

## Industry (again) targeted after unsafe operator crashes

RICHMOND, Va. — Another high-profile and deadly crash involving a slime-ball curbside motorcoach operator has unleashed a torrent of new calls for additional bus industry safety measures.

But the crash late last month just north of here of a Sky Express coach, traveling from Greensboro, N.C., to New York City's Chinatown, also resulted in a wave of criti-

cism aimed at the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

The FMCSA closed Charlotte, N.C.-based Sky Express hours after one of its buses flipped over on Interstate 95, killing four passengers and injuring 52 others, but the shutdown came months after the company had run up one of the worst safety records in the U.S.

During the past two years, Sky

Express repeatedly violated federal hours-of-service requirements, plus rules mandating it assure its drivers have proper licenses, medical certificates and English-language skills, according to FMCSA records.

Sky Express' 99.7 score in driver fitness indicates its record was worse than 99.7 percent of the nation's 3,500 bus operators. The company had a score of 86.2 in fatigued

driving, and had been caught seven times since October 2009 allowing drivers to work excessive hours.

After conducting a compliance review of Sky Express two months ago, the FMCSA proposed on April 12 shutting the company down. Sky Express appealed the shutdown proposal on May 11 and promised improvements, said Candice Tolliver, agency spokeswoman. The agency

rejected the appeal two days later.

Under agency rules, it could not close Sky Express immediately because it had to wait 45 days from when it proposed the shutdown.

However, after 45 days — on May 27 — instead of shutting down Sky Express, the agency decided to probe new safety concerns, according to Tolliver.

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## Charter coaches targeted by IRP

ARLINGTON, Va. — The U.S. states and Canadian provinces that are members of the International Registration Plan are voting this month on a measure that would eliminate the plan exemption granted to charter bus operators and force most of them to buy apportioned license plates.

"This is huge," said Victor Parra, president and CEO of the United Motorcoach Association and an industry member of the advisory panel of the IRP board of directors.

"This change will not only restrict travel and hurt tourism, but it will no doubt cost operators more to purchase their tags," said Parra.

Currently, only recreational vehicles, vehicles displaying restricted plates, city pick-up and delivery vehicles, buses used in transportation of chartered parties, and government-owned vehicles are exempt from the IRP definition of "apportionable" vehicles.

All commercial trucks and line-run buses weighing more than 26,000 pounds and operating interstate are required to have apportioned registration. Charter buses may be proportionally registered at the option of the operator.

Currently, fewer than 30 percent of the states and provinces require charter operators to purchase

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## Rash of spring storms challenge operators

Most motorcoach operators are pretty well equipped to cope with all but the nastiest weather. But few expected to see or experience what happened in the nation's midsection during the past two months.

First, there were days and days of torrential rain storms that overflowed streams and rivers, causing devastating flooding in dozens of towns and cities.

Later, more storms moved in but this time they were accompanied by a record-setting series of deadly tornados that skipped across several states and touched down in a number of highly populated areas.

By the time the wave of bad weather passed, as many as 300 people were dead, hundreds more injured. Damage to homes, businesses, schools and hospitals totaled hundreds of millions of dollars.

"It was all so very overwhelming," Connie Heimberg of Viking Trailways in badly damaged Joplin, Mo., said of the death and destruction caused by the EF-5 tornado that hit that city, killing 138 people.

Alan Thrasher of Thrasher Brothers Trailways in Birmingham, Ala., described it as a "crazy few weeks," and Jared Stancil of Anchor Trailways in Nashville,



An appeal in South Carolina for supplies for Alabama storm victims brought an abundance of giving.

## After tornado, coaches do double duty

SPARTANBURG, S.C. — For Elaine Johnson, it was an easy call.

People in Tuscaloosa, Ala., were hurting from a devastating tornado that ripped through the town two days earlier and were badly in need of emergency supplies.

"We had three empty coaches headed down there for a charter,

Tenn., said it was a "pretty interesting time — to say the least."

While they and other motor-

so I thought 'why not?'" she said. "It was a no brainer."

Johnson contacted a Spartanburg television station and word that water, food, blankets, toiletries, paper products and other supplies were needed was broadcast on the late night and early morning newscasts.

coach operators in communities hit hardest by the horrific weather were spared serious damage to

People were directed to a discount store parking lot where two Cross Country Trailways buses would be waiting for donations. Hundreds of people showed up.

"The response was just overwhelming," said Johnson.

She said the donations quickly

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8 ►

their facilities and fleets, none was able to escape its impact.

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## Academy Bus extends reach by buying New World Tours

HOBOKEN, N.J. — One of North America's largest motorcoach companies has gotten a little larger with its second acquisition in less than a year of a carrier outside its traditional operating area.

Academy Bus of Hoboken confirmed it has completed the purchase of New World Tours of Bristow, Va., a company well known in the industry for its high technology innovations and business plan of trading out its fleet every three or four years.

Although Academy would not discuss financial details of the deal, company spokesman Greg Rhodes did say it involved New World's fleet of 25 coaches, its terminal in Bristow, southwest of Washington, D.C., and its sales office in Bethany Beach, Del.

He said New World President Dave Bolen, a former Metro Magazine Operator of the Year and United Motorcoach Association Vision Award winner, is staying on as terminal manager and all of the company's employees were offered the opportunity to remain with the business as well.

Also, New World is taking on

the Academy name, and graphics on its coaches are being changed to reflect the name switch.

"New World Tours has a long history of delivering exceptional charter bus service to its customers, meeting our stringent qualifications to carry the Academy brand," Academy President Francis Tedesco said in a statement.

"This expansion provides Academy and New World Tours' customers more options and service availability from Washington D.C., through New England and everywhere in between."

The purchase, which was completed last month, bolsters Academy's position in the highly competitive D.C. metropolitan area, where it runs some charters but did not have a local presence. New World has for years been a major industry player in the nation's capital; it was formed in 1994.

"We wanted to expand our footprint and this was a very good opportunity for us to do so," said Rhodes.

Although Bolen declined to talk about the sale, he was quoted

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## UMA questions need for EOBR rule

WASHINGTON — The United Motorcoach Association has urged the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration to walk before it runs when it comes to adopting a mandate requiring all over-the-road bus and truck operators have electronic onboard recorders.

In comments filed with the FMCSA last month, UMA said the agency needs to prove that electronic onboard recorders reduce commercial vehicle crashes before requiring all commercial vehicle operators to install the expensive pieces of equipment.

Currently, says UMA, there is inadequate evidence that indicates use of recorders actually results in fewer crashes.

UMA said the agency has a perfect opportunity to substantiate the case for electronic onboard recorders through a rule that goes into effect June 1, 2012. That rule says carriers that violate hours-of-service rules 10 percent of the time, based on a single compliance review, must use electronic onboard recorders to track driver hours.

UMA urged the FMCSA to defer any consideration of an EOBR mandate for all commercial carriers "until such time as FMCSA can substantiate a credi-

ble and significant reduction in crashes and a further reduction in supporting documents that justifies such a substantial financial investment by motor carriers."

The comments submitted by UMA apply to an FMCSA proposal issued in January that would expand the 2012 rule to cover all of the approximately 500,000 truckers and bus operators now required to maintain driver logs.

UMA also contends that passenger carrier operations are enough different from those of trucking that actual violations of hours-of-service maximums are not a major issue, and motorcoach drivers generally don't have an opportunity to violate hours-of-service rules like truck drivers.

"Generally, motor carriers of passengers operate under two scenarios: 1) scheduled service, or 2) charter services," said UMA. "Under both scenarios, substantial documentation exists to substantiate the intended hours a driver is to drive and be off-duty."

"Scheduled-service operators generally have published schedules and passenger expectations. Charter operators generally dispatch drivers under charter orders that meet the demands of groups.

Motor carriers of passengers' drivers are generally supervised through a myriad of formal and informal means.

"Actual violations through (hours-of-service) maximums are very low. Non-compliance of recordkeeping is generally low and usually a result of carelessness rather than willful acts.

"As a general rule, motor carriers of passengers' drivers are not free to act as 'free agents' as they are controlled by a predetermined schedule or a detailed charter order," UMA asserted.

Beyond the operational differences between bus companies and truckers, UMA said the FMCSA needs to be mindful of the financial impact of an EOBR mandate.

With 96 percent of all motorcoach operators considered small businesses, a one-size-fits-all commercial vehicle mandate "hardly acknowledges the financial inequities."

UMA also said it remained "concerned" there is a considerable lack of standardization of electronic on-board recorders for widespread use by drivers and enforcement agencies.

"We heard testimony at the

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# THE DOCKET

## Feds tout success of Pre-Employment Screening Program

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Transportation is touting the popularity of the pre-employment driver screening system it introduced just over a year ago.

Bus and truck operators and their drivers conducted 380,000 pre-employment driver safety record searches during the first year of the new federal Pre-Employment Screening Program.

“Our Pre-Employment Screening Program is helping us put safe drivers behind the wheel of large trucks and buses,” said USDOT Secretary Ray LaHood. “PSP will help make our roads safer for everyone.”

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration launched the

Pre-Employment Screening Program in May 2010 to provide access to driver inspection and crash records as part of the hiring process. (See June 1 and Nov. 1, 2010 issues of *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

During its first year, 353,929 users visited the PSP website at [www.psp.fmcsa.gov](http://www.psp.fmcsa.gov), and PSP customer service responded to more than 19,000 calls.

FMCSA staff traveled to conferences and association meetings across the country to explain the program and its uses.

“These results show that carriers welcome PSP as an essential tool for making informed hiring decisions that lead to safer drivers on our roads,” said FMCSA Administrator Anne S. Ferro. “We

know that the majority of our nation’s carriers and drivers strive to operate as safely as possible. PSP makes their jobs a lot easier.”

Yet, despite the first-year popularity of the program, there remains concern that many motorcoach operators may not be familiar with the program or are not using it to improve their hiring process.

“Ten dollars (the cost of researching a driver record) is a small price to pay to minimize your exposure by using the federal program to screen your new hires,” said United Motorcoach Association President and CEO Victor Parra.

“Recent serious accidents have revealed serious concerns about the backgrounds of drivers. This is just a good thing to do. But too many

motorcoach operators have no idea what it’s all about,” Parra noted.

The Pre-Employment Screening Program provides access for up to five years of driver crash data and three years of inspection data, which includes serious safety violations in the areas of unsafe driving, hours-of-service, controlled substances and alcohol, and valid medical qualifications.

It also gives users access to post-crash violations and the dates that drivers’ records are updated.

The PSP data is updated monthly by the FMCSA Motor Carrier Management Information System, which is comprised of driver performance data, including inspection and compliance review results, enforcement data, state-reported crash-

es, and motor carrier census data.

While the program is widely viewed as being helpful in screening driver applicants, the new-hire limitation also has resulted in some criticism.

“Operators can only use it for new hires,” said UMA Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Ken Presley. “Many of our operators that are using it would like the capability of running these (PSP reports) at least annually because many of their drivers also drive for more than one company.”

There also has been grouching about the \$10 fee for accessing the driver information that is sitting in a federal database. However, the fee is similar to that charged for a state motor vehicle records search.

## House leaders propose private direction for high-speed rail

WASHINGTON — Leaders on the House Transportation Committee have proposed a dramatic change in direction for developing high-speed passenger rail service in the Northeast Corridor.

Their proposal would transfer development of the nation’s most congested corridor from Amtrak to private sector competition.

Committee Chairman John L.

Mica, R-Fla., and Rail Subcommittee Chairman Bill Shuster, R-Pa., announced at a congressional hearing they are preparing legislation to significantly speed up development of high-speed rail and reduce high taxpayer subsidization of the project.

“We plan to introduce legislation to separate the Northeast Corridor from Amtrak, transfer it to a

separate entity, and begin a competitive bidding process that would allow for a public-private partnership to design, build, operate, maintain and finance high-speed service.

“Our plan would do so in a dramatically shorter time, in closer to 10 rather than 30 years, and at a fraction of the \$117 billion cost proposed by Amtrak, while creating new jobs,” Mica said.

At the congressional hearing, it was revealed that despite the potential of the corridor, Amtrak’s ridership in the NEC has decreased since 1977. In fact, Amtrak had 10.5 million NEC riders in 2010, down from 10.6 million in 1977.

“This is a dismal record and a pitiful statement of Amtrak’s lack of achievement in this incredibly valuable transportation corridor,” said

Mica. “Amtrak’s plan to bring high-speed service to the NEC is unacceptable. We can attract private sector resources and expertise and do it in less than half the time.

“If anyone is holding their breath for Congress to approve \$117 billion for Amtrak’s 30-year plan, they’re going to turn blue,” Mica added.

The 437-mile Northeast Corridor is the only rail corridor owned, almost in its entirety, by Amtrak. The NEC is one of the most valuable transportation assets in the nation, and its population density and other existing transportation connections make it the most viable location for successful U.S. high-speed rail, say Mica and Shuster.

“We’ve tried it Amtrak’s way without success for nearly 40 years and it’s time to go down a new path and inject private sector competition,” said Shuster. “It’s time to deregulate America’s passenger rail system and the Northeast Corridor presents the best place to start.”

“This is a very bold and encouraging move on the part of Chairman Mica and Rep. Shuster,” said Victor Parra, president and CEO of the United Motor Coach Association.

“More privatization, meaning less use of federal funds, will help reduce the deficit and create jobs supported by private investment rather than taxpayer dollars.

“Hopefully, this same strategy will be carried through in the highway bill by using more private sector assets to support mass transit,” Parra added.



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# N.Y. senate passes bill requiring driver criminal check

ALBANY, N.Y. — The New York State Senate has passed legislation designed to crack down on so-called terror bus drivers. It requires bus drivers to submit to a criminal history check.

The legislation aims to improve bus safety by screening out drivers with a history of criminal driving convictions.

“Bus drivers literally hold their passengers’ lives and safety in their hands; those passengers should be able to trust that the driver is qualified to handle that responsibility,” said Sen. Charles Fuschillo, a Republican from Merrick, N.Y., who is sponsoring the bill.

“Bus companies deserve to have all the relevant information about a driver’s background when they decide to make that driver responsible for passengers’ safety. Helping to weed out drivers who don’t belong behind the wheel of a bus will help improve safety for bus passengers and everyone else on the roads,” Fuschillo, chairman of the Senate transportation committee, added.

The legislation would require all new bus drivers to submit to a criminal background check when they are hired. Drivers would be subjected to a 90-day conditional period while the background

check is being undertaken.

All current bus drivers would submit to a criminal background check the next time they renew their commercial driver’s license. Currently, this requirement applies only to school bus drivers.

Requiring criminal background checks would help keep

bus drivers who have a history of criminal driving convictions, such as DWI and license revocations, from getting behind the wheel, say the legislation’s supporters.

The current lack of a background check requirement is enabling many of these drivers to stay on the roads, often with dead-

ly consequences, supporters add.

On May 7, a New York City tour bus driver, who allegedly struck and killed a Philadelphia man in Manhattan, was charged with vehicular manslaughter after police found a travel cup with vodka in his bus’ cup holder.

On May 8, an out-of-control

tour bus driver almost ran over a New York City police officer at the Midtown Tunnel. The driver, Anthony Judd, was charged with reckless endangerment, fleeing a police officer, running a stop sign and driving with a revoked license. Judd’s driver’s license had been revoked 14 times.

## Illinois approves uniform speeds

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — The state General Assembly has given final approval to legislation that expands the uniform 65 mph speed limit to all four-lane divided highways outside of the Chicago area that currently have a split speed limit.

Two years ago, the General Assembly passed legislation to allow for a uniform speed limit on “rural interstates,” but it did not include certain four-lane divided highways, many of which are built to interstate standards.

The new legislation allows for a uniform 65 mph speed limit for all vehicles on these divided highways that are not classified as interstates.

Currently, those roads, such as U.S. 51 from Bloomington to Decatur, Illinois 255 in southeastern Illinois and the newly completed Illinois 336 in western Illinois, still have a split speed limit of 55 for commercial vehicles and 65 for cars.

Most safety experts say uniform speed limits are safer. Split speed limits encourage unnecessary and dangerous lane changes, rear-end collisions and cut-offs, the experts contend.



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## ATA supports electronic logs, but...

WASHINGTON — The American Trucking Associations has told the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration it supports the agency's proposal to require motor carriers to install devices to record drivers' hours of service electronically.

But the ATA also urged the agency to address important device design and performance requirements.

ATA also raised a number of concerns about the supporting documents component of the proposal.

Among issues the ATA says the FMCSA must address are a more secure driver identification and authentication process, and improved standards to assure the devices are not prone to tampering or fraud.

When it comes to supporting

documents, ATA said the "FMCSA proposal to require carriers retain a document (or documents collectively) to verify the beginning and end of each on-duty/not driving time period is unrealistic. Available documents typically lack such precision," ATA said.

"The agency's suggestion that carriers certify that such documents don't routinely exist would place those carriers at great risk."

## School bus operators seek exemption from EOBRs

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — The National School Transportation Association has asked the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration to remove school buses from a proposed rulemaking for electronic onboard recorders.

The school bus association

says the requirement would be financially burdensome for private school bus contractors while resulting in little — if any — safety benefits for students.

A letter submitted last month by NSTA Executive Director David Hobson said there have

been zero recorded student fatalities in regulated operations. That is, those performed by private school bus companies that must comply with FMCSA rules.

And, Hobson added, there have been no recorded student deaths tied to school bus driver fatigue.

## UMA questions

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

recently held National Transportation Safety Board Truck and Bus Safety Summit that at least some enforcement agencies may not yet be capable of evaluating existing EOBRs for compliance, either due to a lack of proper technology, education or perhaps both.

"This summit also produced

comments that suggested, at the very least, anecdotal evidence that some (commercial vehicle) drivers with EOBRs have already found ways to manipulate the technology in a manner to 'cheat.'" UMA said.

Finally, UMA noted that while EOBRs may accurately record the time a commercial vehicle is in operation, EOBRs are incapable of recording the purpose of commercial vehicle use and accounting for

the time drivers are not driving.

"EOBRs cannot compel a driver to rest, nor can they account for the quality of rest," the association said.

"Considerable evidence exists that point to these factors as risk adverse, as opposed to driving time. These reasons alone suggest that EOBRs would not be any more effective than paper logs in reducing fatigue or associated crashes."

## Bus parking enforcement is stepped up in Toronto

TORONTO — Police here have stepped up enforcement of bus parking rules along Queens Quay, a prominent street in Toronto's waterfront tourist area and HarbourFront neighborhood.

The Ontario Motor Coach Association reports the city is responding to complaints from citizens about buses parking along Queens Quay for extended periods.

"The area attracting the most attention is Queens Quay West, near Lower Simcoe (Street) in front of HarbourFront Centre," the association said in a notice to members. "Officers will be strictly enforcing the no-parking regulations against parked buses on Queens Quay between York and Rees streets."

The OMCA said it had confirmed with the city parking enforcement unit that buses are allowed to load and unload passengers in the area, but remaining for any length of time is a violation and subject to a \$300 fine.

The association advises that if a bus needs to load passengers, it should time its arrival to minimize the waiting time. Ample free, 24-

hour, on-street designated bus parking spaces are available to the east at the Portlands area.

There are 23 spaces on Villiers and Commissioner streets just east of Cherrey Street, and 7 spaces on Cherrey.

"While not the nicest of areas for your drivers to spend a few hours, it beats paying a \$300 fine," the OMCA observes.

OMCA notes that "extended waiting is essentially 'parking' under the (city's) bylaw."

Meanwhile, the association has written to Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, expressing concern about Toronto's strict bus parking bylaws and stiff fines, which OMCA says discriminate against buses.

The letter notes that Toronto promotes the city as a tourist destination, but at the same time hands out \$300 tickets to buses attempting to pick up or drop off groups at downtown Toronto venues, sending "the wrong message to tour operators and bus companies about Toronto."

The letter asks the mayor to put a stop to the discriminatory and unfair practice.

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## Spring storms

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Many lost work as customers cancelled charters. Others picked up unexpected business transporting emergency utility work crews or Amtrak passengers displaced by track flooding in a handful of states.

And those with coaches on the road had their operating skills tested as they struggled to make sure their drivers avoided flooded highways and stayed clear of areas where conditions were ripe for tornados.

### Driver close call

Stancil said both the flooding and the tornados produced multiple problems for his company, including injuring one of his drivers.

Two of his relief drivers were waiting in Ringold, Ga., for two Florida-bound coaches when a tornado blew out their hotel room windows, cutting one of the drivers on the foot. The storm also blew out all of the windows of their car, which was parked outside of the hotel.

Earlier, the Anchor Trailways branch office in Paducah, Ky., struggled to juggle several charters and routes when the Ohio River spilled over its banks and flooded a wide area of the community.

"We had 20 buses there for an

event and they had to move it to another location, so we had to adjust for that," Stancil explained.

He said the company also had to find a different location for overnight parking of the coaches because the Army Corps of Engineers had issued a warning, saying the area where they were parked could be flooded by daybreak.

### Worry in Joplin

In tornado-devastated Joplin, where most of the storm deaths occurred, Viking Trailways survived the storm, but some of its customers might not have.

"Even though our business is still standing and our homes and families are OK, it really touches us all," Heimberg said tearfully. "We don't even know if some of our customers are still alive"

She said passengers aboard two coaches that returned to Joplin from a trip to Kansas City discovered that a number of the cars they left at a truck stop parking lot while they were traveling were damaged or missing.

The company also had numerous charter cancellations, most of them from the school district, which lost its administration building, a high school and four elementary schools.

Other carriers lost business, too, but many said the trips have

since been re-booked.

"We had some schools cancel their trips but they were rescheduled because the schools wanted to take the kids away from the destruction and return them to normalcy as soon as possible," said Thrasher.

Cliff Dorsey of Tuscaloosa Charter Service in Tuscaloosa, Ala., said he, too, lost several charters because of the storms, but all of them were rescheduled.

### Electronic peace of mind

Electronic onboard recorders with GPS tracking systems proved their worth during the storms, allowing operators to help keep their coaches and passengers safe during the storms.

Stancil said the tracking equipment on his coaches was used to reroute several that were headed toward areas where weather forecasters were warning that tornados were possible. Several times, his drivers pulled their coaches off the road to avoid problems and one driver even took his passengers to a Wal-Mart store where he believed they would be safe if a tornado struck.

"The main thing was to error on the side of caution and we did that," he said. "We were blessed that no one was seriously injured."

Electronic onboard recorders

## Doing good

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

filled the luggage bays of the two coaches and she had to send for the third. It was loaded just as quickly and the overflow had to be put inside the buses.

"One man brought 25 cases of water himself and a lot of kids brought toys," Johnson said. "A 97-year-old woman stopped by saying she didn't have anything to

give, but she wanted to hug the bus drivers and tell them she was praying for them."

In fact there were so many donations that a hotel in Tuscaloosa offered use of a conference room to store the goods.

While the initial idea was to give the donated items to students at the University of Alabama where the daughter of one of the bus drivers was a student, the plan had to be changed because there

was just too much.

"After the students got what they needed, we decided to give the rest to the Red Cross," said Johnson.

Among the donations were several stacks of prayer cards that were donated by a church and given to parishioners of a church in Tuscaloosa.

"It was pretty amazing what people brought," said Johnson. "They really gave from the heart."

## NYMTA destination signs to be supplied by Aesys

TENAFLY, N.J. — Aesys Inc. has announced that its electronic destination sign systems will be installed on 90 Prevost X3-45 commuter coaches being purchased by the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Aesys says its VerbaBUS LED destination signs are the most technologically advanced in the field.

Their characteristics and fea-

tures include readability from any viewing angle, high contrast in all light conditions, virtually maintenance-free operation, and low power consumption. And, they stand up to weather.

Later this year, Prevost will begin delivering the X3 commuter coaches to NYMTA under a pilot purchase program. The initial coach in the order is scheduled to be delivered this month.

also allowed Robert O'Brien of Time Lines in Oklahoma City to make sure his passengers were kept out of danger.

"We knew where our coaches were at all times and each time we heard of a storm we checked their locations to make sure they were not in the area," he said.

Still, he said, two charters were cut short when passengers became so worried about the weather that they asked to be returned home.

In addition to his coaches and passengers, O'Brien had a scare with his main facility, too. "There was one tornado that was headed directly at us, but it died out before it got to us," he said.

### New system tested

The weather did give the Southeastern Regional Motorcoach Operators special evacuation advisory committee its first test of an emergency, according to James Kelton of Kelton Tours Unlimited in Gadsden, Ala., who chairs the group.

The committee was formed over the past two years out of the frustrations of operators who went unpaid for months after doing emergency transportation work for states that were hit by Hurricane

Katrina and other major storms. In addition to securing standing contracts with payment assurances, the group also developed a rapid response plan for quickly rounding up large numbers of buses for emergencies.

Kelton said that while the states did not use private coaches for the floods and tornados, several utility companies did and the rapid response plan quickly brought together more than a dozen companies that supplied coaches for transporting work crews from motels to staging areas.

"We learned a lot from Katrina," noted committee member Gregory Page of Corinth Charters and Tours in Corinth, Miss., adding that he was pleased with how well the plan worked.

While the floods and tornados took their toll on operators, Thrasher said he was vividly reminded of how much worse things could have been.

"I drove by a truck farm outside of town and saw that all of the trucks had been tossed around and were sitting upside down," he said. "It made me think that if those had been my buses I would be done, I would be out of business."

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# Bus & Motorcoach NEWS

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# Telling the coach industry story more effectively

By Dave Millhouser

Every time the whistle blew, it was terrifying.

We were playing soccer at Gallaudet University. As one of the few colleges specializing in educating hearing-impaired students, Gallaudet had the pick of the nation's deaf athletes.

They were big, strong, fast and they couldn't hear the whistle.

We had been instructed that when the whistle sounded we were to freeze and raise our hands. The problem was that for many of them, recognition that play had stopped came sporadically.

There were some terrific collisions. I haven't always been a chubby sissy; back then I was a skinny sissy, and got clobbered a lot.

Sometimes I raised my hand when there was no whistle...just to see what would happen.

It's tough to survive in an environment where the competition's comprehension of the rules is different. We often think of our competitors as being other bus operators, Amtrak and the airlines. True enough, but there are a couple of other serious players we have to consider.

One, of course, is the car. Americans love their freedom, and driving a car offers control over scheduling, route and who you travel with.

Another is cost. Customers look at the price of a charter coach and wince. A ticket on a line carrier can appear expensive.

There is also the enduring perception that traveling by bus is déclassé (a French word thrown in to impress you).

None of the things listed above is a surprise or new. To compete more effectively, we need to do a better job of telling our story. We have a number of organizations working at it, but two things seem important to say.

First, we haven't got the money to do it the way airlines and auto manufacturers do. Nothing wrong with current efforts but we can't

afford to mount a large enough campaign to effect major changes. Assess every one of the 30,000 coaches in the U.S. \$100, and you'd have about enough for a single Super Bowl TV ad.

Second, if we're going to sell ourselves, we're going to have to do it at the grass roots level. That is, win hearts and minds close to home.

We have a lot to sell. Passengers are safer on the worst bus than in the best car. If Americans knew what it really cost to drive a car, or could divide that charter price by the number of seats, we'd look great.

That same math indicates coaches lower consumption of foreign oil, pump less CO<sub>2</sub> into the air, and reduce traffic congestion. Heck, you knew that.

One of the first steps might be to make sure everyone involved in your coach company knows the story. Every employee ought to be proud of what they do, and brag on it.

Few people can assert they have a "greener" job than someone who works for a motorcoach company.

Invite local media to do stories on what is right about buses, let them tell our story. Often they are starved for ideas — give them one.

It seems silly to spend \$500,000 on a coach, and not drop another \$5,000 on graphics to make it a mobile and splashy advertisement for your company and the industry.

Your buses are far nicer than the public imagines. Why not take them places, where folks can see them? Travel shows, sales calls to potential customers, county fairs, local parades, fund-raising events, car shows and the like. Manufacturers invest in demonstrator coaches for a reason.

No travel shows in your area? Have an open house and show off your coaches. Trust me, if you feed them, they will come.

Track down groups that aren't riding buses and schmooz them. Taverns can sponsor trips to sports events, senior centers might set up day trips to events or attractions.

## Speakers set for NEBA meeting

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — The New England Bus Association has confirmed the lineup of guest speakers for its annual meeting here June 23-26.

Those speaking at the Friday morning, June 24, general session will be Robert Miller, eastern region director of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration; Clyde Hart of the American Bus Association; Ken Presley of the United Motorcoach Association;

David Kestenbaum of University of Vermont Green Certification program; Tim Davis of the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities, and John Englert of MassDOT.

Other annual meeting activities include a golf event, welcoming reception, local touring and shopping, visits to NEBA-member facilities and the traditional harbor tour. For more information, go to [www.newenglandbus.org](http://www.newenglandbus.org).

It's an article of faith that the "baby boomers" will eventually ride buses. Not if we don't sell them. This is a huge potential market with money to spend, and they haven't given us much thought.

The traditional model of waiting by the phone (or sitting on your website) isn't enough. Chances are you already have a sales force.

Most of your drivers like people, or they'd be driving trucks. Put those skills to work by sending them on sales calls during the off-season. Some may have photographic or public speaking skills,

ask them to do presentations at service clubs or schools.

Motorcoach drivers have been to fascinating places and met interesting people. Don't waste those stories by only having them repeated at the bus garage. Make arrangements for them to speak to groups. They'll love it and you and the industry will benefit.

Surely you can think of other ways to tell our story (because I KNOW you're smarter than me). National efforts are worthy but the battle will be won locally. You and your employees are the ones who

control your fate.

If the Gallaudet game taught me anything, it was that standing still was a good way to get run over.

*Dave Millhouser is a bus industry marketing consultant and freelance writer. Contact him at his new email address: [Davemillhouser@gmail.com](mailto:Davemillhouser@gmail.com).*



Dave Millhouser



## Coach Manager



### Charter and Contract Booking System



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**David Annett Vice President Annett Bus Lines**

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**Leo Mroz – Chief Financial Officer – Ambassadors Gray Line**

*"The usage of Coach Manager has allowed us to streamline our office procedures with paperless quotations and invoicing. Coach Manager has helped us improve our quotation tracking to ensure timely follow up. We found that the user friendly interface allowed our employees to train quickly and start to use the program in no time at all."*

**Dale McMichael Vice President Executive Coach**

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## Calendar

### JUNE 2011

**14-17 Pennsylvania Bus Association Annual Meeting**, Seneca Niagara Casino, Niagara Falls, N.Y. Info: [www.pabus.org](http://www.pabus.org).

**23-26 New England Bus Association Annual Meeting**, Providence (R.I.) Biltmore. Info: Go to [www.newenglandbus.org](http://www.newenglandbus.org).

### JULY 2011

**11-14 Florida Motorcoach Association Appointment Show**, Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino, Hollywood, Fla. Info: Go to [www.floridamotorcoach.org](http://www.floridamotorcoach.org).

### AUGUST 2011

**1-3 NTA Contact**, (educational, networking event), Newport (R.I.) Marriott. Info: Go to [www.ntaonline.com](http://www.ntaonline.com).

**7-10 Alabama Motorcoach Association Annual Meeting and Marketplace**, Renaissance, Montgomery, Ala. Info: Go to [www.alabamamotorcoach.org](http://www.alabamamotorcoach.org).

**15-16 Brian Crow Retirement Dinner and Honorary Golf Tournament**, Niagara Falls, Ontario. Info: Call or email Laura Huether at (416) 229-6622 Ext. 227, or [laura@omca.com](mailto:laura@omca.com).

## Academy Bus

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

in an Academy news release as saying he is proud of his company's dynamic fleet of vehicles, outstanding safety record and overall reputation.

"Academy's vision for New World Tours is simply the right fit and we look forward to providing our customers with the same great service they have come to expect but now under the Academy name," he said.

Bolen, a member of the UMA board, won acclaim from the industry in 2007 when he introduced a newly developed high-tech entertainment system on his coaches. (See Feb. 1, 2007, *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

The takeover of New World comes just 10 months after Academy bought Archway Bus of West Warwick, R.I. That purchase, which also included the company's fleet of coaches, terminal and name, gave Academy a big push to the north. Like New World, the Archway name is disappearing.

Rhodes said Academy had been looking to extend its business into New England and when the opportunity to acquire Archway came up, it acted.

The Archway acquisition fol-

lowed by two months Academy's opening of a terminal in Bridgeport, Conn., which it said also was aimed at opening its business to customers in Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

"Bridgeport is a prime central location that can serve New Haven, Hartford, Providence, Boston and their surroundings to each other, as well as into and out of New York City," Academy sales manager Julie McColley said at the time of the terminal opening.

"Our work in New England is a natural extension given that the density there mirrors locations we already serve in New York and New Jersey."

The push further into the Northeast was strengthened even further just weeks ago when Academy beat out Peter Pan Bus Lines of Springfield, Mass., for a lucrative shuttle contract with Boston University.

Rhodes said buses already have been moved to Boston and the shuttle service is expected to get under way sometime in the middle of the month.

The bid by Academy was aimed at not only widening its presence in Boston, but also to replace a long-time contract it lost earlier this year with Rutgers State University in New Brunswick, N.J. Academy was outbid for a new

## N.J. association picks officers

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. — The Greater New Jersey Motorcoach Association has elected officers for 2011-12.

Serving as president for the next year is Tim Stout of Stout's Transportation in Trenton, N.J.; vice president is Mark R. Waterhouse of Classic Tours in Lakewood, N.J.; secretary is Mitchell Sussman of Starr Tours in Trenton, N.J., and treasurer is Joseph P. Fernandez, CPA, of West Islip, N.Y.

The association board remains unchanged: David Benedict of

David Tours & Travel in Philadelphia; Thomas Dugan of Safety Bus in Pennsauken, N.J.; Scott E. Henry of Martz Lines in Wilkes-Barre, Pa.; Nate Karp of Greyhound Lines in New York City; Wayne Klein of Klein's Bus Service in Douglasville, Pa.; James Murphy of Saddle River Tours in Wallington, N.J.; Thomas JeBran of Trans-Bridge Lines in Bethlehem, Pa., and Tom Taylor of Lakeland Bus Lines in Dover, N.J.

The officers were elected last month at the association's annual meeting here.

agreement by FirstTransit.

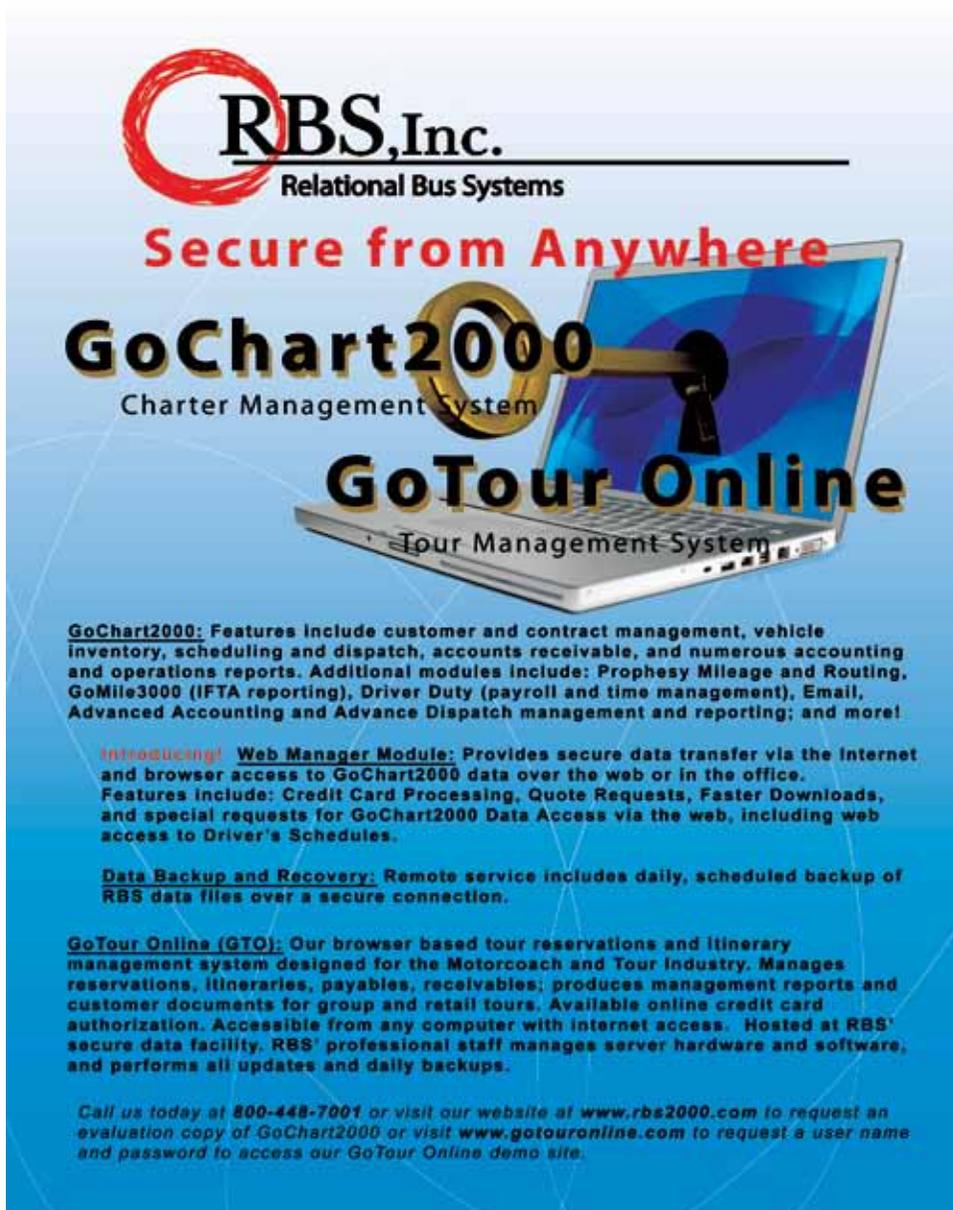
Academy, which has a fleet of more than 500 coaches, built much of its business on general charters and commuter runs, including those it operates under contract with New Jersey Transit. It also operates daily shuttles from New York and New Jersey to casinos in Atlantic City and Connecticut as well as work for three universities.

The growth of Academy through the acquisition of individual companies is being closely watched by many in the industry, including some who note that strong companies that have tried

the same thing in years past have not fared as well as they had hoped.

"Academy is trying to evolve and a big question is, is Academy President Francis Tedesco's ability to manage a ménage of companies," observed one long-time industry executive.

Some experts suggested that part of Academy's expansion up and down the East Coast may be due in part to its strongest revenue stream — commuter work for New Jersey Transit — slowing some, and the company is looking at new markets as a way to keep its huge fleet of buses on the road.



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# Trustee says Berg diverted \$45 million to bus operation

SEATTLE, Wash. — The bankruptcy trustee for the mortgage investment company founded by former motorcoach executive Darren Berg says a months-long investigation has found that Berg misappropriated \$100 million, including diverting \$45 million into his former bus operation, MTR Western and affiliated companies.

Trustee Mark Calvert told investors last month that Berg, who has pleaded not guilty to charges of illegally funneling tens of millions of investor dollars to himself, had used 81 accounts at six banks.

What's more, said Calvert, "we opened a storage closet at (Berg's company, Meridian Mortgage) and found bank letterhead, envelopes" that may have been used to create false bank statements.

Calvert estimates the assets that will be recovered may total \$27.7 million. About \$6 million will go to the accountants, lawyers and others that have worked on the Meridian and Berg bankruptcy cases, which are continuing at a

parallel pace.

Calvert went to extraordinary lengths to figure out how Berg juggled the money invested in Meridian.

First, he assembled hundreds of bank statements and images of more than 140,000 incoming-and-outgoing checks, deposit slips and

transfers from 2004 on.

His firm then "loaded it up to a cloud (a type of computing that shares resources to achieve high-performance computing power) and it went to India," where a crew of 30 typists earning \$5 per hour keyed 30 pieces of data from each check into a database. A total of

\$7,000 later, Calvert had "a real good tool" for detecting how funds were diverted for Berg's personal use, the trustee told a Seattle newspaper.

Besides the \$45 million in investor money that went to Berg's buses, he also spent millions more on a Mercer Island mansion, other

homes and a lifestyle filled with yachts, jet planes and cars.

Berg, who's sitting in jail, is scheduled for trial in October on charges of wire fraud, bankruptcy fraud and money laundering. His attorney in the criminal case, Russell Aoki, had no comment on the trustee's remarks.

## iTransit relocates Orlando operation

ORLANDO, Fla. — iTransit Inc. has relocated its service center, sales operation and corporate offices to south Orlando, a move the company says makes it more accessible to customers.

The new location is on West Taft-Vineland Road, minutes from Florida's Turnpike and Beachline/State Route 528 at Orange Blossom Trail/U.S. 441.

"Being just five miles from SeaWorld and Orlando International Airport and 10 miles from Universal and Disney, we are easily accessible and very convenient for our Orlando-based customers, but also for any motorcoach company that brings coaches to the Orlando area," said Jack Farrell, director of vehicle services.

The relocation consolidates iTransit's sales, service and corporate staff at one site.

Covering almost five acres and 15,000-square-feet of shop and office space, the new service center accommodates seven motorcoaches for service or repair.

iTransit's new pre-owned sales lot covers 1.5 acres with an inventory that includes a variety of makes and late-year models.

To mark the opening, iTransit is offering an oil-and-filters-change, chassis-lube and coach-inspection special that is good until Sept. 30.

For more information, call (877) 777-6007 or (407) 545-2880, or go to [www.i-Transit.com](http://www.i-Transit.com).

# TRUE VALUE

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JOHN RUSKIN, BRITISH ESSAYIST  
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## Big CNG order for MCI

SCHAUMBURG, Ill. — It has been a while between orders but Motor Coach Industries has sold 84 compressed natural gas-powered MCI Commuter Coaches to the city of Los Angeles.

Each of the 40-foot, 49-passenger coaches will be wheelchair-lift equipped and feature a Cummins ISL 8.9-liter, 320-horsepower natural gas engine.

The total value of the order is \$59.22 million, or the equivalent of \$705,000 per coach. The order includes an option for 11 additional coaches after deliveries begin in the third quarter.

The Federal Transit Administration is paying 70 percent of the cost.

The D-model CNG coaches will be the first MCI models in the Los Angeles Department of Transportation fleet, and will link downtown Los Angeles with such communities as Century City, Westwood, El Segundo, Pasadena, Glendale, Burbank and Encino.

LADOT's Commuter Express service operates 13 routes on weekdays, with an annual ridership of more than two million.

The new coaches will replace the majority of the 94 older, heavy-duty diesel buses that now carry LADOT Commuter Express passengers.

Features on the MCI coaches in-

clude plush-upholstered, forward-facing seats; individual overhead reading lights and personal airflow controls; advanced multiplexing for simplified diagnostics, and Smart Wave tire pressure monitoring systems.

MCI launched its CNG commuter model in 1998, when it sold 77, 40-foot, Detroit Diesel-powered coaches to New Jersey Transit. One of the coaches was returned to MCI for use as a demonstrator.

The MCI CNG model was relaunched last October with the Cummins engine and a host of upgrades.

"With a renewed focus on domestic energy supplies and green fuels, in combination with significant advances in new-coach technology, we felt the timing was right to reintroduce the CNG option to our commuter coach customers," said Michael Melaniphy, vice president of MCI's Public Sector. "The time is right for CNG to become an easy choice for public transportation operators who want this green solution for their commuter service."

MCI also offers its commuter model in clean diesel and hybrid configurations.

The company estimates there are 4,000 MCI coaches being used by transit agencies in major cities throughout the U.S. and Canada.

## Greyhound revenue, profits rise

ABERDEEN, Scotland — FirstGroup plc says it continued to make good progress during fiscal 2011 in improving the "operational leverage" of its Greyhound Lines subsidiary.

For the 12 months ended March 31, Greyhound revenue increased by 2.2 percent to \$985 million from fiscal 2010 revenue of \$963.4 million.

Operating profit at Greyhound during fiscal 2011 increased to \$62.3 million from \$39.6 million a year earlier, a gain of 57.3 percent.

FirstGroup said it was particularly encouraged by the results, considering the "ongoing difficult trading backdrop, as high unemployment and a slow economic recovery continued to impact consumer confidence and discretionary spending."

But it added that it liked recent trends in passenger volumes, "reflecting increased fuel prices, which has led to higher costs for car drivers and airline passengers."

Greyhound management, said FirstGroup, remains focused on "rigorous management" of the bus system and costs. "Greyhound's highly flexible operating model has enabled targeted mileage re-

ductions of 2.5 percent and ensured that revenue per mile is ahead of last year. In addition, we continue to take action to make the fundamental changes to the business model necessary to achieve further sustainable growth."

FirstGroup mentioned the extensive coach refurbishing project it currently has under way (see Oct. 15 *Bus & Motorcoach News*). It said more than 100 coaches had been overhauled with another 200 expected to be completed this year.

By next April, more than 50 percent of Greyhound's fleet will be "new or like new."

FirstGroup said the relaunched Greyhound website that expands print-at-home ticketing capacity, together with discounted online fares, is helping to reduce the cost of sales.

Internet sales continue to increase with 25 percent of all sales now made through *greyhound.com*.

FirstGroup said that BoltBus, the curbside service operated by Greyhound and Peter Pan Bus Lines, continues to grow "with strong increases in both passenger volumes and revenue."

Among other FirstGroup units, revenue at First Student dropped by

2.5 percent to \$2.48 billion, down from \$2.54 billion for fiscal 2010.

Operating profit at First Student was \$200.2 million, down from \$281.1 million in fiscal 2010.

The environment for First Student "remained challenging throughout the year.

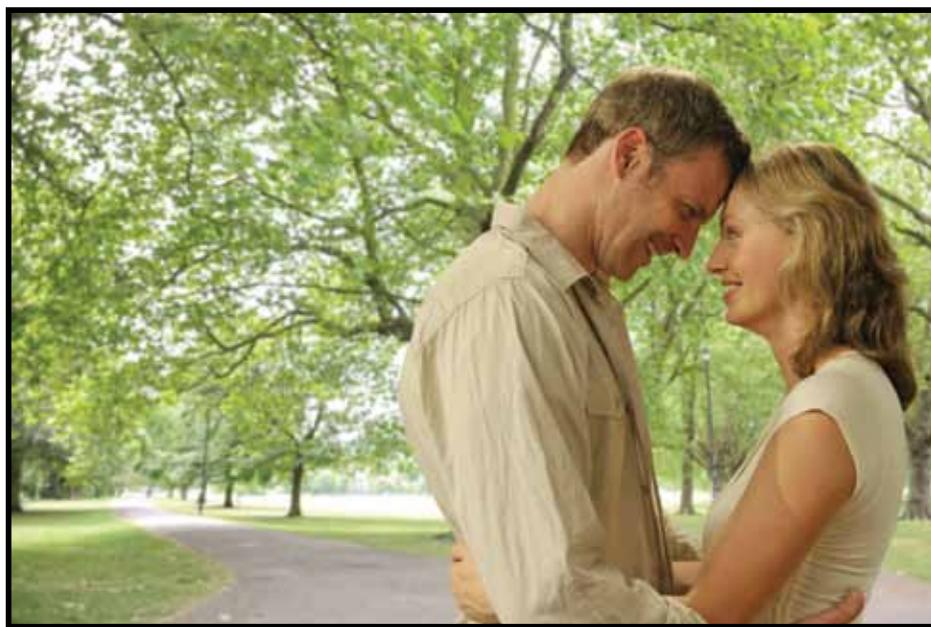
"As school boards reduced their overall transportation costs as a result of budgetary constraints, we were not able to flex our costs and achieve sufficient operating efficiencies to offset the pressure on operating margin.

"Against the backdrop of significant pricing pressure and a particularly high percentage of contract churn within our business our retention rate fell below 90 percent during the year."

To combat the turmoil, First Student has strengthened its commercial development team to improve contract retention in the fall.

At First Transit, fiscal 2011 revenue increased 3.4 percent to \$1.2 billion from \$1.160 billion in fiscal 2010. Operating profit was \$89.5 million in fiscal 2011, versus \$84.4 million a year earlier.

FirstGroup's bus division in the United Kingdom saw revenue drop 2.8 percent.



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## IRP vote

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

apportioned tags.

Parra and Lisa Simon, president of NTA (formerly the National Tour Association), have appealed to NTA members to send a letter to all state tourism directors, asking them to contact the IRP voting member in their state and urge him or her to vote against the ballot measure.

In their appeal, Parra and Simon say if the IRP ballot measure is approved it "will reduce travel to your state... The proposal reduces the ability of groups traveling by charter bus to move between states, as well as move between states and Canadian provinces.

"Currently, under the IRP plan, charter buses are exempt from displaying apportioned license plates and are able to travel relatively freely between the two countries and among states and provinces. Thus, onboard tour guides can alter plans and easily travel among the states and provinces without any consequence.

"However, with apportioned plates, the bus company must know in advance where it's heading and must have declared that state or province on their 'cab card,' a document that lists all the

states/provinces a charter operator plans to visit during the coming year," say Parra and Simon.

"Unfortunately, the nature of the charter and tour business is such that predicting those trips one year in advance is virtually impossible. It denies the 'demand-responsive' nature of our business. If a charter bus enters a state or province that is not listed on the cab card, he/she runs the risk of having the bus impounded without any concern for the passengers on board!" Parra and Simon warn.

"This is a bad idea — plain and simple!" they add.

The ballot measure submitted to the 59 states and provinces that are members of IRP views the issue differently.

"Charter buses utilize the same roads and bridges as trucks, truck-tractors and non-chartered motor buses," states the summary of the official IRP amendment that is being voted on by the states and provinces.

"Charter buses engaged are subject to (the same) regulatory requirements as trucks, truck-tractors and other motor buses, including USDOT, International Fuel Tax Agreement, and Unified Carrier Registration requirements.

"In its study of the (Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administra-

tion Performance and Registration Information Systems Management) program, the (Government Accountability Office) attempted to determine the reason for this exemption by contacting representatives from the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators, UMA and FMCSA.

"The representatives said the reason for the exemption is that charter buses are for-hire operations and may not be able to reliably predict where they may operate. The representatives, however, were not able to provide a rationale why this exemption does not apply to for-hire trucking companies that may not be able to predict where they may operate.

"A survey of IRP members (58 out of 59 responded to the survey) reflects that less than 30 percent of jurisdictions required charter buses to be IRP registered. The jurisdictions that did not require charter buses to be IRP registered reported that due to the IRP registration exemption for charter buses, their jurisdiction recognized the 'full' registration of charter buses through jurisdiction bilateral or multi-lateral free reciprocity agreements, jurisdictional statutes or administrative rules," the summary stated.

That same survey found that

"nearly 75 percent of jurisdictions reported that interjurisdictional charter bus operations should be treated the same as any other motor vehicle engaged in interjurisdictional commerce."

That finding could indicate it will be difficult to stop the ballot measure from being approved by state and provincial officials who may relish the idea of raking in additional vehicle registration dollars.

"The removal of the charter bus exemption from the plan would insure that charter bus operations would be ineligible for free reciprocity under separate reciprocity agreements and therefore would pay license fees, either by way of a permit or prorate, to each jurisdiction in which the charter bus operated or intended to operate," states the ballot summary.

"An additional benefit of removing the charter bus exemption from the plan" is that IRP registration would subject most interjurisdictional charter bus operations to the FMCSA PRISM program, which prevents or suspends the IRP registration of unsafe carriers, the summary adds.

The 59 states and provinces have until June 30 to cast their vote. If the measure is approved, it becomes effective Jan. 1.

## N.Y. parkway gets additional warnings

SALINA, N.Y. — The New York Department of Transportation has painted "low bridge ahead" on the pavement in front of the low railroad bridge over Onondaga Lake Parkway nearly nine months after four people died when a megabus.com coach slammed into the structure.

The pavement marking, painted on either side of the bridge, joins several warning signs already in place.

In addition to the pavement markings, workers installed rumble strips to create sounds warning drivers when their vehicle crosses the centerline.

## Driver arraigned

SALINA, N.Y. — A megabus.com driver has been arraigned on four felony counts of criminally negligent homicide in connection with the crash into the railroad bridge over Onondaga Lake Parkway.

The double decker megabus driven by John Tomaszewski hit the low bridge at about 2:30 a.m. Sept. 11. Police said Tomaszewski was using a personal GPS device and ignored the warning signs.

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## Industry targeted

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

"We took the option of extending the investigation by 10 days (from May 27) to further investigate the carrier," said Tolliver. "We wanted to make sure we had an airtight case to shut the company down completely."

In hindsight, that was a bad decision. The Sky Express coach crashed on May 31.

### The boss is angry

The 10-day extension granted by the FMCSA was blasted by no less than U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood.

In a sharp rebuke to his own agency, LaHood said "I'm extremely disappointed that this carrier was allowed to continue operating unsafely when it should have been placed out of service."

In a written statement, LaHood admonished the FMCSA for not shutting down Sky Express before the crash and in view of its history of repeated safety violations.

LaHood said he was immediately halting the practice of giving operators with a history of safety violations additional time to clean up their act.

"There is no excuse for delay when a bus operator should be put out of service for safety's sake," said LaHood. "On my watch, there will never be another extension granted to a carrier we believe is unsafe."

It also was reported that LaHood plans to propose in Decem-

ber allowing the FMCSA to close bus companies having excessive safety violations without having to conduct a full-blown compliance review.

Also criticizing the FMCSA was Peter Pantuso, president of the American Bus Association. "Why did they allow a company with a safety record this egregious to continue to be on the road?" Pantuso was quoting as saying.

### Focus on fatigue

Much of the attention related to the Sky Express crash focused on driver fatigue.

Virginia State Police blamed the crash on driver fatigue, but its finding has not been confirmed by the National Transportation Safety Board, which also is investigating the incident.

The driver, Kin Yiu Cheung, 37, of Queens, N.Y., was charged with reckless driving. He suffered minor injuries and was jailed after being treated for his injuries. He later was released on bail.

However, within a couple of days he was rearrested and charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter. If convicted he could be sent to prison for up to 10 years on each charge.

Cheung reported for duty in Greensboro at 10:30 p.m. on May 30. About midnight, he departed Raleigh, N.C., for New York City with 56 passengers. The crash occurred at 4:55 a.m., five hours after leaving Raleigh and less than half way into the trip.

It's 500 miles from Raleigh to

## NTSB urges urgency for recommendations

WASHINGTON — A member of the National Transportation Safety Board says his agency's recommendations to improve the safety of passenger buses need to be taken more seriously in the wake of a fatal bus crash in Northern Virginia late last month.

NTSB member Robert Sumwalt said on the panel's Safety Compass blog that the agency, which is investigating the accident, has recommended changes for years.

Among them are stronger roofs, better emergency exits and higher standards for passenger seating compartments, he said.

New York City. Under the best of circumstances, it's roughly a 10-hour run. At the pace of the fatal trip, it would have taken an additional seven to eight hours for the Sky Express coach to travel from north of Richmond to New York City. The schedule called for a 9 a.m. arrival. It was not clear why the coach was badly behind schedule.

The sequence of events in the Sky Express crash described by Virginia police — a tired driver drifting off a highway — are similar to the 2008 motorcoach crash that killed nine passengers near Mexican Hat, Utah, and the 2004 crash near Turrell, Ark., that killed 14 passengers and the driver.

The NTSB is currently investigating whether fatigue was a factor in the March 12 crash that killed 15 passengers in New York City. The agency has cited driver fatigue in nine bus wrecks since 1998 that killed 57 people, not including this year's crashes.

Of significance to some observers is the fact the Sky Express and Turrell, Ark., crashes occurred at roughly the same time of day: 4:55 a.m. for Sky Express and 5:02 a.m. for Turrell. The infamous crash involving a coach that mistook an exit ramp for a highway curve, plunging off an overpass in Atlanta in March 2007, happened at 5:08 a.m.

The FMCSA is examining hours-of-service rules for bus drivers, awaiting results of a study on bus driver fatigue due this fall.

### A trip back in time

The last time the FMCSA considered changing the hours rules for bus drivers was eight years ago when it revised the hours requirements for truck drivers.

The decision in 2003 to have separate driving hours' rules for bus and truck drivers was momentous because for 64 years bus and truck drivers shared the same hours-of-service rules despite the vastly different nature of the two jobs.

The motorcoach industry's two

The agency has also recommended lane-departure warning systems and collision-monitors.

The problem, Sumwalt said, is that the recommendations have not gone anywhere.

"The NTSB has issued many motorcoach safety recommendations based on our accident investigations," he wrote. "Three of those issues are on our Most Wanted List.

"Unfortunately, there has been no sense of urgency on these recommendations, some of which are nearly 10 years old. The result?

"We continue to investigate accidents where the same things

happen."

Sumwalt chaired an NTSB forum last month about motorcoach and truck safety, the first such event held by the agency since 1999. (See June 1 *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

Sumwalt said there had been progress made on bus safety since '99, but "there is much more work to be done to avoid tragic accidents such as the one on... in Virginia."

Congress has held hearings and Sens. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, and Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, have renewed their call for legislation to require seatbelts.

are believed to have completed one of the study's questionnaires.

No word on the study's results surfaced publicly for months — until early 2003 — when FMCSA officials revealed at a Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance meeting in Toronto they had rejected the study, saying it had not been based on sound science.

### Whoa, Nellie

The FMCSA investigation of Sky Express took an interesting and dramatic turn early this month when the agency announced it had issued a cease-and-desist order against Sky Express after finding the company was attempting to operate and sell tickets under a different company name — 108 Tours and 108 Bus. The order was effective immediately.

"FMCSA also has learned that Sky Express is repainting, or has repainted, some or all of its vehicles and is unlawfully selling tickets... under other operating authority registrations," the agency said.

Additionally, as part of its investigation of Sky Express and its ongoing pursuit of "reincarnated" bus companies, the agency issued a sweeping subpoena of records from three Internet websites that have sold tickets for Sky Express and several other so-called Chinatown bus companies.

Those sites are [www.gotobus.com](http://www.gotobus.com); [www.taketours.com](http://www.taketours.com), and [www.2001bus.com](http://www.2001bus.com).

"We are relentlessly targeting unsafe and illegal bus companies," said LaHood. "This action sends a strong message that the U.S. Department of Transportation will utilize every legal and enforcement tool available to shut down unsafe bus companies and protect passengers and motorists."

Last month, FMCSA and its state and local law enforcement partners conducted more than 3,000 surprise passenger carrier safety inspections during the first couple of weeks of May, resulting 442 buses or drivers being put out of service.

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