

35-Foot Coaches

Operators want, manufacturers hesitant

A growing number of motorcoach operators are asking coach builders to bring back 35-foot models that have many of the attributes of larger coaches, and some bus builders are beginning to take a serious look at the possibility of developing them.

ABC Companies Inc., which imports Van Hools, and Setra of North America are assessing the practicability of adapting European-built coaches for use in the United States and Canada.

"We're very serious about doing it and we should have a decision very soon," said ABC President Ron Cornell.

ABC and Van Hool are looking at the possibility of converting a 35-foot Van Hool model built in Belgium and importing it to the United States. Van Hool exported a 35-foot model — the T-800/35 — to the U.S. in the 1990s.

Patrick Scully, president of Setra, said his company also is evaluating whether it's feasible to adapt a 35-foot coach it builds at its production facility in Ulm, Germany. "It's something we are looking at right now but we have not made any decisions yet," he said.

The two executives said the models under consideration are not cutaways but true, over-the-road coaches that could be used for full-service tour and charter operations.

A 'serious' need

The evaluations, they said, were prompted by requests from numerous coach operators from around the country who say they have a serious need for smaller



ABC Companies is considering importing a 35-foot Van Hool coach (above) from Europe for the U.S. market. Until last year, MCI produced North America's only 35-foot over-the-road motorcoach, the F3500.



coaches to help fill growing demand from existing customers and to attract new customers.

Other coach manufacturers say they, too, are hearing from operators who are looking for a 35-foot model that can match full-size coaches for comfort and durability, but aren't likely to be offering one any time soon.

"Right now we're in a wait-and-see mode," said Bill Fay, director of coach marketing and sales at Blue Bird Corp. "We would have to make sure the market was going to be there for the long term and the revenues could justify the up-front money."

Noel Patterson, regional sales manager at Prevost Car Inc., said it's very unlikely his company would add a 35-foot coach to its

line, mainly because a true over-the-road coach would cost more than what most carriers would be willing to pay. Plus, he thinks the market may be too small to justify the millions of dollars that would have to be invested to build a new model. "I doubt you are going to see one developed by the manufacturers with the true quality that folks would expect," he said.

Motor Coach Industries, which produced the last 35-foot motorcoach for the U.S. market — the F3500 — until last year, also is watching developments closely and could be interested if demand grows substantially, reports Gene Hall, MCI's new vice president of private-sector coach sales.

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Schwarzenegger is star to California operators

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has quickly become the golden boy of California motorcoach operators. Not only is he reducing operators' costs but he may be increasing their revenue as well.

On his first day in office Schwarzenegger made good on one of his major campaign promises, repealing a tripling of the state vehicle license fee.

The rollback saves hard-pressed California coach operators thousands. For example, an operator that paid \$13,000 in licensing fees last year would have had to pay \$40,000 this year had Schwarzenegger not acted.

The fee, levied at 2 percent of a vehicle's value and allocated to local governments, was cut 67 percent between 1999 and 2001. It

was restored on Oct. 1, under a trigger built into the 1998 law creating the cut.

Schwarzenegger's executive order said the administration of former Gov. Gray Davis erred when it tripped the trigger to restore the vehicle licensing fee to the 2 percent level.

But it hasn't been just the fee repeal that has helped California coach companies. Schwarzenegger, as it turns out, is pulling more tourists to Sacramento, and coach operators stand to benefit.

Tour operators from Britain, Germany and elsewhere are looking to add Sacramento to their California bus tours, reports Steve Hammond, head of the Sacra-

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Key House members introduce huge highway, transit proposal

WASHINGTON — After months of delay and despite stiff opposition from the White House and House Republican leaders, the maverick Congressmen who head the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee have unveiled their own version of the highway and transit reauthorization bill.

Transportation Committee Chairman Don Young, a Republican from Alaska, and ranking minority member, Rep. Jim Oberstar from Minnesota, want to spend a whopping \$375 billion for highway, transit and other transportation projects during the next six years.

That's 50 percent more than the White House has proposed and 70 percent more than was spent dur-

ing the past six years.

Young and Oberstar call their plan the Transportation Equity Act — A Legacy for Users, or TEA-LU.

It is, indeed, a lulu. Besides the bloated spending, the bill contains a wide assortment of items that will impact the motorcoach industry.

A sampling:

Sec. 3023 tightens the charter prohibitions for transit agencies that get money from the Federal Transit Administration. It would remove enforcement of the charter rules from the FTA and place it with the Secretary of Transportation.

Sec. 3035 increases wheelchair accessibility grant levels. It also provides that 75 percent of all future grants are to go to line-run

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THE DOCKET

Hot in New Orleans

Coach operators in Louisiana are upset over plans by the local transit agency to establish a new commuter service. **Page 4**

Operators to Fight

Motorcoach operators in Oklahoma are organizing to battle the imposition of sales taxes on coach services. **Page 4**

More Associations?

The president and CEO of UMA says the industry needs more

state and regional associations to fight money hungry politicians. **Page 6**

Overhaul at NTSB

The National Transportation Safety Board is revising its "Most Wanted" safety program. **Page 6**

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Drivers cited for manual back-up video systems

Another outrage in New Jersey ?

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. — Inspectors for the New Jersey Department of Transportation have apparently stepped up enforcement of a state regulation governing the operation of back-up video systems on coaches. Drivers are being cited for having a manually operated back-up monitor.

Rule 16:53-3.40 Mirrors; Video Camera in the New Jersey DOT "Autobus Specifications" says back-up video cameras may be installed to enable the driver to view the exterior rear of the coach. However, "the camera shall be operable only while the autobus is in reverse," the rule states.

In other words, unless the back-up video monitor system has a transmission interlock switch that turns it on and off when the coach goes in and out of reverse gear, then it violates the state rule.

Many systems apparently have been installed by coach builders with manual switches so drivers can turn them on and off when they want to use them.

One victim of New Jersey's enforcement is Homer Reitz, a driver for Bailey Coach of York, Pa.

An inspector from the NJDOT climbed onboard a Van Hool coach Reitz had driven from York to

Atlantic City. The inspector asked Reitz if the back-up monitor worked and to turn it on. When Reitz complied, the inspector informed him the system was "only suppose to work in reverse. ... He was nice about," said Reitz, but nevertheless wrote him a citation: "Back-up video monitor is operational from all gears."

On the "Driver Vehicle Examination Report," the NJDOT inspector also cited a federal regulation that prohibits "broadcast" television receivers from being visible to drivers while operating a coach (FMCSR No. 393.88). However, that regulation does not appear to cover back-up monitoring systems because they do not receive "television broadcast(s)."

The federal rule was instituted 50 years ago when it was feared TVs would be mounted where drivers could become distracted.

The incident outraged Reitz boss, John Bailey, president of the company bearing his family name. "I'm really fed up with New Jersey," he said. "We don't need this hassle. Let another carrier take them (to New Jersey)."

"Their state motto should be 'we're not happy until you're unhappy.'"



Changes aplenty at Upstate Tours

SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y. — Upstate Tours, an upstate New York charter, tour and scheduled commuter service, is closing out one of its most exciting years ever with more changes on the way.

Highlights have included the transition to new management, adding 12 new Setra S417 coaches, and adopting a new logo.

The new management was occasioned by the retirement of company President Bruce Matthews, a long-time industry leader who owns a family of bus industry-related companies operating under the banner of the Matthews Group.

The senior Matthews was succeeded as president of Upstate Tours by his nephew, Glenn. The

younger Matthews has been involved with the Matthews bus group for several years.

Drew Tuller, an experienced coach industry sales executive, has joined Upstate Tours as vice president and general manager. Tuller previously had served as national sales manager for Setra of North America and prior to that had been vice president of Coach Sales of Neoplan.

Besides the management changes, Upstate Tours also has updated its charter and tour reservation software and is preparing to give the company offices a more contemporary look with



Drew Tuller

new interiors.

The "new look" of Upstate Tours also is reflected on its new Setras. The silver and blue coaches are equipped with 430-horsepower Detroit Diesel engines, Allison B500 Transmissions with retarders, Alcoa aluminum wheels and Firestone tires.

Upstate Tours, which has a fleet of more than 30 coaches, has been operated by the Matthews Group for nearly 25 years.

The Matthews operation also includes Matthews Bus Sales of Ballston Spa, N.Y., Matthews Distributor Services of Greensboro, N.C.; Matthews Specialty Vehicles of High Point, N.C., and Rifled Air Conditioning Systems of Archdale, N.C.

Vermont operator decides to tackle Orlando market

ORLANDO — A five-year-old coach company based in Vermont has expanded its operations to Orlando.

Bristol Trailways of Orlando has been opened by Bristol Trailways of Vermont, marking an additional service territory for the Trailways Transportation System.

"We have decided to add a new facility in central Florida to fill a service void in that region and to offer our customers more connections and ease of access north to south on the Eastern Seaboard and throughout North America," said Bristol Trailways President & CEO Anthony Grassano.

Bristol Trailways of Orlando has leased the former Florida Stage Lines location in the 3000 block of West 38th Street in Orlando.

Florida Stage Lines closed this past summer when its owner, Ed Dowling, decided to retire and sell the business.

"In Vermont, we do a lot with school groups through our "Classrooms on Wheels" division and we intend to develop that in Florida," said Grassano. "And we see a huge need there for senior services. ... When we did our market research, we found a void in packaged tours for seniors. So, we plan to promote that service actively."

Rob Grassano, company vice president who is directing the Florida operation, said Bristol's ability to offer "one-stop shopping" for school groups is something new for the Orlando area.

"We are going after the school



market with complete educational tour products, not just charter services," he says. "Of course, we offer theme park tours in the area, plus additional themes like the Civil War in the South and historic St. Augustine."

The company also is eyeing Orlando's huge corporate convention market.

Bristol Trailways has a fleet of nine coaches which it intends to split between Vermont and Florida, depending on the season

and demand. Initially, it is starting the Florida operation with four coaches.

Gale Ellsworth, president and chief executive of Trailways, said Bristol Trailways' expansion to Orlando opens an important new territory for the Trailways network.

"Bristol's entry into this market adds a vital dimension to our ongoing initiatives to enhance customer services," she said. Trailways is the nation's largest network of independent motorcoach operators.

D.C. council bans loading on Eastern Avenue

WASHINGTON — The District of Columbia City Council has voted to ban tour bus parking and loading on Eastern Avenue between Riggs Roads, N.E., and Kennedy Street, N.E.

The location is at the northeastern boundary of the district, near Chillum, Md.

The ban prohibits parking, as well as loading and unloading of any sightseeing, charter or tour bus with a seating capacity of more than 12 passengers. Violators are subject to a \$500 fine for each offense. The ban will last for 225 days.

The council reportedly acted after a motorcoach operator repeatedly used the stretch of Eastern Avenue as a drop-off and pick-up point for its Atlantic City runs.

THE DOCKET

Shuttle proposal by New Orleans angers operators

NEW ORLEANS — Plans by the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority to establish park-and-ride commuter bus service between New Orleans and Slidell, La., has many Louisiana motorcoach operators hopping mad.

"They made no effort to put (the service) out for bid" or to include private bus operators in planning for the new service, said Louis Sanders of Louisiana Coaches Inc. Sanders also is president of the new Louisiana Motorcoach Association.

"We want to have a chance to compete," said Sanders. "We have the expertise, the facilities and the equipment" to provide the service.

Last month, New Orleans RTA pilot tested the commuter service, offering free rides for a week from an outlet mall parking lot in Slidell to 20 stops in the New Orleans central business district. Slidell is roughly 30 miles east of New Orleans on Interstate 10. Two morning departures and afternoon return trips were offered. One-way travel time is about 40 minutes.

Sanders said he and other operators are exploring their options in dealing with the situation. They plan to start by protesting to the RTA.

"They're using the FTA to their advantage," said Sanders. "If they're allowed to get away with this they will spread out from there. The next step will be to operate convention shuttles and casino shuttles. And they're doing it with our tax money."

Rolling stock legislation wins vote after protest

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — Illinois motorcoach operators and truckers appear to be on the verge of winning a major legislative victory with the state Senate adopting a bill that would ease higher licensing fees adopted by legislators in June.

The Senate unanimously adopted an amended House bill that reverts Illinois rolling stock exemption back to its prior form beginning July 1, 2006.

The bill also would reduce a new "commercial distribution fee" that is tied to vehicle licens-

ing each registration year and eliminate it entirely beginning July 1, 2006.

The impact of the commercial distribution fee was to increase motorcoach registrations fees by 36 percent. The fee was adopted during the summer as part of Gov. Rod Blagojevich's plan to fill a \$5 billion budget deficit.

The Senate vote came a day after truckers and bus operators from around Illinois surrounded the state Capitol with their big rigs and coaches in a show of protest of the higher fees.

Oklahoma operators organize to fight tax on coach travel

OKLAHOMA CITY — Motorcoach operators in Oklahoma are gearing up to fight efforts by the Oklahoma Tax Commission to force bus companies to collect sales taxes for charter services.

Jeff Polzien of Red Carpet Charters in Oklahoma City said he and other operators are developing plans to fight imposition of the tax. He said the group is researching the issue, looking at hiring an attorney and making plans to meet with representatives of the state tax commission.

The tax commission sent letters this fall to operators telling them that — under Oklahoma's sales tax code — sales of charter bus services are taxable. The letter makes no distinction between intrastate charters and those traveling inter-

state, which cannot be taxed by state and local governments.

Polzien also contends that taxing charter service doesn't make sense because many groups traveling by coach are tax exempt, including churches and schools.

"We disagree with the commission" on this issue, said Polzien.

Supporting the Oklahoma operators will be the American Bus Association. ABA legal counsel Richard Schweitzer said the association will be sending the tax commission a letter reminding them that interstate bus services are not subject to state taxes.

In the Nov. 1 issue of *Bus & Motorcoach News*, the basis for Oklahoma's drive to collect sales taxes on bus charters was reported incorrectly. The tax commission is pushing application of the tax.

Post-9/11 Visa rules are keeping tourists, and others from U.S.

WASHINGTON — More than two years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a thicket of new rules governing the granting of visas to foreigners is dissuading thousands of people from coming to the United States, the *Washington Post* reports.

The rules are generating protests from the travel industry, research universities, medical institutions and multinational corporations, according to the newspaper.

Because of the new regulations, foreign tourists and conventioners, students, scholars and corporations have decided by the thousands to take their business elsewhere.

Some critics warn that the security procedural obstacles are fostering a bureaucratic "culture of no" that discounts the benefits that foreigners bring to the United States.

But Bush administration officials defend the new rules, saying they are keeping terrorists from entering the country. "In the post-9/11 environment, we do not believe that the issues at stake allow us the luxury of erring on the side of expeditious processing," Janice L. Jacobs, deputy assistant secretary of state for visa services, told a congressional committee earlier this year.

But critics contend that by requiring foreigners to wait weeks or months for visas, Washington is damaging its efforts at public

diplomacy. They say the United States is sending a hostile message to the world.

All 19 of the 9/11 hijackers entered the United States on valid visas, most of them without being interviewed by an American consular officer. Mindful of that, the Bush administration adopted extensive new policies governing visas, the latest of which took effect Aug. 1.

The most significant include a requirement for face-to-face interviews for hundreds of thousands of visa-seekers who previously were excused from such interviews, and the withholding of visas for certain categories of people until the FBI runs name checks to determine that they do not appear to be a threat. That process can take months.

The administration also granted the Department of Homeland Security control of most visa rule-making decisions, as well as vetoes over visas issued overseas, previously the exclusive province of the State Department.

Starting Jan. 5, the government intends to fingerprint all visa-bearing travelers who arrive at airports and seaports. Next October, visitors who do not require visas — mostly people from Western Europe and Canada — will have to have machine-readable passports. In addition, people issued non-immigrant visas abroad will be fingerprinted when obtaining the visa.

Deadline close for commenting on South Jersey agency rules

HAMMONTON, N.J. — The deadline for commenting on plans by the South Jersey Transportation Authority to overhaul its Bus Management Program is the end of this week.

The authority has drawn up more than 30 pages of revised rules that will impact operators in a wide variety of ways. (See Nov. 1 issue of *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

Among the proposed changes is

a plan to begin scrutinizing the safety performance of motorcoach companies that send coaches to Atlantic City, including requiring operators to report all their traffic safety violations to the authority.

In other words, operators that send coaches to Atlantic City on a fairly regular basis would have to report every single traffic safety citation to the authority regardless of where the violation occurred.

Other changes include:

- An increase in the annual fee for a fleet medallion from \$30,000 to \$40,500.

- An increase in the annual fee for a single-bus medallion from \$550 to \$675. (The daily permit fee for buses entering Atlantic City remains unchanged at \$2.)

- Establishment of bus routes for the new Borgata Hotel Casino. According to the South Jersey

Transportation Authority, the primary intent of the retooled rules is to eliminate unnecessary reporting requirements, streamline certain processes and provide more flexibility.

Written comments on the proposed rules must be submitted by Dec. 5 to: Laura McAllister Cox, Esquire, Cooper Levenson April Niedelman & Wagenhaim, 1125 Atlantic Ave., Atlantic

City, NJ 08401.

The authority's board is comprised of the following members: Chairman Frank Spencer and Commissioners Stanley R. Glassey, Charles E. Owens, Louis Toscano, James M. Dwyer, James Washington, Carl W. Block, Jack Lettiere and William Watley. To contact board members, write to: P.O. Box 351, Hammonton, NJ 08037.

ABA criticizes New York City idling limits, parking woes

NEW YORK CITY — The idling restrictions and parking regulations imposed by New York City on motorcoaches are unworkable and a detriment to tourism in the city, says a top official of the American Bus Association.

And, adds ABA Vice President of Government Affairs Clyde Hart, increasing city fines for idling and expanding enforcement of the regulations makes no sense.

Hart made his comments last month in testimony before the Committee on Environmental Protection of the New York City Council. The committee has oversight of the enforcement of and compliance with idling restrictions in the city.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg, some city council members and others are advocating that fines for idling be increased and that enforcement of the city's tough idling restrictions be stepped up.

Currently, coaches can idle only three minutes on New York City streets, and must load and unload passengers within that time.

Hart said the unloading and loading passengers cannot be governed strictly by time, and increased penalties will result in fewer buses bringing tourists to the city.

He urged the council to modify its regulations, allowing coach operators latitude to idle a bus to ensure the safety, health and comfort of their passengers.

"Frankly, there is no way for any motorcoach to safely load or unload within three minutes," said Hart. "A bus with 50 or more passengers requires more time, and the disembarking of passengers with their personal baggage adds more time to the process.

"Further," Hart continued, "the loading and unloading of luggage from the luggage bay underneath the motorcoach requires additional time, and this assumes that the passengers are not elderly or disabled."

Hart expressed concern that regulating idling time will interfere with the safety features of coaches. He noted that running a coach engine is needed for the vehicle's air conditioning and brakes to be functional. And, said Hart, three minutes may be

insufficient to assure enough air pressure has built up in the system and, in that case, a driver pulling away from the curb or terminal may not have fully functional brakes in the event of an emer-

gency situation.

Hart also said motorcoach operators are hindered by the lack of parking facilities in New York City and he asked the city to work with ABA to find sources of

state and federal funding that may help alleviate the problem.

Currently, the lack of bus parking requires motorcoach drivers and their passengers to cruise city streets searching for places to safe-

ly load and unload, negating the many benefits of motorcoaches to the environment.

It is estimated that upwards of 1,000 charter and tour buses travel to New York City daily.

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THE DOCKET

More state associations urged by UMA president; 'State Watch' announced

PALM SPRINGS, Calif. — Victor Parra, president and CEO of the United Motorcoach Association has called on coach operators across the U.S. to form state and regional associations to battle politicians bent on balancing state budgets on the backs of coach companies.

Speaking last month at the annual meeting of the California Bus Association, Parra said governors across the U.S. are running for their political lives, feeling the pressure to get their fiscal houses in order.

"And unfortunately, our industry is an easy target to get more revenue. Particularly if that money is coming from out-of-state carriers, like what's going on in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and, no doubt, soon in other states as well," Parra said.

"We have serious problems in our industry and more serious challenges coming at us from all sides. The need for us to band together and solve problems

together is greater today than probably it's ever been in our industry's illustrious history."

Parra recited a litany of tax and fee increases designed to raise revenue and narrow deficits, plus new regulatory burdens, idling crack-downs and stepped enforcement actions taking place in states all across the U.S.

"What is driving all this? he asked rhetorically. "Money. Dollars. Bottom line, we need strong state associations. ... We're in for the fight of our lives."

To help state and regional associations fight back and get an earlier warning when legislative or regulatory changes are proposed that would adversely impact operators, Parra said UMA is launching a new initiative called State Watch.

"We have a state tracking service that will give us timely updates on anything that may impact our industry — from changes in registration fees, to imposing new taxes, to collecting out-of-state



Victor Parra

corporate tax.

"We don't want another situation where operators are caught flat-footed," said Parra.

"We will need to tell our story forcefully, convincingly and passionately. We need to say how much money we contribute to a local economy and the tax base of that state. We need to involve our partners in these fights — hotels, destinations, CVBs.

"If we're overly taxed that affects their customers, both the coach operators and the hotel guest who now has to pay more for the trip. Like seniors operating on fixed income. It will mean less that they spend at hotels, destinations or anywhere else they go," Parra told CBA members.

NTSB overhauls safety recommendation program

WASHINGTON, D.C. - The National Transportation Safety Board has overhauled its Most Wanted Transportation Safety Improvements program, including dropping onboard recording systems for buses from its "most-wanted" list of recommendations.

That doesn't mean, however, that the federal government's interest in requiring "black boxes" for motorcoaches and schools buses is going away. It simply means the NTSB is satisfied the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is making progress in addressing the issue.

The NHTSA has been studying the issue for four years and has "an event data recorder working group" pushing the idea.

Following a meeting last month, the NTSB announced it had completed changes to its Most Wanted Safety Improvements program. As a result of the overhaul, the board has closed 111 recommendations and developed a classification system to indicate action and timeliness of progress on remaining issues.

"The Most Wanted List includes safety issues that we believe will make the greatest impact on transportation safety," said NTSB Chairman Ellen G. Engleman, "The Board will use this revised safety tool to aggressively pursue safety and achieve safety results."

Still on the NTSB most-wanted list are:

- Development of a comprehensive medical oversight program for drivers of commercial vehicles, and
- Upgraded vehicle standards that will improve bus occupant safety.

Perhaps more significantly, the NTSB has decided to take a more hands-on approach to pushing the safety recommendations that result from its investigations of air, highway, rail and sea incidents and issues.

"Issuing recommendations is not enough," said Ms. Engleman. "Implementation is the key and the board will work with its partners in safety to clear languishing recommendations."

N.C. halts toll plan, Massachusetts to try

North Carolina Gov. Mike Easley has put the brakes on a proposal to put toll booths along Interstate 95, newspapers in that state report.

I-95 is the major interstate along the nation's East Coast and runs for 182 miles in North Carolina. Under the proposal, traveling from the Virginia border to the South Carolina border on the highway would have cost at least \$18.

A consultant's report to the state Department of Transportation had proposed putting six sets of toll booths, each about 30 miles apart, and charging \$3 per vehicle. The fees would have raised \$2.4 billion over 30 years to widen I-95.

Supporters said the plan would hit out-of-state drivers hardest while letting locals make short trips for free, *The Fayetteville Observer* reported. Opponents, however, contend the tolls would discourage tourism and breed more toll booths north and south of the state border.

NCDOT wants to transform I-95 from a mostly four-lane highway into an eight-lane freeway with higher bridges, wider shoulders and longer ramps. But dipping into available highway funds would delay other projects, according to Calvin Leggett, manager of the department's program development branch.

North Carolina planned to apply to the Federal Highway Administration for one of two spots remaining in a federal test program for putting tolls on existing interstate highways. Ohio and Texas also have expressed interest in applying, and it appears Massachusetts likes the idea as well.

The Massachusetts House of Representatives is considering a bill that would establish toll booths on I-95 in that state, plus on I-495, I-93 and state Route 3 near the border with New Hampshire.

Revenue from the tolls would be earmarked for transportation needs in the commonwealth.

Diesel price rises half-cent in week

The average retail price of diesel fuel in the United States rose 0.5 cent to \$1.481 per gallon during the third week of November, the Department of Energy reported.

The over-the-road bus industry's predominant fuel had decreased a total of 2.6 cents during the prior three weeks. Still, the price going into the final week of November was 7.6 cents a gallon higher than it was a year ago.

The half-cent increase means that a motorcoach operator is paying \$1 more than the previous week on a 200-gallon purchase at retail pumps.

The national average price for regular unleaded gasoline fell 0.7 cents to \$1.497 a gallon, the lowest level since \$1.489 on July 7. The decline was the 11th in the previous 12 weeks.

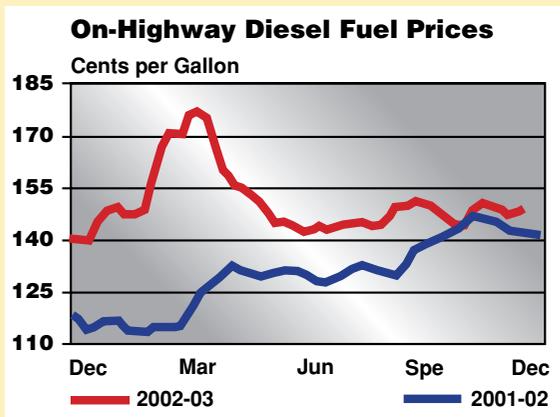
Regionally, the price of diesel rose by 1.7 cents to \$1.596 along the West Coast group of states, but fell 0.2 cent to 1.465 in the Midwest, the Department of Energy said. Other parts of the nation reported increases of between 0.1 cent and 0.7 cent.

The cheapest diesel fuel is in the lower Atlantic states, averaging \$1.423 per gallon, while the high-price leader is California, where diesel averages \$1.641 a gallon.

Each week, the DOE surveys 350 diesel-filling stations to compile its national snapshot price of diesel fuel.

Meanwhile, the price of crude oil in New York has been steadily rising in recent weeks, reaching its highest level since the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March.

Crude oil for December delivery rose \$1.55, or 4.9



Diesel Fuel Prices

	Cents per Gallon	Change from	
		Price	Week Ago
U.S.	148.1	▲ 0.5	▲ 7.6
East Coast	147.8	▲ 0.7	▲ 8.4
New England	158.1	▲ 0.2	▲ 8.9
Central Atlantic	158.2	▲ 0.5	▲ 9.7
Lower Atlantic	142.3	▲ 0.8	▲ 7.6
Midwest	146.5	▼ -0.2	▲ 5.9
Gulf Coast	143.1	▲ 0.8	▲ 8.5
Rocky Mountain	154.0	▲ 0.1	▲ 7.9
West Coast	159.6	▲ 1.7	▲ 9.6
California	164.1	▲ 1.2	▲ 11.7

percent, to \$33.28 a barrel on the New York Mercantile Exchange.

People



Ted Burk

Greyhound Lines has announced three key executive changes at its corporate headquarters in Dallas.

Ted Burk was promoted to vice president of operations from vice president of customer service; **John Taylor** was promoted to vice president of labor relations from vice president of driver operations, and **Cheryl Farmer** was promoted to vice president of finance from vice president and controller.

Also, **Myron Watkins** was promoted to general manager-East from district manager of customer service for District 1. **Bill Blankenship** was promoted to general manager-West from director of Greyhound PackageXpress.

Burk, who continues to head customer service, adds managing driver, terminal, agency and food service to his responsibilities. He has more than 36 years experience in the intercity bus industry, joining Greyhound in 1987 as part of the takeover of Continental Trailways.

Taylor's position is newly created and makes him responsible for all Greyhound labor relations in the U.S. He serves as the principal liaison between the company and the IAM, the ATU and the Teamsters. He has been with



Cheryl Farmer



John Taylor

Greyhound since 1988.

Ms. Farmer manages the accounting, financial reporting, corporate development, strategic planning and internal auditing for the company. A Greyhound employee since 1995, Ms. Farmer assumes responsibilities formerly held by **Jeffrey Sanders**, senior vice president and CFO, who left the company.

"Today's announcement is part of our long-term strategy to decrease cost, increase revenue and improve performance," said Stephen E. Gorman, president and CEO, Greyhound Lines, Inc.

Mark Paterson has joined MCI Fleet Support as general manager of its Midwest Fleet Support Center in Des Plaines, Ill. Paterson will be responsible for managing the shop, parts operations and customer service. He reports to Jerry Cignarella, executive director of Fleet Support Center operations.

Paterson joins MCI after a five-year career with Penske Truck Leasing where he served as an operations manager, managing a \$25-million, 2,000-truck leasing and rental business. He is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and has an MBA from the University of Southern California.



Mark Paterson

James Edward Vanderhoof dies suddenly

WEST ORANGE, N.J. — James Edward Vanderhoof, a straight-shooting ex-Marine who owned and operated Vanderhoof Transportation for more than 30 years, died suddenly at his home late last month. He was 67.

Mr. Vanderhoof took over the charter company that had been founded by his father in 1918, but managed over the years by his uncles and a cousin after his father died at a relatively early age.

Before settling down to run the company, however, Mr. Vanderhoof sowed a few wild oats. As a young man, he spent six years in the Marine Corps and raced automobiles, including competing in drag races at regional strips on the East Coast and Midwest. His love

of autos continued throughout his life, focusing on DeSotos, a Chrysler nameplate that disappeared more than 40 years ago. He was a member of the National DeSoto Club and owned a fleet of vintage DeSotos.

But it was the bus industry that was Mr. Vanderhoof's first love. He could be found seven days a week at the business, and among his peers he was known for his fair dealing. When he hired another coach company to help fulfill a contract and part of the job ended up being cancelled, he would let his own buses sit idle rather than shut out the other operator.

In recent weeks, Mr. Vanderhoof had joined another operator, Richard Jaeger of

Coachman International Tours in Haledon, N.J., to push for formation of a new state association of bus operators in the Garden State. The pair bridled at the increasing regulation of the industry by state government.

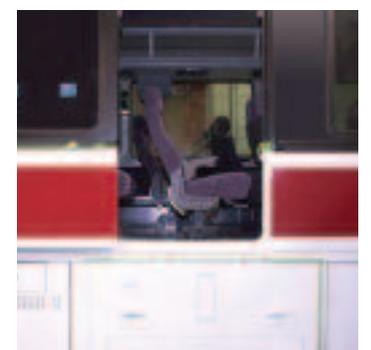
The company Mr. Vanderhoof headed has a fleet of 21 coaches, most of which are Eagles. "He was an Eagle man," said his son Edward. "He liked the Torsilastic suspension."

In addition to his son, who helped his father manage the business, Mr. Vanderhoof is survived by his widow, Ruth Ann; another son, Craig, and a daughter, Ellen C. Johnson. His son-in-law, E.J. Johnson, is director of maintenance at Vanderhoof Transportation.

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Ontario Motor Coach Assn., honors two industry veterans

TORONTO — The Ontario Motorcoach Association honored two transportation industry veterans at its Annual Conference and Marketplace here last month.

The OMCA presented its Lifetime Achievement Award to Bob Colborne, chairman and CEO of the Pacific Western Group of companies, one of Canada's largest privately owned transportation networks and operator of the eighth largest bus fleet in North America.

For nearly 50 years, Colborne has been an advocate of motorcoach travel, which helped qualify him for an award that honors individuals who have made significant lifetime contributions to building

the coach industry.

Inducted into the OMCA Operator Hall of Fame was Geoff Davies, president and CEO of Century II Holdings Inc., operator of ICS Courier, whose fixed-route courier business serves more than 35,000 customers in North America.

Other operations Davies has headed operate motorcoach charter and line-run services, school buses, airport transfers and para-transit contract services.

In the early 1980s, Davies was instrumental in restructuring OMCA. He is a past president and board member of the association. Five years ago, he was voted a life member.

OPINION

Study supports reasons for luxury bus service

A study of business executives and the impact of travel on their productivity has identified yet another reason why the U.S. needs luxury over-the-road bus service.

The study found that business travelers are not only less productive while on the road but also less productive for significant periods of time after their return from their travels — in some cases more than three days.

Travel-related stresses, including physical ailments, anxiety caused by increased security and simply being away from the office contribute to the recovery time business travelers say they need to return to “normal” productivity.

The study, commissioned by Kensington Technology Group, a maker of accessories that make using laptop computers easier and productive, was conducted by San Francisco-based Socratic Technologies.

• Of the 600 respondents in the Kensington study who travel by air at least once a month, 50 percent need up to two full days to catch up on work responsibilities after a business trip. Twelve percent say they need at least three full days to recover.

Fifty-three percent of respondents require one to two days to recover physically, and 51 percent take the same amount of time to get their personal lives back in order.

• Despite the proliferation of laptop computers, cell phones and

email-equipped PDAs designed to keep business travelers productive, the study found that people still work less and get less done on the road, simply because they waste more time and are more stressed by the airline travel experience.

Fifty-five percent of respondents in the study say they spend too much unproductive time traveling to and from airports, while 41 percent are stressed by time wasted in airport security lines. And, while nearly all respondents carry laptop computers on their trips, only 39 percent use them to do work on the plane.

• In terms of physical stress, two out of every five respondents experience headaches, back pain, neck pain or sleeplessness while traveling, and nearly three out of five suffer from significant fatigue.

All this, combined with the disruption of home and family schedules, clearly illustrates why people who travel on business need serious recovery time on both professional and personal levels.

It also clearly illustrates why more business travelers should be traveling by no-stress and no-hassle luxury bus service.

Such motorcoach service, where it exists, offers in-office accommodations and amenities, cabins that don't starve the passengers for oxygen, no security lines, plush seating, minimum wait times, and no rubber-gloved federal bureaucrats poking around your dirty skivvies.

Interviewing: It's not just a friendly chat



By Thomas D. DeMatteo
Vice President and General Counsel
ABC Companies

When interviewing a prospective job applicant you should only ask questions that reasonably relate to the job. You must not ask for information that's not job-related or that might reveal the applicant's “protected status” (see explanation below).

If discriminatory subjects are discussed during an interview, you may have to later show that such information was not used to discriminate. Keep in mind that some apparently innocent “chatting” subjects can be considered improper in an interview.

For instance, “You went to XYZ High, too? Perhaps you knew my daughter — when did you graduate?” Or, “Your name is Jane Doe ... are you related to John Doe who works in our corporate office?” Specifically, do not request information from an applicant concerning the following “protected status” areas (especially tricky and innocuous-seeming points are italicized):

- Age or date of birth
- Marital status (including the identity of one's current or former

spouse and whether the spouse is an employee of the employer)

- Sex, race, creed, color, religion, national origin or *sexual orientation*
- Disabilities
- Date and type of military discharge.

Other inappropriate questions include:

- *Do you have or intend to have children?*
- How many children do you have? How old are they? Who will care for them while you are at work?
- If you become pregnant, will you quit your job?
- Do you use birth control?
- Are you married? *What does your spouse think of all this?*
- Whom can we contact in case of an emergency?
- Have you tested HIV positive?
- What does your spouse do? Is he/she a union member?
- How does your spouse feel about you making more money than he/she does?
- *What year(s) did you graduate from (attend) high school? College?*
- How would you feel about taking directives from someone younger than you?
- Have you ever been arrested?
- Have you ever been treated for any of the following diseases or conditions?
- What languages are spoken in your home?
- *Do you have a good credit rating? Have your wages ever been*

garnished?

• Have you ever been treated by a psychologist or psychiatrist? If so, for what condition?

• Have you ever been treated for any mental condition?

• How many days were you absent from work because of illness last year?

• Have you ever been treated for drug addiction or alcoholism?

You may come upon a situation during an interview when an applicant volunteers some of the information listed above. In that event, acknowledge, but do not pursue further questions regarding this information. Also do not take notes on such information. Although the information may be volunteered, it cannot be used as a basis to or not to hire an applicant.

Here are other important things to remember during an interview:

- Do not make any notations on application forms or resumes. Codes, numbers or shorthand notes especially could be misinterpreted and should be avoided.
- Make no oral or written representations to the candidate regarding prospective employment.

Keep detailed notes during an interview (not on the application itself) to substantiate that representations were not made and to verify subject matter discussed.

Thomas D. DeMatteo also is an adjunct professor of law at Hamline University School of Law in St. Paul, Minn.

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Bus & Motorcoach NEWS

ISSUE NO. 19
A PUBLICATION OF THE UNITED MOTORCOACH ASSOCIATION

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Major on-line bus auction is scheduled for Dec. 12

WINTER GARDEN, Fla. — The largest-ever on-line auction of motorcoaches in the U.S., will take place Wednesday, Dec. 12, at two locations of ABC Bus Companies.

The auction, which is being managed by Great American Group of Woodland Hills, Calif., will feature 166 coaches being sold from two ABC locations.

The sale dwarfs another auction coordinated by Great American Group in mid-September. That sale featured 75 buses being liquidated by a variety of sellers, including CIT Equipment Finance and an Ohio operator that was going out of business.

Bert Jones, vice president of marketing at Great American

Group, said the auction this month is an all-motorcoach event, featuring Van Hools, MCIs, Eagles, Neoplans and Prevosts. The newest coaches are 2001 models and the oldest are from the mid-1980s.

Most of the coaches are at

ABC's sprawling used coach center in Winter Garden, while the remainder are at its regional sales and service facility in Camden, N.J.

Jones said bidders can participate in person at the Winter Garden location, via simulcast

hook-up at Camden, or via the Internet from anywhere in the world. Potential buyers can register in person or via the Internet. Jones recommends early registration for potential on-line bidders to avoid any possible technical problems.

The sale buses can be inspected in person Dec. 10-11, at the two locations, or on-line at www.greatamerican.com.

Additional information is available from Jones by calling (818) 884-3747 Ext. 355.

Schwarzenegger

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

mento visitors' bureau.

And the chance of glimpsing Arnold, however remote, is already packing the city's Capitol tour.

"Arnold is arguably the most famous person in the world, and he brought unprecedented media attention to the city," Hammond says.

Sacramento couldn't buy the kind of publicity it received during the two-month-long recall-election saga, when the city's leafy streets and sunny skies were the backdrop for news reports beamed around the globe, says Hammond. His bureau is predicting a 20 percent boost in the city's 15 million annual visitors.

"We're getting calls from as far away as Australia and England about visiting," adds Jerry Westenhaver, who runs the Hyatt Regency Sacramento, the city's largest hotel.

Highway bid

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

operators.

Sec. 3040 extends the axle-weight exemption to 2009.

The bill provides only \$17 million for the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration's new new-entrant inspection program instead of the \$30 million the administration proposed.

The bill would establish a medical review board to work with the FMCSA on driver medical qualifications. However, a provision to register medical providers has been dropped. Safety advocates consider that a huge step backwards.

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*Non-members can join UMA for only an additional \$175 and save on registration costs. Call 800-424-8262 for more details.

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INDUSTRY NEWS

BANY, independent operators meet

NEW YORK — Leaders of the Bus Association of New York have told a group of independent coach operators that BANY is working in the interest of all private bus operators in New York regardless of their size or the nature of their business.

"Since 1935, it has always been our position to work with the interest of operators in mind," BANY President Stan Brettschneider of Command Bus in Brooklyn said in an interview. "We have members in the association with hundreds of buses and those with one or two, and we try to reflect the interests of all."

The meeting of independent New York operators with members of BANY's executive board came in response to an earlier gathering of independent New York operators who met to talk about industry issues, as well as explore the idea of forming a new state motorcoach association.

About 70 people, representing upwards of 45 operators, attended the first meeting in late September. Many of the coach executives at that meeting criticized BANY's performance in

representing the industry in Albany, the state capital.

Some of the same criticisms surfaced at last month's meeting, said Brettschneider. "Questions were asked and answers were provided."

One issue that was discussed

"I had a good feeling about the meeting. People need to give BANY a try."

was whether BANY is so dominated by large intercity and commuter carriers that it ignores the problems and concerns of smaller tour and charter operators.

"The perception of some small operators is that we're only for big businesses. That's an incorrect perception," said Brettschneider. "The perception of small operators is that they are not represented by the association. That also is not an accurate view."

BANY, he said, focuses on statewide issues that are important to all operators. And, he suggested that the association's priorities sometimes shift based on the major issues facing operators and various segments of the industry. "We always try to take care of the needs of small operators, as well as large."

One independent operator who attended the meeting came away impressed, saying he "felt pretty good about what was discussed."

William E. Schoolman, president of Classic Transportation Group in Bohemia, N.Y., said he agreed with Brettschneider's view that many independent operators' perception of BANY does not match up with reality.

"I had a good feeling about the meeting," said Schoolman. "People need to give BANY a try."

And that's exactly what Schoolman intends to do. He said he will be joining the association and participating in its activities. "I want to give BANY a chance to see if it works. ... You get out of it what you put in."

Partnership launches plan for fuel cell bus

LONG BEACH, Calif. — A coalition of private companies and public transit agencies is seeking \$150 million in federal tax money to push development of fuel cell and hydrogen-powered drive systems for transit buses.

The National Fuel Cell Bus Technology Initiative is being coordinated by WestStart-CALSTART, which bills itself as North America's leading advanced transportation technologies consortium.

WestStart-CALSTART says it is a "fuel neutral, participant-supported organization of more than 120 companies and agencies, dedicated to expanding and supporting a high-tech transportation industry that cleans the air, creates jobs and improves energy efficiency." The group helps companies develop and deploy "clean and efficient drive systems for transit and heavy-duty vehicles."

The fuel cell bus initiative brings together hydrogen and fuel cell bus users and suppliers to create "a targeted, multi-year program to develop, deploy and commercialize fuel cell and hydrogen-powered drive systems for transit.

The group envisions spending \$150 million over the next six years to support the research, development and demonstration of fuel cell and hydrogen technology.

Members of the consortium include AC Transit of Oakland, Calif., Ballard, Boeing, the CEO Coalition to Advance Sustainable Technologies, ECD Ovonic, Hydrogenics, ISE Research, Northeast Advanced Vehicle Consortium, Quantum Technologies, Sunline Transit of Palm Springs, Calif., Texaco Ovonic Hydrogen Systems, Thor Industries (ElDorado National and Champion buses) and the Tri-Metropolitan Transportation District in Portland, Ore.

WestStart-CALSTART readily acknowledges that fuel cells are far from ready for transportation use, and much work needs to be done in the areas of cost, durability and reliability.

The consortium is seeking funding via the reauthorization of the federal highway and transit legislation, currently known as TEA-21.

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DECEMBER 2004

4 NorthEast Passenger Transportation Association: Annual Meeting, Anthony's Pier 4 Restaurant, Boston. Info: (800) 637-8201, or go to www.nepta.org.

8 Northwest Motorcoach Association: Annual Meeting, U.S. Small Business Administration, Seattle Regional Office, Seattle. Info: Gladly Gillis, (206) 763-5817.

JANUARY 2004

7-9 Pennsylvania Bus Association Sales Retreat & Winter Meeting, Wheeling Island Racetrack & Gaming Center, Wheeling, W.Va. Info: (717) 236-9042 or go to www.pabus.org.

11 Prevost Car Maintenance Training Seminar (Canadian customers), Quebec. Info: Call (877) 520-7386.

16-20 American Bus Marketplace, American Bus Assn., New York City. Info: (800) 283-2877 or go to www.buses.org.

16-17 Bus Industry Safety Council, New York City. Info: (800) 283-2877 or go to www.buses.org.

29-Feb. 1 North Carolina Motorcoach Assn.: Annual Meeting & Marketplace, Grove Park Inn, Asheville, N.C. Info: (336) 495-4970.

FEBRUARY 2004

1 Prevost Car Maintenance Training Seminar (U.S. customers), Quebec. Info: Call (877) 520-7386.

4-8 2004 Tennessee Motor Coach Association Convention, Pigeon Forge, Tenn. Info: (423) 348-1385 or go to www.tnmca.net.

Public agencies seek charter firms

The following public transit providers have informed the United Motorcoach Association of their intent to provide charter service unless willing and able private charter operators step forward to offer their services, or to bid on contract opportunities. The UMA urges operators to take the time to respond to these public notices:

Midland-Odessa, Texas. Deadline: Dec. 11, 2003. Write to: Midland-Odessa Urban Transit District, %City Manager's Office, 411 W. 8th St., Odessa, TX 79760. Phone: (432) 335-4106.

Huntington, W.Va. Deadline: Dec. 19, 2003. Write to: Vickie Shaffer, General Manager, Tri-State Transit Authority, P.O. Box 7965, Huntington, WV 25779. Phone: (304) 529-6094.

8-10 The 20th Anniversary Motorcoach Expo 2004, Georgia World Congress Center, Atlanta. Info: United Motorcoach Association, (800) 424-8262 or go to www.uma.org.

24-25 California Bus Association Spring Maintenance Seminar, Royal Coach Tours, San Jose, Calif. Info: (831) 633-1755 or go to www.cbabus.com.

25-27 The 4th Annual Clean Heavy-

Duty Vehicle Conference, Rancho Las Palmas Resort, Palm Springs, Calif. Info: (626) 744-5686 or go to www.weststart.org.

25-28 The 68th Annual Trailways Conference & Meeting, Hilton San Diego Resort, San Diego. Info: (703) 691-3052, or go to www.trailways.com.

MARCH 2004

8-11 Society of Automotive Engineers

2004 World Congress, Cobo Hall, Detroit. Info: (877) 606-7323, or go to www.sae.org.

16-18 The 71st Family Motor Coach Association International Convention, State Fair Grounds, Albuquerque, N.M. Info: (800) 543-3622 or go to www.fmca.com.

24-27 National Tour Association Tour Operator Spring Meet, Little Rock, Ark. Info: (859) 226-4444 or go to

www.ntaonline.com.

31 Pennsylvania Bus Association Marketplace 2004, York Expo Center, York, Pa. Info: (717) 236-9042 or go to www.pabus.org.

APRIL 2004

3-8 Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance Annual Conference, The Peabody Hotel, Little Rock, Ark. Info: (202) 775-1623 or go to www.cvsaa.org.

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INDUSTRY NEWS

Maryland colleges seek coaches

BALTIMORE — A group of community colleges in Maryland that train truck drivers wants to expand their programs to include motorcoach drivers. But, alas, they've got a problem — no buses.

Jack Burkert, a long-time coach industry insurance and association executive, said the colleges are operating first-rate commercial driver training programs — “no CDL mills.”

“These are educational institutions doing it right, at honest and reasonable pricing, and helping with placement and tuition assistance,” said Burkert, who is on the adjunct faculty of two of the colleges.

“Anyway, these schools all do

truck driver training and two have old school buses and one has a motorcoach that is essentially non functional. They are all interested in expanding driver training into the bus industry but lack the equipment.”

The schools and Burkert are hoping there are generous coach operators or vendors who can afford to donate one or two older, but mechanical sound motorcoaches, to the colleges. MC9s or 8s would be appropriate, says Burkert.

The schools likely would rotate the two buses among them, with one of the colleges taking ownership and then simply “loaning” the equipment out as needed, Burkert explained. “Exact details to be

worked out.”

Anyone interested in discussing a possible donation should contact Bruce List, a coordinator for the Community College of Baltimore County. He can be reached by calling (410) 918-4270.

“Bruce can establish the deal and discuss “tax-advantage giving,” said Burkert.

“Believe me the schools will promote the generosity of the donor, and probably paint a sign on the bus if that would help.”

The colleges serve a wide area, including Maryland, Delaware and southern and southeastern Pennsylvania, as well as Washington, D.C., and parts of Northern Virginia.

Greyhound, union to resume contract talks next month

DALLAS — Greyhound Lines and the union representing its drivers and mechanics will resume negotiations for a new labor agreement next month.

Greyhound said in a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission that negotiations have been scheduled for January. Greyhound goes into the negotiations with a new vice president of labor, John Taylor. (See People page 7.)

The current contract between the Amalgamated Transit Union and Greyhound expires Jan. 31. The agreement covers roughly 4,800 employees. In May and

October, Greyhound drivers and mechanics overwhelmingly rejected company contract offers.

In its SEC filing, Greyhound said it is between a rock and hard place in its negotiations with the union. It said it will suffer badly if, on the one hand, the union strikes or there is a work stoppage or if, on the other hand, it's unable to reach “an acceptable new agreement,” meaning one that keeps costs down.

“Either ... could have a material adverse effect on the business, financial condition and results of operations of the company,” Greyhound said.

35-foot buses

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

“If the demand is there, we could gear back up either with the F or some variation of that,” he said. “That's our thinking right now.”

F3500 is dropped

MCI quit making the F3500 coach after the company closed its plant in Mexico where it and the full-size G4500 were being built. Talk of moving production of the F3500 to Canada failed to materialize.

Hall said the G-series coach was designed primarily for Greyhound Lines, MCI's largest customer, so the company decided to build only the G4500 at its Winnipeg plant and put the F3500 on hold. “Obviously the G was a very high priority for us so we made it our priority to get it back up and running,” he said. “The F is still there, it's just not a priority.”

ABC currently offers a 35-foot cutaway bus, the ABC M1000, but it is being marketed for trips of a radius of about 800 miles, not cross country trips, according to Dane Cornell, executive vice president. “We did not market it as a true motorcoach, although some of our customers are using it that way, so it is capable” he said. “It was more for shorter tour and charter work rather than going from New York to Los Angeles.”

A number of operators say the industry is ripe for smaller coaches that not only act and feel like the 45-foot coaches that make up most of their fleets, but offer a lower purchase price and reduced operation and maintenance expenses.

“I've been begging for one,” said Dave Brown, president of Holiday

Tours in Randleman, N.C., stressing that a smaller coach would allow operators to serve a number of new markets that many of them are losing because buses in their current fleets are too large.

He said he would like to see at least 20 percent of his fleet of 46 coaches made up of 35-foot models.

Smaller charter groups

In the past few years, according to Brown, charter and tour groups have gotten smaller and many college sports teams that have small numbers of players, such as volleyball and swimming teams, are now looking to travel by coach.

“But some of the groups don't feel like they should be chartering a 45-foot coach and when we tell them we don't have a smaller one, they go some place else and rent two or three vans for their trip,” said Brown.

Robert Hopwood, general manager of Premier Coach in Colchester, Vt., agreed, saying he has 10 F3500 models in his fleet and they've helped him obtain work he might otherwise have missed.

“The lower purchase price and operating costs let us put the 35-foot coach out in the market at a little bit less expensive rate and that's been a primary reason why we have been able to attract some contractual relationships with customers,” he noted.

Hopwood said he would like to see more of the smaller type coaches on the market and would add some to his own fleet if they were available. “I've been lobbying the manufacturers for more of them,” he said.

Joan Libby, owner of Cavalier Coaches in Boston, which has

three F3500 coaches in its 22-coach fleet, holds that the shrinking size of tour groups — many of them are between 20 and 25 people — underscores the need for smaller coaches. “I think the manufacturers are really missing the boat here,” she contends.

She says the 35-foot coaches in her fleet have been in great demand and customers ask for them specifically. “We're sold out of them most of the time and they are getting very hard to get,” she says.

The typical 35-footer

A typical 35-foot coach seats 36 passengers and weighs in at around 27,000 pounds, versus 35,000 to 40,000 pounds for a 45-foot coach. When you eliminate the tag axle you get a steep reduction in overall weight.

Of course, less weight means the engine size is smaller and the fuel savings is larger. A 285-horsepower power plant will move a 35-foot coach nicely versus up to 400 horsepower demanded by some 45-foot coach drivers.

The smaller coaches also are much more maneuverable, both because of the shorter wheelbase and the absence of a tag axle to drag around corners. A turning radius of 70 feet or thereabouts could be expected with a 35-foot coach, versus 80 to 90 feet for a 45-foot model. Drivers typically drive over fewer curbs and hit fewer objects with the rear end of 35-foot coaches.

Meantime, the manufacturers say they are struggling with trying to figure out how they can bring a true coach worthy 35-footer to market at a price operators can afford and just how big the market for such a coach might be.

Price point is key

Most manufacturers and operators appear to agree that the small coaches would have to be in the \$200,000 to \$225,000 range to be acceptable in the market. MCI's F3500 had a base price of around \$225,000 when it was introduced three years ago.

“The ultimate objective is the price point; what customers will want to pay for something between a cutaway and a full-size coach,” said Scully.

Fay said a concern builders often have with a new model is that the operators start asking for added features — larger air conditioners, better seats, larger engines, better suspensions and larger transmissions among them — that take the price to a point where even those requesting the upgrades don't want to pay. “Then they suddenly say they're going to go out and buy a coach that is three-to-five years old instead,” he said.

While the financial issue is critical, manufacturers say the size of the potential market for a 35-foot coach is just as important.

“And the dilemma is, you hear of the interest but how many can you sell because the investment is rather significant to bring these products to market,” noted Fay. “I don't know that I would call it a fad but it's probably just a 30- to 50-bus market right now.”

A small market?

Hall agreed, saying there probably will always be a market for a 35-foot coach but it likely will remain relatively small. “But it is a very price sensitive market and the key is building something that will accommodate the needs of the operators and yet be affordable to

build,” he added.

Patterson said manufacturers would have a difficult time getting any return on their investment if they were to produce a new, smaller coach. “The whole coach would have to be designed as a 35-foot coach and this going to require millions, tens of millions of dollars to develop,” he said. “There are simply not enough people out there who really would commit to buying that to justify that kind of investment.”

He worried, too, that the price of building a small coach that could meet the expectations of the carriers could run as high as \$320,000, well above what most of them would be able to afford. “That would make the market even smaller because nobody is going to want to pay that much,” he added. “And operating at the tariff levels they are operating on today, well, that's just not going to happen.”

Dane Cornell agreed that market consistency must be there because of the huge upfront cost involved in engineering, designing and production costs. “It can't be a one-shot deal,” he said. “What happened a little bit in the past is that you bring a vehicle in and you fill the need in about a year, selling 30 to 35 vehicles. Then the next year you only sell a trickle.”

He said if ABC decides to import a 35-foot Van Hool, the company goal would be to deliver a vehicle at a reasonable price that could build the needed consistency into the market. “Where we feel we might be able to do that is if we can bring the vehicle in with a price point that will attract more buyers than just the handful that now are very interested,” he said. “That could give us market consistency.”

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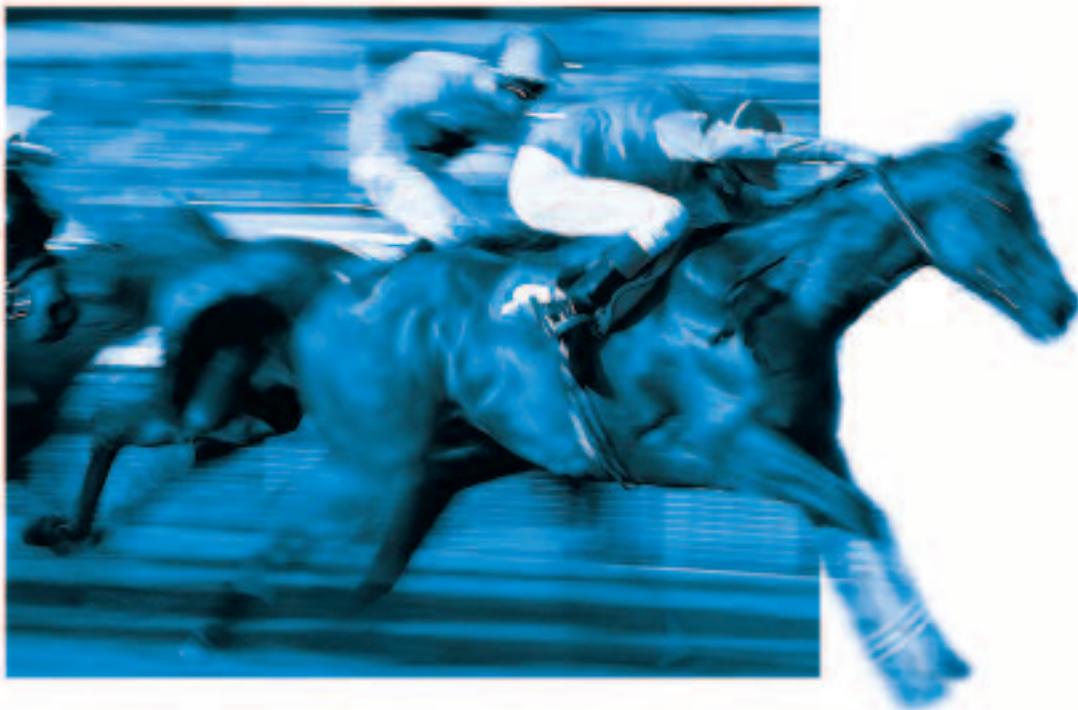
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