to San Francisco and Oakland after June 22, and from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, San Jose and Millbrae, Calif., earlier, said Moser.

In January, megabus suspended service from Los Angeles to Phoenix and then pulled out of San

Diego as well.

Despite spending thousands on advertising to promote its West Coast service, Moser said its full-size coaches would sometimes pull out of L.A. with as few as a dozen riders.

The announcement of the abandonment came just days before megabus.com was to launch service — on May 30 — along the East Coast, including runs from New York to Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Toronto and Baltimore.

Meanwhile, according to Moser, megabus continues to do well in the Midwest where the company serves 17 cities and has seen business increase 137 percent during the past year.

“We’re disappointed” about the failure of megabus to grab hold on the West Coast, Moser said. But, he added, “it doesn’t mean at a later date we won’t revisit bringing the service back.”

point troop movements, has been eliminated.

In its place are interactive galleries that are themed to phrases from the Gettysburg Address. Visitors can pack their own kit bag,

learn to read signal flags and hear soldiers’ stories.

Exhibits blend dioramas, such as Gen. Robert E. Lee’s field camp, with video presentations in five

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Gettysburg opens \$103 million museum

GETTYSBURG, Pa. — The deadliest but most-visited battleground in North America has a new \$103 million museum and visitor center.

The upgraded facilities at Gettysburg National Military Park include 12 interactive galleries; two 187-seat, three-screen theaters, and an elevated gallery to accommodate the historic 377-foot wrap-around “cyclorama” painting the *Battle of Gettysburg*.

The gray granite and metal

complex is meant to bring context to the events that occurred here during three bloody days in July 1863 — even for visitors who don’t know the details of the historic confrontation.

Gettysburg, of course, was the most important of all Civil War battles. The enormity of the battle and the Gettysburg memorial park can be overwhelming.

- There were more than 51,000 casualties, including 7,000 deaths.
- The park covers 6,000 acres

and has 1,300 monuments.

- There are more than 1 million historical artifacts.
- Almost 2 million visitors arrive annually.

“It’s beautiful and you want to find out what happened in these green fields, but it’s overwhelming and it’s hard to find out,” says a park spokesman.

One tool that helped visitors try to make sense of Gettysburg and its events for 45 years, the electric map that used light bulbs to pin-

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THE DOCKET

Tolls hiked on N.Y. Thruway

ALBANY, N.Y. — New York State Thruway Authority board of directors has approved a series of toll hikes that are expected to bring in an additional \$125 million annually.

The toll increases for the 641-mile highway came despite opposition from many elected officials.

The new toll structure differs slightly from the one proposed last November (see Oct. 15 *Bus & Motorcoach News*), in that it preserves a volume discount for some commercial vehicles, as well as discounts for hybrid vehicles.

The increases will start in July and continue through January 2010.

There was a 10 percent in-

crease in January, the last of a series of toll hikes enacted three years ago. (See Jan. 15, April 15 and May 15, 2005, issues of *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

Thruway managers say the hikes were unavoidable because traffic volume has not been high enough to cover the cost of a \$2.1 billion highway and bridge repair plan.

Drivers paying cash will see two 5 percent hikes, while those who use the EZ-Pass will see what amounts to a 28 percent increase because of higher rates, combined with lower discounts for using the payment system.

2009 highway bill could be gigantic

WASHINGTON — Despite the fact 2009 will usher in a new president and administration, with their own transportation priorities, the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee is gearing up to start work on the six-year highway and public transportation spending bill in the fall.

According to a committee staffer, Rep. Jim Oberstar, D-Minn., chairman of the committee, wants to take the lead on the issue and plans to send up a reauthorization recommendation of perhaps as much as \$500 billion

as soon as the new administration is ready to receive it.

The next highway-public transportation bill will be called on to solve long-standing problems of deteriorating roadways and congestion in many urban areas, as well as take into account concerns for the environment.

Winning support for the bill will be challenging in the first instance because an allocation in the neighborhood of \$500 billion would almost double the current spending authorization (\$286 billion spread over six years).

In addition, the public has not forgotten the bad taste left by squabbling over earmarks in the last transportation bill, when legislators held out for special projects for their home states.

The United States needs to spend \$170 billion more each year on transportation infrastructure to avoid a crisis in the next decade, according to a new study.

That money could come from higher fuel taxes, private sector investment, tolls and congestion pricing, the Urban Land Institute said in a report.

Maine increases bus registration fee

AUGUSTA, Maine — As a result of new legislation, the registration fee for buses in Maine is going up 40 percent.

Effective Sept. 1, the fee jumps to \$70 from \$50. Fees for other com-

mercial vehicles also are going up.

Questions about the fee can be directed to Francis Fox, Chief of Maine Motor Carrier Services, at (207) 624-9056; e-mail him at francis.fox@maine.gov.

Travelers get Web view of Kansas highways

TOPEKA, Kan. — The Kansas Department of Transportation has installed four television cameras on Interstate 70 — at Junction City, Salina, Walker and Edson — and plans to install 25 more, covering the roadway across the state.

In addition, cameras have been

installed on U.S. 75 in Topeka, K-39 highway at Chanute; K-96 and Webb Road in Wichita, and U.S. 50 at Garden City.

The cameras are intended to aid motorists in choosing routes, especially during inclement weather. They are being spaced in

such a way as to show conditions across the state.

The Kansas highways can be viewed at www.511.ksdot.org. Click on the camera icon on the upper right-hand side of the page. Metro Kansas City conditions can be found at www.ksscout.net.

The advertisement displays several bus seat models in a grid layout. Each model is labeled with its name: '2+1', 'BRASIL', 'TORINO STANDARD', 'TORINO VIP', 'PATRIOT', and 'FEATURES'. The seats are shown in different colors and configurations, including blue and grey. The text 'THE BEST OPTION FOR YOU.' is prominently displayed at the bottom center of the grid.

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Idling bill in South Carolina opposed by operators

COLUMBIA, S.C. — The Motorcoach Association of South Carolina and the United Motorcoach Association are opposing aspects of an anti-idling bill that's making its way through the South Carolina General Assembly.

The bill, H. 4911, has passed the South Carolina House and is being considered by the state Senate Committee on Transportation.

UMA Vice President of Industry Relations Ken Presley said the legislation would impose unreasonable idling restrictions on passenger coaches trying to cope with South Carolina's brutally hot and humid summers.

"Motorcoaches differ greatly from trucks or automobiles in construction as compliance with Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards preclude the opening (except in emergencies) of the motorcoach windows to allow air to adequately circulate to keep the interior temperature equal to that of the outside ambient temperature," said Presley. "There are examples of motorcoaches parked, with the engine shut down, exposed to the South Carolina sun during the summer months and the interior temperatures exceeding 150 degrees.

"When excessive temperatures are reached in a motorcoach it becomes much more than just cooling air. The very framework, cushions and fabric of the interior also have reached these excessive temperatures and must be cooled down before the interior of a bus can be considered a safe and comfortable environment for the passengers, very often South Carolina's tourists," Presley noted.

"In actual practice, idling time limits have had a reverse effect in the many jurisdictions that have implemented unrealistic idling regulations. Summer heat often forces motorcoach drivers to drive around the community empty to avoid violating idling ordinances and possibly receiving a fine.

"Commonly referred to as a 'rolling idle,' it should be obvious that an empty motorcoach roving around town just to cool the interior for the passengers consumes more fuel and emits more pollutants than a motorcoach simply idling. This void in political leadership to understand and explain to the public the disparity is never more obvious than in the city of Washington, D.C. With an idling restriction of three minutes, it is not unusual to view dozens of empty motorcoaches driving aimlessly around The Mall, just to cool the coach.

"This is political correctness gone awry," said Presley.

He also points out that the demographics of most South Caro-

lina motorcoach passengers reveal they are both in-state and out-of-state tourists, with most of them either senior citizens or youth.

"The very young and the elderly are the most susceptible to heat-related health issues," Presley said.

UMA and the Motorcoach Association of South Carolina are seeking to have the bill amended to

allow passenger buses to idle for up to 40 minutes prior to loading passengers if the outside ambient temperature is 80-89 degrees or below 32 degrees; idle for up to 60 minutes prior to loading passengers if the outside temperature is 90-99 degrees, and unrestricted idling prior to loading passengers if the outside ambient temperature is 100

degrees or greater.

"By relating idle time to outside ambient temperature, a reasonable approach may be implemented within the mechanical limitations of the motorcoach heating and air conditioning systems," Presley said.

The South Carolina coach association and Presley are urging

operators to write to state Sen. Lawrence K. Grooms, chairman of the South Carolina Senate Committee on Transportation, to seek changes to the idling bill.

The text of the bill can be found at www.scstatehouse.net. On the right side of the page, click on "Bill Number" under "Quick Search." Enter 4911.

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Internet-on-the-go deal results from coach ride

It's not often — if ever — that a motorcoach ride has resulted in creation of a \$3.2 billion company but, still, one has to wonder what might happen if more high-powered executives climbed on board a bus.

Here's the story:

On a bus ride in January through Portland, Ore., Brian L. Roberts, chairman and CEO of cable giant Comcast Corp., says he saw the future of Internet-on-the-go.

"We participated in a three-way videoconference call at 50 miles an hour. It was pretty incredible talking to people in the car behind you and to people in an office," Roberts told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

He also watched streaming video and saw high-speed data coming in live to the coach.

After the ride, Roberts and others went to work on a \$3.2 billion deal, signed last month in New York. In the transaction, Comcast Corp. joined with other cable companies, a chip-maker and two wireless-phone companies to create a venture that will provide high-speed Internet-on-the-go in the nation's top 100 markets by 2010.

The new technology, called WiMAX, will transmit high-speed Internet, movies, television shows, sports games and other digital data from about 200,000 existing cellular-telephone towers to laptop computers, telephones and other devices.

The deal creates a company called Clearwire Inc. Its owners will be Comcast, Sprint Nextel Corp., Intel Corp., Google Inc., Time Warner Cable Inc. and Bright

House Networks LLC.

They have agreed to collectively invest \$3.2 billion. Comcast's share is \$1.05 billion. The deal is expected to close by the end of the year.

"We'll be on the offensive in wireless with world-class partners. It is exciting. Our customers will know that the Comcast experience will be not just in your home but wherever you want it," Roberts told the *Inquirer*.

Sprint and Clearwire will build and operate the system. Intel will make the chips that allow computers, cell phones and other devices to receive the signal. Google and the cable companies will rent time on the network to distribute their products and services.

To get a head start on the next generation of wireless, Comcast and the others are betting on technology, called 4G, not yet tested on a grand scale. Comcast insists it has done a lot of research on the technology, which is already in use in Australia and parts of Asia.

Comcast's role began late last year, when its chief financial officer, Michael Angelakis, along with two company senior vice presidents, saw a WiMAX demonstration at a technology show in Las Vegas.

A short time later, Roberts and his chief operating officer, Stephen B. Burke, flew to Portland to meet with cell-phone pioneer Craig McCaw, who will be chairman of Clearwire, and to go on the demonstration bus ride.

After the ride, Roberts said he agreed to line up other cable companies and work on the deal.

Daecher blasts entry-driver rule

WASHINGTON — The Daecher Consulting Group, long-time motorcoach industry trainers and consultants, has weighed in on the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration's proposed entry-level driver training rules with a strongly worded critique.

"Our review of the proposed rulemaking results in our opinion that the proposed rule is counterproductive to achieving the results it intends, impractical to apply and, in some cases, untenable to implement," Daecher said in a filing with the federal agency.

Carmen Daecher, president of the consulting company bearing his name, provided comments on the proposed rule in seven safety areas related to the motorcoach industry:

- The proposal contains no curriculum for motorcoach operators, although one exists (the Model Motorcoach Driver Training Curriculum developed by the Federal Highway Administration in 1995). In addition, the proposal merely suggests topics to be included in a training program. It does not provide a minimum standard of content for the courses. Future motorcoach operators need a curriculum customized to their needs and the actual curriculum specified must be presented by any school or operator to comply.

- The topic of passenger safety is excluded from the rule. "This is a dangerous exclusion," said Daecher. "This implies that the safety of passengers is somewhat secondary to fundamental requirements for driver training." The topic is excluded even though passenger endorsements are necessary for CDL drivers who drive passenger-carrying vehicles. And ADA

requirements, which FMCSA oversees, are not part of the requirements for the passenger endorsement and proficiency in the use of lifts and tie-down systems for disabled passengers will not be demonstrated under the current proposal.

- The method for qualifying a driver training institution excludes truck and bus companies that have established training programs. The rulemaking requires an institution to be accredited by the U.S. Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. This limits training facilities to established commercial driving schools, junior colleges or other such institutions. Many truck and bus companies have effective and well-established training programs with appropriate facilities and trainers. Denying accreditation to companies that have traditionally provided CDL training will create a serious hardship to them and to the industry. "We strongly believe that by endorsing or even more appropriately requiring the use of approved curricula... the intent of the rule will be served and its effectiveness within the industry will be maximized. By approving curricula rather than institutions, it will allow operators to conduct training for future drivers as well as any other institutions that choose to do so."

- Qualifying driver instructors should be based on driving experience and driving history. "Instructors at any truck or bus company today may be just as effective as instructors in community colleges or in truck schools. To require that instructors meet state requirements for vocational instructors will significantly limit the number of

instructors with no measurable increase in quality of instruction."

- The rule contains no method for assessing and revising the program. FMCSA should track all future CDL holders who are affected by this rule and compare their motor vehicle conviction and accident rates to past CDL drivers.

- Using an hours-based standard for training is inefficient. A performance- or proficiency-based format could specify minimum passing grades of pre-established exams and the passing requirements for a driver's skills test. This would allow for variable time in the classroom or behind the wheel. "We believe this is a more efficient and effective approach to gaining assurance that the curriculum content and necessary driving skills are understood and acquired by the student."

- Exemption of transit and school bus drivers from the requirements will make the administration of this rule at the state level a nightmare. In order for a potential transit or school bus driver to receive a CDL, they would only have to inform their state licensing agency they will not be driving a motorcoach. However, the state will not be able to verify this because a person getting an entry level CDL most likely will not have a job yet. Requiring school bus and transit drivers to take the additional training will not simplify matters, either, because it would mean the development of even more standard curricula due to the differences in school bus and transit operations.

The full text of the Daecher comments can be found at www.regulations.gov, enter Docket No. FMCSA-2007-27748.

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Charter decision

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required private bus companies to own at least one bus or van and prohibited federally funded transit agencies from leasing vehicles for transportation purposes to businesses that did not have federal authority to transport people.

Taylor held in her opinion that Escambia County Area Transit and Escambia County, which operates the transit agency, had a long and close relationship with Winterfest and should have known from the outset that the event planner did not qualify as a charter company when it leased it the trolleys.

"In fact, respondent (ECAT) admits in its response that Winterfest had not been issued a DOT (Department of Transportation) number authorizing it to operate motor vehicles for hire for the transportation of passengers," she said.

Beach Boy owner Thomas McKean said he was pleased with

the ruling, but disappointed Escambia County Area Transit was not fined or ordered to pay the company the money it made by running the shuttles. "I would at least like to get the money that I lost," he said.

The amount of revenue the charters produced was not determined and Taylor noted that Escambia County Area Transit and the county were not counting on earning money from the shuttles, but rather benefiting through increased tax revenues from visitor spending.

Several private charter companies, including Beach Boy, had been providing the special event service before 2006 when Escambia County Area Transit decided to use Winterfest to operate the shuttles.

McKean said he plans to have his attorney review the FTA decision to determine if it might be possible to file a damage suit against Escambia County Area Transit in

an effort to recover some of the revenue he lost by not being allowed to run the shuttles.

He's already tangled up in a state lawsuit that Escambia County Area Transit and Winterfest filed against him last year, claiming the charter rules violation complaint he filed with the FTA was frivolous. It was not immediately known what will happen to that action now that the FTA has ruled against the transit agency and event planning organization.

Meanwhile, McKean said he plans to keep a close watch on Escambia County Area Transit and Winterfest this summer to see if they attempt to operate a shuttle service to the beaches as they have in past years. "If ECAT is going to be leasing any trolleys, they better do it right," he added. "If not, I'll file another complaint under the new charter rules."

The charter service rules were redone by the FTA last year and became effective April 30.

Gettysburg

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

film galleries, along with written material that illuminates the mind-set of the era.

A moving 22-minute introduc-

tory film, *A New Birth of Freedom*, narrated by actor Morgan Freeman, explores both the causes and consequences of the war.

Entry to the museum is free but admission to the film is \$8 for adults, \$6.50 for children.

The Gettysburg Cyclorama opens Sept. 26. Combination tickets for the movie and cyclorama tour will be \$12 for adults, \$10 for children.

Free ranger-led battlefield tours run June 14-Aug. 9. Year-

Daimler Buses helps finance first Setra order from Canada

GREENSBORO, N.C. — For the first time, Daimler Buses North America has helped a Canadian operator finance the purchase of Setra S 417 motorcoaches.

Daimler, which introduced the S 417 in the U.S. five years ago, began selling the luxury Setra model in Canada a little over a year ago.

"Our first customers did not need our financial assistance as they had everything in place prior to their purchases," said Jake Keys, Daimler Buses corporate communications coordinator.

"Knowing we would eventually need to offer financing, Daimler put in place a financial assistance plan to offer our Canadian customers. Once it was in place, we made it available to our customers as part of natural progression," Keys explained.

Trius Tours of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, became the first operator to take advantage of the new financing arrangements

with the purchase of 11 Setra S 417 coaches.

"It is very important for us to establish ourselves in the Canadian market with the Setra S 417 luxury motorcoach, and I couldn't be more pleased we were able to do this with Trius Tours," said Tom Chezem, vice president of motorcoach sales for Daimler Buses North America.

"We are thrilled to have assisted with the financing in Canada for the first time ever. I believe the Setra S 417 will resonate well with Trius Tours and their customers, while continuing their tradition of excellence," Chezem added.

Mike Cassidy, owner of Trius Tours, said that of the 11 S 417s purchased by his company, one has the TopSky glass roof that runs the length of the coach, and six have the rear window that allows more natural light into the cabin.

"We have assigned each driver a brand new Setra to create a sense of ownership and pride," noted Cassidy.

round two-hour bus tours cost \$25.95; private tours start at \$55 for up to six people. For reserva-

tions call (877) 874-2478. For general information call (717) 334-1124 or go to www.nps.gov/gett.



RELIABILITY DOWN THE ROAD

Calendar

JUNE 2008

1-6 Community Transportation Association of America Community Transportation Expo, Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, New Orleans. Info: Go to www.ctaa.org, or call (800) 891-0590.

7 Museum of Bus Transportation Spring Fling, Hershey, Pa. Info: Go to www.busmuseum.org.

17-20 Pennsylvania Bus Association 2008 Annual Meeting, Sheraton Atlantic City. Info: Go to www.pabus.org, or call (717) 236-9042.

20-22 Bus History Association 2008 Convention, Holiday Inn Manchester Airport, Manchester, N.H. Info: Go to www.bus-history.org.

24-26 National Tour Association Grassroots Symposium, Washington, D.C. Info: Go to www.NTA.travel.

26-29 New England Bus Association Annual Meeting, MGM Grand at Foxwoods, Mashantucket, Conn. Info: Go to www.newenglandbus.org.

AUGUST 2008

6-8 International Motor Coach Group Strategic Alliance Meeting, Chantilly, Va. Info: Go to www.imgcoach.com.

Pa. Bus Assn. meeting this month

HARRISBURG, Pa. — The 2008 annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Bus Association will be June 17-20 at the Sheraton Atlantic City.

The event will feature a supplier expo June 18 and an educational day, co-sponsored by Lancer Insurance Co. and Research Underwriters, on the 17th. Senior safety and claims managers from Lancer will make a presentation on "Managing an Accident Scene."

Tim Cotter, regional adminis-

trator from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, also is scheduled to speak.

The Pennsylvania Bus Association Annual Meeting is a business and educational event devoted to learning, communication of ideas, social interaction and recreation. In addition to the expo and education sessions, the meeting includes FAM trips, a golf outing and networking opportunities.

For information, go to www.pabus.org.

Mich. operator, Jerry Zuercher, dies

CARO, Mich. — Jerry Zuercher, who founded Classic Charters and Tours a dozen years ago and operated it with his wife Liz, died in late April. He was 63.

Mr. Zuercher spent 32 years as a teacher in the Caro schools, retiring in 1998. He attended Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, where he received both bachelor and masters of arts degrees. He was hired as band director for Caro Community Schools in 1966.

In 1996, Mr. Zuercher combined his love of travel and driving

by founding Classic Charters and Tours, which operated two motorcoaches.

Mr. Zuercher was a member of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Caro, where he was a choir member and former treasurer. He was also a member and officer of the Michigan School Band and Orchestra Association, American School Band Directors Association, the United Motorcoach Association, and the American Bus Association.

In addition to his widow, Mr. Zuercher is survived by four

daughters and a brother.

A memorial in Mr. Zuercher's named has been established with the St. Paul Lutheran Church Choir, 503 S. State St., Caro, MI 48723, and the Jerry W. Zuercher Endowment for the Musical Arts is being established at Caro Community Schools, 301 N. Hooper St., Caro, MI 48723.



Jerry Zuercher

'Celebration of Life' to honor Bill Harnett

CHERRY VALLEY, N.Y. — There will be "a celebration of the life" of William J. "Bill" Harnett, founder and president of RBS Inc., at 5 p.m. June 14 in the Old School Café in Cherry Valley.

Mr. Harnett died in April at the age of 57. (See May 15 *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

The "Evening of Remembrance" will include a pot luck dinner and music performed by Mr.

Harnett's musically inclined family and friends. Stories and memories of Mr. Harnett also will be shared.

For information, including a list of accommodations, call RBS at (800) 448-7001.

People

Complete Coach Works of Riverside, Calif., has announced the addition of *Tom Farnan* as regional sales manager for the West Coast. His responsibilities include covering both Northern California and the state's Central Valley, as well as surrounding states. He will

focus on both the bus rehab and retrofit markets, as well as introduce the Express Coach by **Blue Bird Coachworks**. Farnan has been in the transportation industry for more than 20 years, most recently working at **BUSWEST** as a representative.

Donald B. Davis Jr. has been appointed vice president, general counsel and secretary of Richfield,

Ohio-based **National Interstate Corp.**, parent company of the insurance company with the same name.

Davis, 50, joins National Interstate with more than 20 years of legal experience. He previously was executive vice president and general counsel to Amherst, N.Y.-based **Meritain Health Inc.** and **Performax Inc.**

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More drivers

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

seeking drivers to fill positions for a new shuttle service he is operating for the Long Island Rail Road.

Not only did he get a much larger response than he anticipated, but the caliber of many of the applicants was outstanding, leading him to believe that he might be able to hire some of them to fill driver vacancies in his regular charter business. His hopes were dashed, however, when he was told by many of the applicants that they only would take part time work with day-time hours.

"The over-the-road drivers willing to run charters still aren't out there," he said. "Instead, a lot of the people trying to get those types of jobs look like they just came from a homeless shelter or a halfway house."

Wallace Jones of Blue Grass Tours in Lexington, Ky., said a jump in the number of people applying for driver jobs at his company has helped him fill his needs, but has not eased his concerns about new hires staying on the job once they are hired.

"We have been able to fill our positions fairly easily and that's pretty uncommon," he said. "But longevity is the thing and we just

don't know how many will stay around for long, or if they will be here today and gone tomorrow."

Factors behind surge

While operators who have experienced an uptick in job applicants say they can't for certain explain what might be behind it, they say they see some signs that the nation's troubled economy and rising unemployment rate may be a key factor.

"We've had some applicants come in here and apply for jobs after they've gotten laid off in other states," noted Jones.

Lebron said many of his recent applicants appear to be men and women who are looking for second jobs so they can earn extra money for their families. "If they can pick up a little extra money it means they might be able to have a night on the town," he noted.

Randy Charlebois of Premier Coach Co. in Colchester, Vt., said that while economic conditions could be behind the jump in applicants at his company, a new pay scale he recently introduced for drivers is a more likely cause.

Concerned because his hiring efforts had not been going well, he increased driver pay by 22-percent across the board and started hold-

ing job fairs at his facility. The result was not only a rush of applicants but enough good ones to bolster his driver pool.

"Our driver applicants are much better now than what they had been in the past and we're getting a nice mix of them, including experienced drivers who are coming over from line runs," he said.

Charlebois said he also increased his charter rates by 3.5 percent to help make up for some of the higher wages. "We made up 12 to 15 percent of the driver increases," he said. "We know we won't make it all back but we have much better people behind the wheel now."

Regional differences

While many operators are reporting increases in job applicants, others say the employment situation at their companies and in their parts of the country has not changed much even as the economy continues to struggle and job losses continue to mount.

Matt Shoup of Cardinal Buses in Middlebury, Ind., said things remain about the same as they have for the past five years — a good number of applicants but only a small number of them good enough to hire.

Prevost parts catalog online

SAINTE-CLAIRE, Quebec — Prevost Car has announced the availability of an online electronic parts catalog.

Called PARTner, the system gives customers access to Prevost parts via the Internet.

In addition to purchasing online, customers can view past orders, track shipments, or check order status, parts availability and pricing.

Prevost said its online PARTner is a graphic-oriented software and database package that lists Prevost's full parts catalog. The database behind the online catalog will be continuously updated.

The system also is designed to streamline repairs and maintenance by providing a quick, intuitive way to understand relation-

ships between assemblies, sub-assemblies and parts.

Prevost customers already using the company's CD-based catalog will find the PARTner system easy to use because the online version is supported by the same software — CatBase.

To sign up to use either the E-Commerce Parts Ordering System or the Online PARTner, contact Vicky Tremblay at (418) 654-0174 Ext. 227, or e-mail vicky.tremblay@volvo.com.

For questions about PARTner, contact Denis Vallée at (418) 654-0174 Ext. 222, or e-mail denis.vallee@volvo.com.

Prevost plans to continue offering a CD version of its parts catalog for customers who do not have or wish to use Internet access.

"Most of them are second-career people, empty nesters looking for another career," he said. "We like those types, though, because they don't have any bad habits to break."

Wigley said his All Aboard America operation in New Mexico hasn't seen any changes in applicants and he continues to have dif-

ficulty finding good drivers. "And we have been advertising every which way but loose," he added.

At the same time, he said there continues to be no shortage of good applicants and good drivers for his West Texas operation. "We don't really have a driver shortage there and haven't had any problems finding drivers."

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Considering buying a new motorcoach? Smart thinking

By Dave Millhouser
ABC Companies

Harry Truman once said banks were willing to lend you money... just as soon as you proved you didn't need it. Probably true then, surely true now.

The current situation in the financial markets is influencing the coach business in a number of ways, and some are not obvious (at least not to the guy who, a few weeks ago, explained how NOT to rebuild an engine).

In an effort to stimulate the economy and mitigate the effects of the mortgage crisis, the Federal Reserve has lowered some key interest rates. Logically, there should be tons of money available for bus financing, at low rates. Not necessarily.

It turns out that the institutions that do most bus financing peg their rates to Treasury Bills, rather than the short-term rates that influence the prime rate. Those jewels bottomed out a couple of months ago, and may be on the rise. Interest rates for coaches are near historic lows... but may not stay there.

If a new coach is in your future, another thing to consider is that the Economic Stimulus Act of 2008 provides for some nice depreciation and expense deductions. If you need equipment... sooner might be better than later.

There are a couple of caveats (a caveat is NOT a tooth problem). Several manufacturers report a tightening of credit. Lenders aren't making a ton on loans; they seem to be more careful about who they fund. They're asking for more information, and examining it microscopically.

Coach operators spend considerable effort avoiding taxes. Using every legal means, they shelter earnings from the government. It's akin to flying a stealth bomber... if the enemy can't see you, neither can that oncoming 747. If the government can't see the profits, neither can the lender.

Successfully avoiding, or postponing, taxes can impact your ability to obtain loans, and impact down payment size and the interest you pay. Within the bounds of law (and decency) there's a balance.

One way to tilt the balance in your favor is to deal with "bus savvy" lenders.

Few coach operators look great on paper, but some lenders (and brokers) specialize in the bus business, and understand its quirks. The person arranging your financing is really doing a twofold job, he's working with you and he's selling you to the lender. You're looking for someone who understands coaches in general, and your business in particular.

You'll find folks like this at all the major manufacturers, as well as at high quality

brokers. It's more important than ever that you help them represent you by providing current, accurate data presented in a professional manner. Some lenders are going so far as to interview applicants. They're also looking at your personal credit.

There's an urban myth that 30-day delinquencies don't hurt. In real life, they always did, but now they can be lethal.

The coach business has its own version of the subprime lender. There are a wide variety of them, some reputable, some not. One thing they all have in common is that they require large down payments, and charge high interest rates. They provide a service for segments of our industry, but like any tool, need to be used carefully.

When traditional financial sources don't work out, consider a few things before going the subprime route. Lenders only make money if they lend. If they turn you down, it's because they're afraid it's not going to work. Respect their opinion, at least enough to take a hard look at where you are. Maybe it's not time yet.

It's possible your company is sound, but you've been too successful at sheltering profit. If you take some time and show profitability, the extra tax burden may be far less than your savings in lower interest rates and down payment.

If you have an opportunity that traditional sources can't recognize, and feel you must

use a second-tier financial source, be careful. Understand all the terms, know how much interest you're paying, and what other assets are being tied into the deal. Make sure you know who owns the coach at the end of the payments.

Assuming there's substantial "upfront money"... is it a down payment or deposit? Who gets it at the end?

In the current environment a top-notch accountant will pay for him/herself. They can help you in "selling your company" to lenders, and assist in getting good terms and lower interest rates. Along the way, they can provide insight into how your business is really doing, and help build relationships with lenders.

To get the favorable deals available now, a good credit history and comprehensive information, professionally presented, are crucial. Otherwise lenders may offer another quote from Harry Truman... "The buck stops here."

Dave Millhouser is a marketing consultant for ABC Companies. Contact him at: dave_millhouser@hotmail.com.



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Private operators to get crack at Indy 500, other races

INDIANAPOLIS — A large piece of business, providing charter and shuttle bus service for the Indianapolis 500 and two other major races here, will be totally available to private operators beginning next year.

But all of the business won't be available this year because of a decision by the Federal Transit Administration.

The federal agency granted an exception to the new federal charter rule — that went into effect April 30, for this year's Indian-

apolis 500, which was run May 25, as well as the Allstate 400 at the Brickyard, a NASCAR race that will be run at the end of July.

However, for the Allstate 400, private operators will be allowed to provide some of the shuttle services, and for the Red Bull Indianapolis GP, a new motorcycle race to be run in September, private operators will be able to handle the whole thing.

The Indianapolis 500 and the Allstate 400 are the largest, one-day sporting events in the world,

attracting close to 500,000 people, and the motorcycle race is expected to attract thousands of fans.

The FTA ruled that Indianapolis Public Transportation Corp., the public transit agency in Indianapolis and known as IndyGo, could provide charter and shuttle service for the two auto races this year under an exception clause in the new rule covering events of regional or national significance.

IndyGo had petitioned the FTA for a waiver, allowing it to supply buses for the races this year

because of the significant planning and coordination required to provide the service.

In its petition, IndyGo made it clear it would turn over the service to private operators next year but for this year it wanted the private operators to learn what is necessary to handle the races, coordinate with key individuals, including race organizers, public officials and law enforcement personnel, and line up the necessary equipment.

In recent years, more than 15,000 people have depended on

IndyGo buses for transportation on race day, requiring up to 125 buses and 10 vans.

IndyGo held a meeting with private operators in March, providing them with information about its race-day services, including its operational model, lists of key contacts, and answering questions.

A half-dozen private operators showed up for the meeting, with two of the operators contacting IndyGo about a month later indicating they were eager to provide the service.

Charter rule

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

companies are registered, the transit agencies can pursue charter work. More than 1,000 charter operators have registered, according to the FTA Website. There are about 3,500 private bus operators in the U.S.

The site is: <http://www.fta.dot.gov/CharterRegistration>.

Registration lasts two years, and you'll be notified when your registration is about to expire. To register, you must own at least one bus or van and have the legal authority to operate a charter business, according to the FTA.

There are a couple of quirks in the sign-up process, Presley and Klika warned. For example, if you have an apostrophe in your company name, put a space instead. Also, be sure and register the names of subsidiary companies.

Once you register, transit agencies have to notify you if they are interested in pursuing a charter job. They have to e-mail you:

- The potential customer's name, address, phone number and e-mail address, if available
- Requested date of service
- Approximate number of passengers
- Whether the customer wants vans or buses
- The trip itinerary and approximate duration
- The price the transit agency wants to charge. This does not mean you must do the work for that price.

When you receive an e-mail, you have to respond quickly. You have to express your interest by the end of the business day, unless the e-mail is received after 2 p.m. Then you need to respond by the end of the next business day, according to the rule, published in the Federal Register.

Presley and Klika advise that you check your e-mail daily. If you aren't interested in the job, you don't have to respond. If you are interested, write that you are "willing and able" to provide the service.

Information: Who to call

At the FTA:
Crystal Frederick
(202) 366-4063
Ombudsman.charterservice@dot.gov

At United Motorcoach Association:
Ken Presley, Vice President of Industry Relations
(800) 424-8262
kpresley@uma.org

At International Motor Coach Group Inc.:
Steve Klika, President
(913) 906-0111
sklika@imgcoach.com

Online:

There's a wealth of information on the rule's Web page. Go to: http://www.fta.dot.gov/laws/leg_reg_179.html.

While an online form for reporting violations is not yet up, there are forms for seeking a cease-and-desist order, as well as requesting an advisory opinion.

You also can research the rule or track the human-service organizations and charter operators that are registered. And there is a handy power-point presentation on the page.

The Website also can be accessed at: <http://www.fta.dot.gov/>; click the "legislation, regulations & guidance" bar on the left; click "regulations" on the left; then, click "charter bus service" on the right.

The notice issued by the transit agency might say you that you have to provide ADA-accessible buses.

"They can't (legally) do that," said FTA's Elizabeth Martineau.

Also, a public transit authority can't dictate that a trolley is needed, Klika said later. It is not the transit agency's job to broker; they can't dictate the terms of a job, including price.

In the same way, agencies are under no obligation to pass on potential jobs they have no interest in.

Also, if the notice says that 100 (or some other large number of) buses are needed and you only have 20, don't write that in your response. Simply say you are willing and able, and then work out the details with the client.

In other words, it's a golden opportunity for you, the private operator, to become a broker. Arranging the other buses and taking a slice of the pie.

Two nice things: You don't have to compete with the agency's price and the transit authority can't pursue the work if your negotiations with the potential customer have failed.

But, it's critical that you negotiate in good faith. Failing to do so can get you removed from the charter registry. And you can be pulled from the registry for other reasons, such as fraud, not maintaining safe operations or not maintaining insurance.

There are some cases when transit authorities can perform charter work. For example, they can shuttle government officials up to 80 hours a year. Also, qualified human-service organizations may be able to charter through the transit authorities, but only in specific circumstances.

Presley advises private operators not to tell potential clients the rules. "Nothing good comes from alienating people in the community" by criticizing the public transit authority, he said.

Mike Watson, managing director of El Camino Trailways in San Francisco, asked: What if the transit authority says a wheelchair lift is needed? Presley answered: "The customer can ask for whatever they want, but the transit agency can't coach them on it."

And even if it is a city-run event, the city could still be considered a third party, and fall under the rule, said Klika.

So what happens if the transit authority still pursues charter work

MCI tech training sessions prove to be highly popular

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Motor Coach Industries reports that its three-and-a-half-day technical tune-up training sessions, held at the company's National Training Center here, are selling out.

According to Scott Crawford, MCI Fleet Support manager and newly named director of training, the session that ran in early May was at capacity, with 50 students representing 38 operators.

MCI, which increased its technician training sessions from two to four this year, will host its next sessions Sept. 23 and Oct. 21.

To register, go to MCI's Website — www.mcicoach.com — or contact an MCI sales representative or MCI PRO Support manager.

The sessions are designed to give technicians greater hands-on experience with major coach systems, teaching them how to identify potential problems, as well as

that doesn't fall under the exceptions? You can ask for an opinion and cease-and-desist order from the FTA Office of the Chief Counsel.

If an illegal charter is actually performed, it is your job to gather the facts and file a complaint with the FTA. Presley and Klika stressed that you need to have as many details as you possibly can get to file a complaint.

Also, the complaint has to be filed within 90 days after the charter. The FTA has 110 days to investigate the complaint. If the complaint is incomplete, the FTA chief counsel may dismiss it.

"FTA is not going to initiate any of this; we have to initiate this," said Klika.

What if the chief counsel decides there is a violation? Funds to the transit agency can be withheld, future funds can be barred, or the agency can face suspension or be debarred.

The intent of the FTA is not likely to pursue isolated incidents, Klika

troubleshoot and make appropriate repairs to HVAC systems, power trains, steering, multiplex systems, brakes, air systems and other components and systems.

All courses are taught by experienced instructors, including MCI's top technical pros. Qualified students can take the 608/609 EPA certification exam free of charge.

For drivers, MCI now has posted videos on its Website, showing diesel engine exhaust regeneration procedures for 2007 and 2008 coaches equipped with EPA compliant engines and its wheelchair operations.

"MCI is committed to giving coach owners the strongest after-market support available," said Crawford. "Access to information and well-trained technicians help make our customers more successful, and that's good for them and for MCI."

said later. "They may not punish for an isolated situation," he noted.

For example, when a single operator doesn't receive e-mail notices. However, when a pattern is established, said Klika, "(The FTA is) going to go for the meat."

"We are hopeful that this will get the attention of the public services," said Martineau.

More charter rule briefings planned

Educational sessions on the new federal charter service rule will be held throughout the nation in coming months, says Steve Klika, president of International Motor Coach Group Inc.

The meetings will be in conjunction with industry or FTA functions. The next meeting is May 28 in Atlanta.

For more information, contact Klika at (913) 906-0111 or Ken Presley at (800) 424-8262.



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Tourism, travel volunteers restore New Orleans' park

NEW ORLEANS — Nearly 350 volunteers from the tourism and travel industry helped restore Louis Armstrong Park as part of a cleanup event coordinated by Tourism Cares, the volunteer organization that brings the travel and tourism industry together to give back to its communities.

The cleanup was the latest example of Tourism Cares' commitment to helping restore New Orleans' cultural fabric since Hurricane Katrina damaged the city nearly three years ago.

Volunteers from the United Motorcoach Association, other organizations and scores of private companies were involved in painting, pressure washing and general cleanup of the 33-acre site, and officially unveiled the restored statue of Louis Armstrong.

"Louis Armstrong Park and specifically Congo Square within, represents what some say is the single-most-important location of African-American heritage in our country — truly hallowed ground — the legacy of which must be preserved for generations to come," said Bruce Beckham, executive director of Tourism Cares.

"UMA was pleased to be involved in the Tourism Cares cleanup of Louis Armstrong Park," said UMA President and CEO Victor Parra.

"These annual clean-up events, and this one specifically, help us give back to the industry that has provided for so many of us over the years."

Next year, Tourism Cares For America will host its annual clean-up event in Gettysburg, Pa.

Diesel fuel

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

While demand in the U.S. for petroleum products is down roughly 330,000 barrels a day because of higher prices and a weaker economy, world demand has been growing about 1.2 million barrels a day this year.

Meanwhile, DOE is projecting retail diesel prices will fall next year, averaging about \$3.67 per gallon. Diesel averaged \$2.88 per gallon last year.

While DOE thinks prices will moderate, oil market analysts disagree sharply on where oil prices are headed in the future.

Goldman Sachs predicted last month that crude prices could soar to \$150-\$200 a barrel as non-OPEC producers struggle to maintain output, let alone increase it. (The firm predicted three years ago oil prices would top \$100 — a prediction that came true in January of this year, and then some.)

"We believe the current energy crisis may be coming to a head, as a lack of adequate supply growth is becoming apparent and resulting in needed demand rationing in the OECD areas, in particular the United States," Goldman Sachs' analysts said.

The president of OPEC also is warning that oil prices could hit \$200 a barrel, Britain's *Financial Times* reported, quoting Chakib Khelil, Algeria's energy minister.

However, a Lehman Brothers analyst is predicting oil prices will fall as low as \$80 a barrel next year as world demand drops, and Saudi Arabia tries to impress the incoming president by pumping more oil.

The Saudis rebuffed President George Bush when he asked them last month to pump more oil.

Still, there are several big development projects under way in Saudi Arabia that could boost that nation's output by 1.3 million barrels a day, more than the expected increase in global demand next year.

Other factors that could change next year are the fact the Chinese will no longer be stockpiling oil in advance of the Olympics, and an estimated 28 million barrels Iran is storing in tankers could find a market willing to deal with the difficult-to-refine crude.

And a survey of oil and gas executives by KPMG's Global Energy Institute found that most of them think the price of oil will drop significantly by the end of the year — to below \$100.

"The combination of traders moving resources into commodities and the weak dollar has had a significant role in the surge in pricing in recent weeks," said Bill Kimble, executive director for KPMG's Global Energy Institute. "However, ... there are underlying issues in the energy industry, such as escalating energy demand in emerging markets and declining oil reserves, which will continue to contribute to upward pricing pressure for years to come."

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Truckers back higher fuel tax

WASHINGTON — The trucking industry's largest trade group, the American Trucking Associations, has announced its support for national fuel-economy standards for over-the-road trucks.

Support for fuel mileage standards is a key element of a six-point ATA plan to maximize fuel use and cut consumption.

"These steps must be taken," said ATA President Bill Graves. "With high diesel prices we have a greater incentive to do something about sustainability. We are going to need some help from the government."

Graves said rising fuel prices, now the largest single expense for many carriers, justified the creation and implementation of truck fuel-economy standards, which would be developed by working closely with equipment manufacturers.

ATA said its support is conditioned on technological feasibility and no reduction in tractor performance.

In legislation last year, Congress called for a study to begin the process of setting over-the-road commercial vehicle fuel standards.

In addition to fuel standards, the ATA program also calls for:

- A nationwide 65-mph speed limit for all vehicles, with governors on new trucks set at 68 mph.
- Reduced idling.
- Road improvements to cut bottlenecks and delays, paid for with dedicated funds from a fuel-tax increase.
- Moving more freight per gallon of fuel consumed by targeted truck size and weight increases.

FirstGroup boosts sales, cuts costs at Greyhound

ABERDEEN, Scotland — So, six months on, how's the British makeover of Greyhound Lines going?

In the first report card issued by FirstGroup on its stewardship of Greyhound, the Scottish-based bus and rail company has given itself high marks.

FirstGroup acquired Greyhound on Oct. 1, when it purchased Laidlaw International for \$3.5 billion. Since then it has been brushing and grooming Greyhound, implementing more than a dozen initiatives aimed at both increasing revenue and cutting costs.

Thus far, says FirstGroup in a financial report issued last month, it has reduced costs at Greyhound by \$30 million to \$40 million on an annual basis and boosted revenues by more than \$30 million on a yearly basis.

The report on Greyhound was a key aspect of the fiscal 2008 financial results released by FirstGroup last month. FirstGroup's fiscal year ended March 31, meaning the results for Greyhound were for the six months from Oct. 1 — when it was acquired — through March 31. First Group did not present comparative year-earlier results for Greyhound because at that time Greyhound was owned by Laidlaw, and Laidlaw's fiscal year did not mesh with that of FirstGroup.

However, some limited comparisons are possible.

In the FirstGroup fiscal '08 report, Dean Finch, chief operating officer of FirstGroup North America, noted that when FirstGroup took over Greyhound "revenue trends had been weakening.

"Since then, actions we have taken have stabilized the business and I am pleased to report that during the last three months of the financial year we delivered year-

on-year revenue growth."

For the six months ended March 31, FirstGroup said Greyhound had revenue of \$565.8 million and earnings (before depreciation and amortization) of \$45.4 million.

During the six months ended Feb. 28, 2007, when Greyhound was owned by Laidlaw, it had revenue of \$550.8 million, and gross earnings of \$17.2 million.

Initiatives implemented at Greyhound to improve revenue include:

- Launching BoltBus, the curbside service operating in the northeastern U.S.
- Instituting extra charges for priority seating and excess baggage
- Improved yield management practices and ticketing structure
- Enhanced Web partnerships and more online ticket sales
- New peak and holiday fares strategy
- Changes to refund and ticketing policies
- New charging structure for call center and online sales

Greyhound cost-cutting strategies include:

- Reducing agent commission rates and arrangements
- Consolidating company headquarters in Dallas at one location
- Relocating the Phoenix call center
- Insurance reduction initiatives
- Reducing cost of sales
- Merging subsidiaries

FirstGroup notes one other accomplishment of which it is particularly proud: It says it has improved Greyhound's on-time performance.

"The (Greyhound) buses were not punctual (when we bought the business)," said FirstGroup Chief Executive Moir Lockhead. "Only 60 percent were on time. In April

we got that to just under 90 percent," Lockhead noted.

Finch said he has a separate team of people who continue to focus on "opportunities" at Greyhound.

For FirstGroup a whole, the

company said its combined adjusted operating profit for the year to end March 31, was up nearly 40 percent at 360 million pounds (roughly \$700 million U.S.), in line with expectations, and that its

outlook was positive.

FirstGroup also announced it had raised 236 million pounds (\$460 million U.S.) in a private share placing to help fund growth in the U.S. and reduce debt.



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Alleged dumping gets operator into hot water in Orlando, Fla.

ORANGE COUNTY, Fla. — An Orlando coach operator has stirred up its neighbors and a local TV station for allegedly dumping its lavatory waste in a vacant lot.

An Orlando television broadcast pictures supplied by one of its viewers of the alleged dumping by Crestline Coach Tours.

A woman living near the company said Crestline buses repeatedly dumped waste at a location right next to a neighborhood off Zell Drive in south Orange County.

Neighbors told the TV station the dumping had been going on for five months. They said they had watched as drivers pulled in the area and dumped.

In the video supplied to station WFTV, Channel 9, a coach is shown backing into the area where neighbors, who didn't want to be identified, have found waste. The residents said they've called both the Orange County Health Department and the company.

The TV station said it had talked to the owner of Crestline Coach Tours, Keith Landi, who said the mess was a mistake. He plans to clean it up and re-train drivers to prevent it from happening again.

Landi said it had not been going on for five months.

An initial Health Department inspection reportedly turned up no violations.

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