

Bus & Motorcoach NEWS

WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE BUS INDUSTRY

Mega movements perplex operators

Large movements, from championship sporting events to emergency storm evacuations, should be attractive business opportunities for just about everyone in the motorcoach industry.

But a growing number of operators are souring on them, saying that recent experiences show they oft-times don't provide a decent (or any) pay day.

"Increasingly it is becoming apparent that large movements, requiring multiple coaches, are a formula for a lot of work and no pay,"

observes Ken Presley, vice president of the United Motorcoach Association.

Operators point to the Winter Olympic Games earlier this year in Canada, where dozens of operators still are owed millions of dollars. (See Sept. 1 *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

And then there has been the industry experience with hurricane evacuations along the Gulf Coast, where many operators who worked in Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama had to fight to get

paid and then were shortchanged when they did get their money. (See Jan. 1 and Feb. 1, 2009 issues of *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

Those highly publicized payment disputes, and others involving large movements, have led some operators to consider staying clear of such work in the future — unless changes are made in the way payments are handled.

"The Super Bowl is coming up in Dallas, just 10 miles from me, and I'm not sure I am going to do

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Internet advertising can be dicey

Are potential customers missing your website because a competitor's ad jumps up, capturing their attention, when the customers conduct an internet search for your company?

If so, to put a stop to it you'll either have to play nice with the competitor or spend a little (or possibly a lot of) money to knock them down a notch or two.

"Those are about the only two things you can really do to stop it," said Eric Elliott of BusRates.com, the motorcoach industry internet company that helps match operators with potential customers. BusRates also is a big advertiser on the web.

Welcome to the semi-wacky and morally ambiguous world of advertising via internet search engines.

Google and other popular internet search engines sell special ads on their pages that display the results from a word or name search.

Listed as "Sponsored Links" or "Sponsored Results," the ads are triggered by a key word or string of words selected by a person conducting an internet search.

When someone searches for something containing any of the key words, the ad appears, usually on the top or right side of the page near the list produced by the

search request.

For instance, if your company is named Comfort Bus Tours and Charters and someone searches for it by its full name, your business would appear at or near the top of the search results.

But, if another coach company purchased an ad programmed to pop up whenever someone searches for anything containing the words "bus," "tour" or "charter," their ad will pop up, too.

And, if the buyer spent enough money for the ad, it will be displayed in the top position, above all the other ads.

More aggressive companies,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12 ►

Obama health-care reform begins

WASHINGTON — Key aspects of the new health-care reform law began going into effect late last month, including changes that will expand the coverage many small businesses provide their employees.

At the same time, many employers and policyholders have begun receiving letters indicating their health insurance premiums are going to rise next year.

After all, someone has to pay

for the expanded benefits, right?

Under the health-care overhaul law enacted six months ago, insurers can no longer set a dollar limit on the amount of care they'll provide over a person's lifetime, or deny coverage to children with pre-existing conditions.

Young adults can stay on their parents' health plans until age 26, and preventive-care services, such as mammograms and colonoscopies; will be more widely available

under health plans.

Plus, consumers get greater rights to appeal insurers' decisions.

"It's really putting in place long overdue consumer protections," Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius told one newspaper interviewer.

Many people, however, will have to wait until Jan. 1 for the changes to help them. That's because most of the new provisions

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Another investment firm assumes control of MCI

NEW YORK CITY — A private investment company — that successfully rehabilitated North America's largest transit bus manufacturer — is the new owner of Motor Coach Industries.

KPS Capital Partners took control of MCI last month in a multi-stakeholder recapitalization of MCI Holdings, the parent company of MCI.

Financial details of the transaction were not made public, and there was no word what management or other changes might be planned by the new owner.

Jay Bernstein, a KPS partner who was named chairman of MCI, said in a statement the acquisition leaves MCI "conservatively capitalized" with the financial resources to fund its continued growth and investment in innovation and technology.

"We are very excited to partner with the company's 1,500 em-

ployees in the U.S. and Canada to manufacture products in North America for North American customers, and to continue with the highest level of quality and service," Bernstein said.

KPS spokesman Mark Semer said the company would not discuss the acquisition further, including financial details, and any plans it might have. "There might be interviews down the road where they would speak about it," he said.

Unlike past ownership changes, MCI did not issue a public statement about the change in control, and spokeswoman Pat Plodzeen referred all questions to KPS.

Sources with knowledge of the transaction said KPS now owns "substantially all" of the bus manufacturer, buying out the holdings of majority shareholder Franklin Mutual Advisers LLC and others.

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Grand Ole Opry House reopens, Opry mall sues over flood claims

NASHVILLE — The Grand Ole Opry House, which had been shut down since May because of flooding, reopened late last month with a gala musical event, while the Gaylord Opryland Hotel Resort and Convention Center, also heavily damaged and closed because of the flooding, expects to reopen next month.

But the future of the nearby Opry Mills mall, a popular Nashville shopping destination and an integral part of the Opryland complex, is in doubt because of a dispute over flood insurance.

The mall's owner, Simon Property Group, has filed a lawsuit against 17 insurance companies, seeking at least \$150 million.

The mall said in its Chancery Court suit it will be unable to restore the property without the insurance money.

The suit claims the mall was covered for \$200 million in flood damage, but the insurers have offered to pay only \$50 million. The suit estimates total mall damage at more than \$200 million.

According to the suit, the in-

surance companies believe they are limited to \$50 million in liability for flooding in a high-hazard flood zone.

The suit claims breach of contract and negligence by the insurers, and requests a jury trial.

A news release issued by the mall said about \$50 million has been spent on mall restoration so far.

The mall, which is on the site of the old Opryland USA theme park, is next to the Cumberland River, which ran out of its banks, flooding the hotel, mall and hundreds of homes and buildings in Nashville. At the time, the shopping center had more than 100 tenants.

A torrential downpour dumped 13.5 inches of rain on Nashville May 1-2, resulting in nine deaths in the area.

The sprawling Gaylord Opryland Hotel Resort and Convention Center also was swamped with water and forced to close, resulting in hundreds of employees being laid off. It expects to reopen Nov. 15. (See June 15 *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

UMA, Motorcoach Academy unveil management seminar

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — The Bus & Motorcoach Academy and the United Motorcoach Association have announced development of a coach industry Business Management Seminar, with the initial seminar to be Nov. 30–Dec. 1, at the National Transportation Safety Board Training Center in Ashburn, Va.

The seminar will be conducted prior to the popular UMA Safety Management Seminar, which the association sponsors annually, and will present course material from the Bus & Motorcoach Academy curriculum in an in-depth, classroom format.

Beginning with this year's session, and in succeeding years, the seminar will focus on a course topic from the academy's Clarence Cornell School of Business. The focus this year will be business and marketing.

Topics to be covered at the initial seminar include building a

business plan, working with an accountant, basic business law, basic marketing, business ethics, pricing, and cash flow analysis.

All attendees will earn a certificate from the Bus & Motorcoach Academy.

Registration for the seminar is now open but space is limited.

The cost for UMA members is \$139, while the price for non-members is \$199.

Attendees can stay to attend the Safety Management Seminar for an additional registration fee. A block of hotel rooms has been arranged for attendees at the Marriott Spring Hill Suites Ashburn Dulles North, with rates beginning at \$69. Hotel reservations can be made by calling (888) 287-9400 by Oct. 30.

For complete information and schedules for both the Business Management Seminar and the UMA Safety Management Seminar, go to www.uma.org.

The Grand Ole Opry House also was closed but reopened Sept. 28, with a show featuring a dozen country music stars.

Performances of the legendary country music show were relocated in Nashville while the opry house was closed.

A banner summer for national parks

WASHINGTON — The National Park Service reports that the number of visitors at U.S. national parks this past summer was up more than 10 percent from last summer.

More than 112 million people visited the nation's 392 national park sites in June, July and August, up more than 1.2 million from the same period last year.

Despite the summer surge, Park Service data for the first eight months of this year showed that more than 202 million people had visited a park site this year, down 1.5 percent from the total for the first eight months of 2009.

Last year was a comparatively robust year for the parks, with more than 285 million visitors, an increase of more than 10 million from 2008, and was the best single-year total since 2000.

U.S. national parks are a popular destination for motorcoach tours and an important tour component for many National Tour Association tour operators. More than half of the NTA's 700 member companies package national parks tours.



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THE DOCKET

Tour guides challenge licensing law in D.C.

WASHINGTON — A pair of Washington tour guides are challenging a District of Columbia law that requires them to have an occupational license.

The two say the district's tour guide licensing law violates their fundamental constitutional right of free speech.

"The government cannot be in the business of deciding who may speak and who may not," said Robert McNamara, a staff attorney with the Institute for Justice, a public interest law firm with a history of defending free speech and the rights of entrepreneurs.

"The Constitution protects your right to communicate for a living, whether you are a journalist, a musician or a tour guide."

Tour guides Tonia Edwards and Bill Main run Segs in the City, which provides Segway "safaris" in Annapolis, Baltimore and Washington. There is, however, a key difference between the three cities: In D.C., doing this makes them criminals.

Delaware revamps rules for driving during heavy snows

Dover, Del. — Snowstorms that occasionally make travel in Delaware a dicey proposition could result in hefty fines for bus operators, truckers and other drivers who decide to white-knuckle their way along roadways.

Gov. Jack Markell signed into law a bill that creates a three-tier system designed to discourage driving during heavy snow falls in the state. The law takes effect Oct. 30.

The law was born in the wake of a significant snow storm in February. Despite a driving ban issued by the governor, many people took to the roads, resulting in hundreds of vehicles being stranded along roadsides throughout the state. Until now, Delaware law limited punishment options to jail time.

The first tier of the new law simply discourages driving. No fines could be imposed for traveling through wintry precipitation.

The next level puts in place a "driving restriction." Driving would be prohibited except for essential personnel: snowplow operators, those necessary to maintain the core functions of government,

Simply by telling their customers that the National Archives houses the Bill of Rights, Edwards and Main could be fined and sentenced to 90 days in jail if they don't possess a D.C. license.

The district's licensing requirement makes it illegal for anyone to "guide or escort" anyone else for hire without first passing a test and obtaining a special license. The prohibition on unauthorized talking covers all of the public spaces in D.C., including roads and sidewalks.

"This is a very important case because it is about our constitutional right to speak," said Tonia Edwards. "We have a business license to operate, but the government cannot force us to get an additional license to speak. When we win, we will protect not only ourselves, but the free speech rights of countless other entrepreneurs as well."

The Institute for Justice is pursuing a similar lawsuit in Philadelphia.

health care workers and "those providing food and fuel."

The final tier would be an all-out driving ban. Only essential personnel, such as first responders and snowplow operators, would be allowed on roadways.

Offenders of the second-and-third tiers would face up to \$115 fines. Repeat offenders would need to pay up to \$200, with the possibility of spending between 10 and 30 days in jail.

Employers are forbidden from "any adverse employment action against an employee" who refuses to violate the law and who hasn't been given a waiver.

Another new Delaware law raises the penalty for red-light camera violations. Previously, the fine had been \$75, plus a surcharge of \$37.50. The new law increases the base fine to \$110.

There are 30 red-light cameras posted throughout the state, including 10 added this past summer. While described by advocates as a benefit to safety, the cameras have generated more than \$5 million in annual revenue for the state.

Urban roadways are substandard in many areas

WASHINGTON — Nearly one-quarter of the major urban roads in the U.S. are in substandard or poor condition, boosting costs for all vehicle owners and operators, reports a transportation research group.

TRIP, a nonprofit organization supported by insurance companies, road builders and others, based its report on 2008 data from the Federal Highway Administration, the most recent available.

It does not reflect road projects in the \$814 billion federal stimulus program begun last year. As of June, states and Washington, D.C., had used stimulus funding to improve 27,810 miles of pavement and build 397 miles of new roads in urban and rural areas, according to the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

"That's 28,000 miles out of a system that is 2.7 million miles," notes Jack Basso, director of program finance and management for the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials. "There is a dramatic need for (greater highway) investment. We need to increase investment and put a long-term federal investment plan in place."

TRIP found that 24 percent of major urban roads have substandard or poor pavement.

The researchers examined about 200,000 miles of urban roads, which carry 78 percent of the two trillion miles driven annually in urban America.

Recession-plagued state and local governments are putting off expensive reconstruction projects and simply patching roads, says Frank Moretti, TRIP's director of policy and research.

Here are the 10 urban areas (with a population of 500,000 or more) with the roughest roads, according to the TRIP study: San Jose, 64 percent in rough condition; Los Angeles, 63 percent; Honolulu, 62 percent; Concord, Calif., 58 percent; San Francisco-Oakland, 58 percent; New Orleans, 55 percent; New York City-Newark, 53 percent; San Diego, 50 percent; Indio-Palm Springs, Calif., 47 percent, and Baltimore, 46 percent.

'11 UCRA fee collection is kicking off this month

WASHINGTON — The board of the Unified Carrier Registration Agreement has announced that collection to UCRA fees for 2011 will begin in the next few weeks.

States participating in the interstate commercial vehicle registration program will send bus and truck operators their UCRA report forms between Oct. 15 and Nov. 15.

The starting date for roadside UCRA enforcement for 2011 — that is, the date by which operators will need to have paid — is Feb. 1.

Industry representatives on the UCRA board had advocated a later collection schedule because 2010 UCRA fees, which were nearly double those of 2009, weren't collected until this past

June and July. (See May 15 *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

The UCRA program, they pointed out, depends heavily on voluntary carrier compliance, and collecting large fees twice within a seven-month period does not exactly promote compliance.

Collection figures for the program would seem to bear out the industry representatives' concerns.

For 2009, states collected \$83 million in UCRA fees. Collections for this year totaled \$84 million, even though fees were nearly twice as high this year.

As one UCRA board member observed: "To be sure, there has been enforcement of the 2010 fees for less than 90 days, but still."

FMCSA committee wants reduced driver distractions

Distracted driving is best countered by a wide-ranging effort to instill a culture of safety among all drivers, but among commercial vehicle drivers it would be helpful to reduce in-vehicle distractions, says a committee of safety experts.

The Motor Carrier Safety Advisory Committee suggested last month that federal regulators look at technology standards, enforcement, driver education and data collection as they consider ways to limit distracted driving in over-the-road commercial vehicles.

The committee, whose members come from industry, law enforcement, and labor and safety advocacy groups, provides advice and recommendations to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration. It has in the past weighed

in on issues such as hours of service and new-entrant regulations.

In a letter to FMCSA Administrator Anne Ferro, the committee recommended the agency take existing research, as well as risks and benefits, into account as it weighs the idea of prohibiting or limiting in-vehicle technologies while commercial vehicles are moving.

The committee suggested the agency consider alternatives to visual messaging, including incentives to promote voice-only technologies. It also urged the agency to consider a rulemaking to develop performance standards for technologies that might distract drivers.

As it assesses distracted driving enforcement the agency should consider potential sanctions, such as traffic tickets or moving violations, the committee said.

Onboard recorder rule changed

WASHINGTON — The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration has made technical changes in its new electronic onboard recorder rule in response to concerns raised by makers of electronic onboard recorders and others.

The agency dropped its requirement that EOBRs be able to operate in extreme temperatures, changed its requirement for a certain type of USB connector, and announced plans to clarify its requirements for EOBR reporting.

Originally the agency wanted the devices to be able to tolerate a temperature range from minus 40 degrees to 185 degrees.

But a number of EOBR suppliers, and American Trucking Associations, said that the cost of adding such protection to EOBRs would be excessive, and not necessary. Typical EOBRs are built to operate in a temperature range of 22-below zero to 158 degrees. The agency agreed the requirement is not necessary.

Rural/intercity bus conference is this month

BURLINGTON, Vt. — Motorcoach operators looking to expand into transit or commuter work may be interested in attending the 19th National Rural Public and Intercity Bus Transportation Conference here next month.

Conducted every two years, the conference is designed to provide a valuable experience for rural and human service transit providers, intercity bus operators, and others interested in rural and intercity bus transportation.

The conference includes information on planning and design; funding and finance; rural transportation in today's operating environment; technology, and special issues in rural transportation. The three-day event, plus welcoming reception, includes more than 30 sessions, events and tours.

Most activities for the Oct. 24-27 meeting are at the Sheraton Burlington Hotel & Conference Center. For more information or to register, go to www.trb.org.

Boston briefing on new safety system

BOSTON — The Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities is sponsoring an information session Oct. 5 on the federal government's new system for monitoring motor carrier safety.

"Are you ready for CSA 2010?" is the name of the two-hour briefing that will be in the facilities of Cavalier Coach Trailways in Boston. The Massachusetts Bus Association is hosting the event with Cavalier Coach.

CSA 2010 is the acronym for Comprehensive Safety Analysis, the system that's replacing the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration SafeStat program. The new system consists of a revamped enforcement and compliance model.

Those attending are being asked to bring their USDOT number and FMCSA pin number.

The session will be from 10 a.m. to noon Oct. 5 at Cavalier Coach at 905-907 Massachusetts Ave.

For more information or to obtain a registration form that must be faxed back, called the Mass. Dept. of Public Utilities at (617) 305-3773, or call Sylvia at the department at (617) 305-3559.



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Plan to change 1099 rule stalls in Senate

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate has fumbled the ball in its dash to eliminate a burdensome paperwork requirement contained in the health care reform legislation passed earlier this year.

Two amendments that would have addressed the provision failed to gain passage in the Senate.

The amendments would have addressed the 1099 reporting requirement that was part of the Health Care Reform Law.

The provision requires all businesses, sole proprietors, partner-

ships, and corporations alike, to issue a Form 1099 report to any entity, corporate, individual or other, to which they have paid \$600 or more during the tax year. (See Aug. 15 *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

Scheduled to go into effect Jan. 1, 2012, the provision will require the issuance of millions of additional 1099s.

Critics say the provision is unduly burdensome for businesses in exchange for the \$17 billion in new tax revenue it is supposed to raise.

For small motorcoach opera-

tors the requirement could compel them to issue hundreds of additional 1099 forms every year — forms for every fuel stop, repair service, parts provider or hotel, just to name a few — where an operator spends more than \$600 annually.

An amendment introduced by Sen. Mike Johanns, R-Neb., would have repealed the provision. However, it failed in Senate voting.

Another amendment, offered by Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., would have exempted businesses with 25 or fewer employees from the re-

porting requirement; raised the yearly threshold for reporting purchases from a total of \$600 to \$5,000; exempted credit-card purchases, and instructed the U.S. Treasury to issue rules that provided exceptions for payments which bear minimal risk of noncompliance.

The Senate did not have the votes for the bill to move forward.

This isn't the end of the issue. TheHill.com predicts the Senate will eventually repeal the requirement or change its scope.

Drugs checker heads to prison

GREENSBORO, N.C. — A man who acted as a medical review officer for USDOT-regulated drug tests without being a licensed physician has been sentenced to 22 months in federal prison.

Additionally, he was directed to make restitution to the government and victims in the amount of \$209,030.

Upon his release from prison, the man will be subject to three years supervised release, 100 hours of community service, and a \$400 special assessment.

Michael R. Bennett of Workplace Compliance Inc. of Winston Salem, N.C., pleaded guilty earlier this year to wire fraud and to making false statements related to the drug testing he supposedly was performing.

Bennett's company was given 36 months probation.

During sentencing, the federal district judge emphasized that Bennett's actions had placed the public in serious jeopardy and had violated the integrity and protections afforded by the USDOT drug testing program.

Healthcare law

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

apply to insurance policies that begin on or after Sept. 23.

Many plans operate on a calendar year, and this fall will begin enrollment for next year.

"It's not like a switch gets flipped and everything (got) changed on Sept. 23," said a spokeswoman for one large health policy group.

Some changes won't apply to plans that are considered "grandfathered" under the law, meaning they existed when the law was signed March 23 and haven't sub-

stantially changed. Those plans are supposed to notify policyholders of their grandfathered status.

Once plans make a substantial change — such as significantly raising co-payments or significantly reducing benefits or the amount an employer contributes — they are no longer grandfathered.

The changes that went into effect last month are designed to help consumers between now and 2014, when the most-significant provisions of the health law take effect.

That's when new health insurance marketplaces, called exchanges, will be created, and it's when most Americans will be required to

purchase health insurance.

Sebelius said some insurance companies have begun notifying policyholders that their premiums will increase in 2011 because of the new benefits that took effect last month.

Karen Ignagni, president and CEO of the industry group America's Health Insurance Plans, said: "The fact is if you increase benefits, you increase costs."

Ignagni said the new law contributes to insurance rate increases, as do other factors, such as the rising costs of prescription drugs and medical care, and a growing number of Americans who are

older or require care for chronic health conditions.

Sebelius sent a letter last month to Ignagni alleging that insurers are sending letters to consumers "falsely blaming premium increases for 2011" on the new health-care law, and warning that the Department of Health and Human Services, in partnership with states, "will not tolerate unjustified rate hikes."

She said analyses of the law's impact by various groups — including HHS, the Urban Institute and the Pennsylvania insurer Highmark — estimate a 1 to 2 percent impact on premiums.

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Entrepreneurial Success: One man's critical factors

By Jay Goltz

I really have only one indulgence. I bought an expensive convertible a few years ago. It's not a midlife crisis car; I would call it a midlife celebration car. It is not red. It was a prerecession purchase. In any case, I was driving to work one recent morning, sitting at a stoplight when a car pulled up next to me and the young man behind the wheel rolled down his window. He shouted over: "How can I be successful like you?" I sensed he was serious. I appreciated his moxie, and I wanted to give him a great answer. I also knew that I had between five and 10 seconds for the pearls of wisdom to be hatched and delivered. I didn't panic. I went with my two favorite

standbys: make sure your customers are happy and make sure your employees are with the program. The light changed. He seemed pleased with his stoplight counseling.

He thanked me, and we both drove off. But I started thinking: Is that the best I could do? Did I give him enough to get him on his way? Should I have mentioned the "work hard and follow your passion" mantra? No. He certainly has heard that before.

Still, I wished I'd had another chance. I feared this would haunt me forever — or at least until lunch. And then, voila! We were at the next stoplight, and he was again next to me, again with his window and mind open. Rebound. I get another shot.

He told me he was graduating from DePaul University, and he wanted to know what else I had for him. By this point, I'd realized that I couldn't give him the secret to

business success in 10 seconds. That would take at least a minute, but I was not prepared.

It is an excellent question that requires some thought. I told him I'd post an answer on this blog. So, to you DePaul graduate with moxie, here is what I believe are the most important success factors in business:

1. Look for opportunities to do something better than just about everyone else.
2. Accept risk as a necessary evil. It makes for much less competition.
3. Act responsibly to customers, employees and vendors.
4. Goals aren't enough. You need a plan. You need to execute the plan.
5. You need to fix the plan as you go. Learn from your mistakes. Most people don't.
6. Do not reinvent the wheel. Learn from others — join a business group.

7. Make sure the math works. I know plenty of people who work hard and follow their passion but the math doesn't work. If the math doesn't work, neither does the business.

8. Make sure that every employee understands and works toward the mission.

9. There are going to be difficult times and you need to be resilient; whining is a waste of time.

10. There will be sacrifices. Work to find a balance so that you don't become a financially successful loser. It's not about the income, it's about the outcome.

That's my Top 10 list. I'm sure there are more. What do you think is missing?

Jay Goltz owns five small businesses in Chicago.

Reprinted from The New York Times' "You're the Boss" blog.

Talk of mileage-fee alternative to fuel tax lingers

COLUMBUS, Ohio — If you're keeping score, you can add Ohio to the list of states that are considering alternatives to fuel taxes as a mechanism for financing road construction and upkeep.

For decades, paying for highways has been fairly straightforward: Highway users buy fuel, which is taxed and the tax revenue is used to foot the bill for road work.

It has — more or less — been a fair system. The more you drove, the more you paid.

But more and more, the people involved in transportation planning and construction say the old model is breaking down as many vehicles get better fuel mileage, or don't use gasoline or diesel fuel at all.

Some of these planners say state and federal governments eventually should switch to a system that charges a tax based on how many miles you drive, not how many gallons you consume.

As gasoline-and-diesel-fuel tax revenue stagnates, the appeal of instituting a true user fee tied to miles driven seems to gain traction.

It was a major recommendation last year

when a 60-member panel met to discuss Ohio's transportation future. Gov. Ted Strickland hasn't taken up the idea, said Scott Varner, a spokesman for the Ohio Department of Transportation, but it hasn't been dismissed, either.

"There are a lot of examples around the country about how it can be done," Varner said. "But there are still a lot of questions about it."

For example, in an era when global positioning systems can track exactly where you go, how much would the government know about where or how far you drive?

Could cities demand a share for the mileage you drive on their streets?

Could it cost more to drive at rush hour? Would collection be as seamless as the gasoline tax?

The Oregon Department of Transportation has conducted tests for replacing that state's gasoline tax with a vehicle-miles-traveled, or VMT, tax. (See Jan. 1, 2010; June 15, 2006, and Dec. 15, 2004, issues of *Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

Readers on gas pumps accessed comput-

ers mounted in volunteer participants' cars to download information about how many miles the car had traveled in different tax zones.

There was one charge for miles traveled in a zone in and near Portland, and a lower rate for miles driven in other parts of the state.

The system didn't keep track of the actual route taken or when the trip was made.

The main problem for those who build and maintain roads is that gas-tax collections have dropped off or stagnated. The poor economy means people are driving less and vehicles are getting better fuel mileage.

Since 2008, Congress has added billions of dollars in non-gas-tax money to transportation funding to make up for shortfalls in fuel-tax revenue. Last year, the federal stimulus also covered the gap.

Many planners say Congress should increase fuel taxes. They point to Congressional Budget Office figures that show there is a \$234 billion gap between current funding levels and needs.

That's a significant gap, say planners, who note there currently is no real viable means other than raising the gas tax to fill it.

The planners contend a VMT tax is an alternative that should be considered for five to seven years out.

Some observers say the U.S. is trying to have it both ways: There is a national policy of increasing fuel economy and moving to non-gasoline vehicles, while at the same time the principal system for funding highways depends on fuel consumption. That would seem to make no sense.

Every major manufacturer will have an electric vehicle out by 2012

General Motors, for example, introduces its long-awaited, all-electric car, the Chevy Volt, later this year in Michigan, California, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Texas, and Washington, D.C.

The auto and light trucks will be in our communities. Additionally, we'll have more alternative fuel sources like (compressed natural gas) that aren't tied to how highways are funded.

Matt Mayer, president of the Buckeye Institute, a conservative research group in Columbus, says the key is to replace the gas tax, not add to it.

How to contact us

To submit or report news, Letters to the Editor, articles, news releases or to report corrections:

E-mail: bsankey@busandmotorcoachnews.com
 Fax: (405) 942-6201
 Mail: 3108 NW 54th Street
 Oklahoma City, OK 73112
 Call: (866) 930-8421

To subscribe or inquire about your subscription:

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To advertise or to mail advertising-related materials:

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To contact the United Motorcoach Association:

Call: (800) 424-8262
 Online: www.uma.org

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CBA supports 'warming' law measure

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — The California Bus Association is supporting a November ballot measure that would temporarily suspend the state's global warming law until the unemployment rate returns to 5.5 percent for a year.

Specifically, Proposition 23 would, for a time, block California's Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, also known as Assembly Bill 32, including its cap-and-trade program and low-carbon fuel standard.

AB 32 requires state regulators to cut green house gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, an estimated 15 percent or more reduction from current CO2 output.

While AB 32 does not directly impact motorcoach operators, it is the potential indirect and long-term effects of the law that prompted the CBA to publicly support its suspension until the economy improves.

In recent years, the California Air Resources Board has imposed a string of increasingly stringent emissions-reducing regulations on heavy-duty trucks and buses. These regulations have been driven primarily by federal Clean Air Act mandates to reduce NOx and

diesel particulate emissions.

An analysis of AB 32 and Proposition 23 by CBA consultant and long-time regulatory guru, Jim Seal, found that while AB 32 and CARB's truck and bus regulations are separate requirements, "both regulations are closely linked by the promoters of AB 32."

Seal concluded that AB 32 could result in surprises down the road for the motorcoach industry, including provisions that impact bus design, diesel engine fuel efficiency, and the cost of fuel.

"All of this activity will be driven on a daily basis by the professional environmental community demanding that state regulators take action and expand AB 32's reach," said Seal. "We experienced this in discussions with CARB staff. They are naturally susceptible to outside pressures when developing this type of regulation.

"The opposition to Prop 23 is understandable, given that AB 32 represents billions of dollars of wealth transfer from some private-sector companies to entities chosen and subsidized by state regulators.

"Our customers' ability to pay

for these hidden costs is of no concern to those trying to expand AB 32's reach into our sector," Seal observed.

"At minimum, AB 32's cap-and-trade program will target fuel production and refining (resulting in higher fuel prices). That is a cost increase that falls to the bottom line of every (CBA) member," he noted.

"Passage of Prop 23 will send a strong signal to the next governor, and state and federal regulators, that the economic effects of excessive regulations are unacceptable if we want to encourage job creation and cost-effective transportation choices — the backbone of our economy," Seal asserted.

Yes on 23, a statewide coalition of government officials and companies, including transportation, energy and forestry businesses, says Proposition 23 will save more than a million jobs that would otherwise be lost by sparing employers the cost of AB 32 compliance.

Conversely, the University of California law school at Berkeley claimed the proposition would create legal uncertainty, reduce state revenue and jeopardize clean energy jobs.

Three California operators win new 'STAR' awards

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Three California motorcoach operators have been named initial winners of a new safety award created by the California Highway Patrol.

The three operators, Thunderstar Stages of Santa Rosa, Pacific Coachways Trailways of Garden Grove, and Storer Transportation of Modesto, were presented the first-ever STAR Awards.

The award was set up by the CHP to recognize private motor carriers that make safety the top priority in their business operations. The name, STAR Award, stands for Safe Transportation Achievement Recognition.

The initial awards were presented during the CHP's 4th annual Commercial Vehicle Safety Summit late last month. CHP Commissioner Joe Farrow and Assistant Chief Janice Mulanix presented awards to the three coach companies and four trucking operations that "have maintained impeccable safety records."

McCloud and Picchi Enterprises, which does business as Thunderstar Stages, has been in business for six years, passing 12

consecutive CHP inspections in both tour bus and school pupil activity bus operations; Pacific Coachways, which has been around for 20 years, has passed 28 consecutive CHP inspections in tour bus and school pupil activity bus operations, and Storer Transportation, in business for 58 years, has passed 84 consecutive CHP inspections in tour bus, school pupil activity bus, and general public paratransit vehicle operations.

The STAR program has three categories for bus operators: 1-10 buses (Thunderstar), 11-25 buses (Pacific Coachways), and operators with 26 or more buses (Storer).

It has 11 scoring categories: Inspection history, citation history, collision history, miles driven, technology innovation, comprehensive policies for highway safety, training, achievements (awards), community service, number of years in industry, and worker's compensation claims.

Attending the awards ceremony was Anne Ferro, administrator of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

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FREIGHTLINER

MCI recalls coaches with potential window problem

SCHAUMBURG, Ill. — More than 1,000 motorcoaches built by Motor Coach Industries between 2001 and 2006 are being recalled because their side windows might become loose and fall or fly out.

The company initiated the recall after two of its customers reported that a window became detached from their coaches, included one who said the window flew off while the bus was in transit.

No one was injured in either incident, although the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration warned that people inside or outside of the bus possibly could get hurt.

The recall targets 1,087 coaches — 242 2001-04 E4500s, 29 2002-06 E4500Cs, 800 2001-05 J4500s and 16 2006 J4500Cs. The windows all carry the marking SE-GI for the name of the window supplier, SE-GI Products Inc. of Norco, Calif.

Owners of those coaches are being notified by MCI and corrective measures are being taken either by the coach manufacturer or individual operators.

Although the company made no mention of operators not using the affected buses until they are examined or fixed, it did urge them to inspect their coaches and have any needed repairs done as soon as possible.

According to MCI and SE-GI, the problem is believed to be due to the paint coating not properly adhering to the aluminum window frame, either because of insufficient paint curing or a chemical reaction between the paint and the window adhesive.

Operators can check their windows by pushing outward on the glass from the inside of the coach at points around the perimeter of the sash and then visually examining whether the glass separates

from the window frame.

“If the windows are not inspected in this way, a debonded window may detach from the coach without warning,” MCI notes in a report it filed with the NHTSA.

MCI said when it learned of the problem, it tested a number of coaches with SE-GI windows and found that about 15 percent of them showed some evidence of becoming loose.

After SE-GI suggested the possible cause of the problem, MCI began testing a number of retrofit kits to re-secure the windows to the coach, settling on a final repair procedure in July.

The repair involves removing the old inner seal and bonding the inner window laminated glass directly to the coach frame and securing them with retention clips.

MCI said individual operators may make repairs in their own shops or take them to an authorized

MCI service center. Those who perform the retrofit repairs are advised to study Service Bulletin No. 348, which was mailed to customers along with the recall notice.

The repair work, including parts and labor, is being paid fully by MCI.

The company said if the forward-most side windows on both the left and right sides of a coach, commonly referred to as the “pentagonal windows,” are affected, then MCI will replace them with new windows manufactured by a different supplier.

Operators needing further information or wanting to make arrangements to take their coaches to an MCI service center for repairs may call (800) 241-2947. Additional information about the recall is available by calling the NHTSA vehicle safety hot line at (888) 327-4236.

The MCI issue comes just

ahead of another recall involving bus windows that was issued in August by Micro Bird Inc. of Drummondville, Quebec.

The company said some of the windows on an undetermined number of minibuses, known as Girardin and Micro Bird by Girardin, do not comply with federal safety standards. The buses were produced between June 1, 2006, and Aug. 12, 2010.

According to NHTSA, the window handle base spacer plate on the slider and push-out windows on the minibuses could tear due to the rotation of the exterior window frame, and if that were to occur they could become inoperable or not restrain occupants in an accident. The agency said the company has not yet filed a plan to correct the situation.

More information can be obtained from MicroBird at (819) 477-2012.

New owner for MCI

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Speculation (finally) ends

The acquisition ends months of speculation that MCI was headed for new ownership.

Although MCI produces some of the top-selling motorcoaches in the industry, it has struggled over the past few years and voluntarily entered Chapter 11 bankruptcy two years ago. It completed a seven-month, court-supervised reorganization in April 2009, when Franklin Mutual took over the company through a debt-to-stock conversion and the issuance of \$200 million in new preferred shares.

Franklin Mutual also did not issue a statement concerning the sale, and its communications director, Stacey Johnston, said it would have none.

KPS, which was believed for some time to be interested in taking over MCI, has experience in the bus industry through its former ownership of once-struggling New Flyer Industries, the leading manufacturer of transit buses in North America.

New Flyer has its headquarters in Winnipeg, Manitoba, home of MCI's largest manufacturing center.

KPS acquired New Flyer in 2002 for an equity investment of \$27.5 million and sold it for about \$200 million less than two years later.

“The successful turnaround of New Flyer is a testament to the quality of dedication of the company's management and employees,” David Shapiro, a KPS partner, said at the time of the sale. “The New Flyer investment is a

great example of our investment strategy, working with management and employees to turn a struggling business into a financially stable market leader, while also generating a superior return for KPS investors.”

KPS' propensities

Although KPS declined to talk about its plans for MCI, documents on the company website stress it believes it can achieve superior investment returns by turning around underperforming businesses and it favors turnaround plans predicated on cost reduction, capital investment, capital availability and, in some situations, the introduction of new management.

The investment company pumped new life into New Flyer by changing management, cutting costs and improving efficiency.

The acquisition of MCI could be a boon for the company's union employees because of KPS' friendly relationship with labor organizations. KPS boasts on its website that labor unions have played a major role in its turnaround successes, noting that some of its investment opportunities have come directly from unions.

“KPS has worked constructively with most of the major industrial and service unions in the United States and Canada. We have sponsored many transactions in partnership with unions, and unions bring a significant number of quality investment opportunities to our attention every year.

“Unions work with KPS because of our respect for the collective bargaining process, our long history of working constructively

with unions in connection with difficult financial transactions and buyouts, and our successful track record in creating viable and profitable going concerns,” the company said.

Labor has responded favorably to KPS, too.

A favorite of AFL-CIO

The AFL-CIO has frequently praised the investment firm, pointing to its history of consulting workers about how to turn around a business, and noting that its goal is “building up companies instead of ripping them apart.”

The union rated KPS, in a study it conducted of private capital funds, as one of the most “worker friendly” in the country.

The relationship reportedly has worked well for both sides. In one instance, union workers at a paper products business agreed to a 15 percent reduction in compensation in exchange for 40 percent ownership of the company. KPS used the savings to modernize the company, resulting in even more savings.

Glen Tomchuck, president of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers Local 1953, which represents MCI employees in Winnipeg, said he knows little about KPS but has heard it works well with labor organizations.

“We're looking forward to meeting with their people to see what this is all about,” he said. “But it is a step in the right direction.”

Tomchuck said he has been in touch with union officials familiar with KPS' purchase of New Flyer and been told employees were treated well.

Dina, JLL, FMA, KPS

The KPS acquisition of MCI brings new ownership to a company that has regularly changed hands in the recent past. Founded as a regional bus manufacturer in Canada in 1933, the company was owned by Greyhound Lines from 1948 until the mid-1990s when it became an independent company.

Its independence was short lived, however. Consorcio G Grupo Dina of Mexico purchased the company in 1995. Then, in mid-1999, Joseph Littlejohn & Levy, a New York investment firm, acquired control.

JLL's ownership lasted until MCI's bankruptcy in 2008. When MCI emerged from bankruptcy, it had another new owner, a group of

investment funds managed by Franklin Mutual Advisers. Seven-months later KPS takes over.

Headquartered in Schaumburg, Ill., MCI is the largest manufacturer of over-the-road coaches in the U.S. and Canada. In addition to Winnipeg, it also operates a manufacturing facility in Pembina, North Dakota, plus seven sales centers and eight service centers in North America.

Bernstein, MCI's new chairman, previously served on the board of New Flyer. Currently, he is a director of five companies owned by KPS: WWRD Holdings, Attends Healthcare Inc., Bristol Compressors International Inc., Global Brass and Copper Inc., and North American Breweries Inc.

Operator fined for ADA violations

WASHINGTON — The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration and the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice have levied \$55,000 in fines against Tornado Bus Co. Inc. of Dallas for violating the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In addition to the fine, the consent agreement requires the bus company to upgrade its fleet to meet ADA requirements (i.e. install wheelchair lifts) by February 2011 or have its operating authority revoked.

“Every person deserves the right to travel freely and have equitable access to transportation services,” said Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. “This enforcement case sends a strong message that we will not allow commercial bus companies to shun their responsibility to oper-

ate fairly and safely.”

An investigation conducted by FMCSA revealed that Tornado had one accessible bus in a fleet of 53 buses, while ADA regulations require at least 50 percent of its vehicles be accessible.

The investigation also found the company had purchased new nonaccessible buses, failed to train employees on interacting with disabled passengers, and failed to establish a wheelchair lift-maintenance program.

“Adhering to ADA accessibility requirements is not a choice, but a high standard that every commercial bus operator must follow,” said FMCSA Administrator Anne S. Ferro.

“FMCSA will continue to work closely with the Department of Justice to vigorously enforce ADA compliance . . .”

Motorcoach Council needs 'votes' — every day this month

Denver, Colo. — U.S. congressional and statehouse elections are a month away but the nonprofit group that's promoting motorcoach travel to consumers needs your vote TODAY.

The Motorcoach Council, which is promoting coach travel throughout North America via its Get Motorcoachified campaign, is trying to win a \$250,000 grant from the Pepsi Refresh Everything Project.

Grant winners are selected through online voting and cell phone texting. The grant applicants with the most votes during October are awarded amounts up to \$250,000.

Pepsi is giving away a total of \$1.3 million to people, nonprofit organizations and businesses that have ideas that will positively impact their communities.

The Pepsi initiative is designed to fund ideas — big and small — that "help refresh the world." Each month, 1,000 "good ideas" are presented to the public for voting. Pepsi will provide grants to the ideas receiving the most votes.

The Motorcoach Council submitted an application for one of the grants and has been accepted for the voting cycle that begins Oct. 1 and ends Oct. 31.

The council is urging everyone with a connection to the motorcoach industry to go to www.RefreshEverything.com/GetMotorcoachified everyday during October and vote for its plan to promote green travel. Voting continues throughout the month and individuals can vote every day.

The council also hopes those who vote

will select the quick links found on the page to use Facebook and Twitter to promote voting.

"The council cannot (win one of the grants) without tremendous support from the motorcoach industry," said Motorcoach Council Chairman Brian Annett of Annett Bus Lines in Sebring, Fla.

"Help us help our industry develop more passengers and protect the environment by voting daily," said Annett. "Forward the links that are provided on the site to encourage everyone in your network to vote for our grant application, and encourage people... to vote each and every day of October."

If the council wins a grant it intends to use the money to help pay for a nationwide campaign that draws media attention to the

fact that motorcoach travel is the greenest form of transportation available to consumers.

"This is a unique way to fund this important industry initiative without industry partners writing a single check; all you have to do is go online and vote each day," Annett explained.

"You can even vote from your mobile phone. Just pick up the code at www.RefreshEverything.com/GetMotorcoachified and text it daily to 73774. It's easy and the benefits will extend to your business, the industry and the communities we live in," said Annett.

For more information about the council or the Get Motorcoachified program, go to www.MotorcoachCouncil.org.

FedEx wins latest challenge to driver classification

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — A federal judge has ruled that FedEx Ground drivers in Kansas are independent contractors and not employees, handing the company a victory in its ongoing litigation over the classification of its drivers.

In a separate ruling, Judge Robert Miller of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Indiana sent similar lawsuits by drivers in nearly a dozen other states back to state courts for further consideration.

"Although some facts weigh in favor of

employee status, after considering all the relevant factors, the court finds that the plaintiffs are independent contractors as a matter of law," Miller said in his ruling.

Miller noted that while FedEx can control "the results of the work — telling the worker what must be accomplished — [that] doesn't indicate employee status."

The Kansas lawsuit was brought by a handful of FedEx Ground drivers working in the state and is part of a larger, multistate suit that covers about 30,000 drivers in 40

states.

In a note to investors, analyst Ed Wolfe at the Wall Street research firm of Wolfe Trahan & Co. said the decision was "an important precedent" because it is the first determination on contractor status Miller has made. "Ultimately, it seems plausible that certain drivers/states will be classified as employees, while others (as contractors)," Wolfe wrote.

An attorney for the Kansas drivers expressed a similar view, saying the "upshot of

these two rulings means that drivers in some places will be legally employees and in other places, if the decision is not reversed, the drivers will be considered independent contractors."

"We have been following the FedEx contractor/employee story closely, and urge all bus and motorcoach companies to consult competent accounting and legal counsel before classifying employees," said Ken Presley of the United Motorcoach Association. "Missteps in this area can be very costly."



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Large movements

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

it,” said Bill Pippin of Cowtown Bus Charters in Fort Worth. “And I know several others who are talking about not working it, too.”

Instead of missing out altogether, though, Pippin already has lined up Super Bowl business with several of his long-time customers. His “end around,” he said, will allow him to get work from the event without having to work for the transportation management company the National Football League hired for the Feb. 6 championship football game, as well as pre- and post-game activities.

Most major events that require the movement of thousands of people, such as the Super Bowl, usually involve brokers or management companies that specialize in transportation and parking, including the utilization of dozens of private carriers.

Middlemen muck up jobs?

Pippin and others contend that it is these third-party companies that often are to blame for payment problems associated with large movements.

“Working with the big guys is not always smart business,” he said.

Jeff Polzein of Red Carpet Charters in Oklahoma City shares the concern, noting that most payment problems he has encountered while doing large movements have

involved brokers or middlemen who worked directly for the events.

“Not all brokers are bad, of course, but we have had problems with them in large movements,” he said.

Dale Krapf of Krapf Coaches in West Chester, Pa., said some brokers create even more problems than just payment issues.

He said they control the convention business in metro Philadelphia and frequently order a certain number of buses well ahead of a scheduled conference, and then, as often as not, reduce the order a few days before the event is to begin. Then, a day or two into the meeting, they frequently cut the number of coaches again.

“So then, because of their pie-in-the-sky estimates, the operators end up having their buses sitting when they probably could have sold them had they not been reserved for the convention,” he said. “We have a low-margin business to start with and if someone is going to suffer, we all know who that is — the operator.”

Presley said that while most brokers and other third-party contractors mean well, there often are significant complexities associated with executing large events that create problems for them.

“While your company may have executed flawlessly, remember you were only one part of a large event and the third party you are contracted with may have diffi-

culties resolving other issues and payment,” he noted. “When the third party cannot be paid there is a strong chance you will have difficulties obtaining your payments.”

Payment merry-go-round

Sometimes the third-party contractors don’t immediately get paid by the event organizers, and they don’t have enough reserve funds to pay the operators until they get their payments. In other cases, the third-party companies are slow or negligent in reconciling operator bills and hold off making payments until the last possible moment.

And, in a few incidences, operators have brought on their own problems by failing to keep accurate records of their work, or not filling out necessary forms and documents properly or on time.

Simply sending in a bunch of receipts with a rubber band around them is a recipe for slow reimbursement.

Despite the potential problems, many operators find large movements too attractive financially to pass up and worth the gamble.

But outside of getting paid fully in advance — a tough demand for large movements — operators have few options to protect themselves.

“Operators must understand when they do work without payment up front they become a creditor and an unsecured creditor at that,” explained Presley. “At that point they may find themselves

way down the list of those that get paid.”

He suggested that operators might consider forming a cooperative, similar to businesses such as Ace Hardware, True Value, Best Western and NAPA Auto Parts.

“While antitrust laws are always in play, there are many business models such as cooperatives that could facilitate operators pooling their resources to serve large events without a third-party,” he said.

Due diligence

Polzein recommended that operators learn as much as possible about the brokers or third-party companies they work with, including what other jobs they have done and their payment history.

“I know I’m going to do a much better job of checking out the middleman from now on,” he said.

Pippin agreed, stressing that operators who fail to investigate the businesses could find themselves being held hostage by someone who did not have their own operations in good order.

He suggested, too, that the management businesses and brokers be required to put the money budgeted for transportation in an escrow account in the name of each bus company working on the movement.

Also, he said upfront payments should be at least 25 percent of the total estimated bill, not the 10 per-

cent that many companies now pay at the start of an event.

“Bus operators as a whole need to start demanding better treatment,” he said.

Krapf said getting paid before doing the work is the best answer and short of that the creation of a consortium of operators could provide them some protection.

He said such an organization could be put together by operators in metro areas, such as Philadelphia, and they then could deal directly with convention planners rather than having to go through a third party.

“Or maybe UMA could form a consortium,” he said. “That might be a good thing for a national group to do.”

In the meantime, though, operators need to stand firm with their policies and understand that not getting a trip is not as bad as it could be, according to Presley.

“When you lose a trip because you are not comfortable with the credit risk you lost the profits associated with that trip. When you don’t get paid for services you provided on credit you not only lose the profits from that trip but the money you spent for drivers, fuel, maintenance, etc. and the opportunity to do a trip that would pay. It takes a lot of profitable trips to make up for those losses,” he said.

Calls to the bus management contractor for next year’s Super Bowl were not returned.

Internet marketing

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

and here’s where the practice gets questionable, also are placing ads that contain a name similar to that of a competitor and include an internet link that appears to belong to that competitor.

However, when someone clicks on the link, they are taken not to the website of the competitor, but rather to the company that placed the ad.

In those cases, according to the experts, legal help may be needed to tackle the problem.

Northwest Navigator of Portland, Ore., recently was the target of just such an ad campaign by one of its competitors.

The competitor purchased a Google ad using the key words “NW Navigator” and containing a link that appeared to be for Northwest Navigator. Even when someone searched for Northwest, or NW Navigator, the correct company came up as part of the search results, but the competitor’s ad with the objectionable link appeared at the top of the page.

And, when the link was clicked, it sent the potential customer to the website of the competitor.

“I don’t mind them advertising, but I won’t stand for them pretending to be us,” said Joe Gillis, a Northwest Navigator owner. “I won’t put up with that.”

Gillis contacted the company that placed the ad and managed to convince it to remove the ad.

“It’s down now, but we are going to be watching it closely to see that it doesn’t happen again,” he said.

Key word advertising is a big money maker for the search engine companies and is sold by all of them — Google, Yahoo, AOL and Bing. Google’s pricing is a bit higher, though, because it runs the top search engine, handling about 80 percent of the daily activity on the internet.

Elliott suggested that operators who take issue with an ad placed by a competitor — especially small companies that don’t have large advertising budgets — should contact executives of the company that placed the ad and try to persuade them to remove it.

If that doesn’t work, he said, then you’ll have to get out your checkbook and buy an ad of your own, using the same key words as your competitor is using.

“But then you’ll still have to

outbid them for the top spot if you want your ad to come up first,” he explained.

The position the ad appears on the search results page is dictated by the amount of money each buyer is willing to pay. The top bidder gets the top spot and companies listed lower down the chain can toss in a little more money and get moved up.

They then pay a certain amount each time someone clicks on the ad, which could make it difficult for businesses to know how much to budget because they never know how many hits they are going to get in a given period time.

Costs for key words used most often in the motorcoach industry vary greatly, ranging from as little as 40 cents a click to more than several dollars, depending mostly on the demand and popularity of the key words.

According to spyfu.com, an internet business that tracks the use of key words and provides cost per click and search volume statistics on them, the current cost for “bus” is 85 cents to \$1.02 a click, “coach” is 84 cents to \$3.53 a click, and “charter bus” ranges from 85 cents to \$3.64 a click.

Elliott said operators can man-

age their costs and possibly improve their hit numbers by targeting their ads so they appear only when someone from their area searches for something that includes the key words.

In addition, he said the ads also can be limited to certain days of

‘Blackberry app’ links Michelin users

DALLAS — Michelin is introducing a mobile tire dealer-locator application for Blackberry smart phones.

The application provides the location of the nearest Michelin commercial vehicle tire or service provider, as well as basic information about that location, from a hand-held Blackberry device.

Users also can call Michelin ONCall emergency road service directly from the application or search for a provider by category, including emergency road service, travel plazas, onsite tire service or retread providers.

The application can locate service providers based on the user’s GPS location or an entered location. It also gives users the ability to call the service provider or save the provider’s information to their device’s contacts or address book.

the week such as days an operator believes most people would be searching for a motorcoach.

Operators can find detailed information about key word advertising by visiting the web home pages of the various search engine companies.

Applications for Android and iPhones are expected to be introduced shortly.

Michelin says it also has enhanced its ONCall emergency road service — available by calling (800) TIRE-911.

“We now have direct contact with service technicians to ensure timely service of customers who need us, many times in the middle of the night,” said Clive Guest, emergency roadside service manager. “We’ve also implemented very clear service metrics, so our partners are accountable for their performance. The initial response has been very positive, with call volumes increasing significantly in a very short time.”

For more information on the Blackberry application or Michelin ONCall, go to www.michelintruck.com.

Technology can improve equipment utilization rates

By Dave Millhouser

We were standing in the boat's wheelhouse one dark night when I asked Captain "Titanic" Smith about a bright light on the horizon.

I call him "Titanic" because the captain of the Titanic was named Smith and I've always assumed they were related.

"It's Venus," he said.

"And that other bright light to the west?" I asked. "That's Venus" he replied.

Celestial navigation is not Titanic's strength, which is why we stay close to land. Despite his being descended from a maritime legend, it seemed important to point out that Venus could not be in two places at once.

Neither can motorcoaches, no matter how expensive and sophisticated they've become. As the price of coaches continues to rise and the economy remains sluggish, utilization of equipment is becoming more critical than ever.

Modern coaches are made to work hard, like a bull. Unfortunately, they're also like a bull in that they consume resources (mostly from your bank account)

whether they're working or not.

Take a look at the most-successful companies; almost invariably they excel at getting maximum use out of their coaches.

Many operate contract-type services that put coaches in place to do additional work during lulls in the action. A break-even commuter run becomes extremely profitable when combined with sightseeing or airport transfers. Many bid on contracts with the big picture in mind. They have to win the contract to make the supplemental work lucrative.

In rural areas, or smaller cities, optimizing the use of coaches can involve creative dispatching. There are efficiencies out there.

One key to accomplishing all this is technology. Years ago a customer told me he'd put dispatch radios in all his coaches. I asked if it was expensive. He answered by saying it was like increasing his fleet size by more than 10 percent. Ten buses could accomplish what 11 or 12 used to. In that context it was cheap.

Things are a lot better today. Modern coach management software can be a miraculous tool in

maximizing both equipment use and revenue in ways the big old ledger book never could.

With cell phones and GPS, even more magic is possible.

Back in the Stone Age my boss was about to dispatch a Scenicruiser on a 3,000-mile run with the clutch screwed tight. It was the only bus available...until miraculously one of our coaches returned to the garage hours earlier than expected.

A lot of emotional pain could have been avoided if we'd known he was coming...with GPS or a cell phone, we would have.

The latest software and technology is capable of diagnosing problems while the coach is under way, and letting your shop know in advance, so it can be ready to deal with issues quickly. Drivers on line runs can check in with passenger counts, sometimes enabling you to swap equipment in a beneficial way. All this is accomplished by training operations folks and drivers to think this way, and communicate.

It's usually cheaper to buy technology than buses.

Fleet size is becoming critical because no one can afford to have buses sitting around in hopes of

seizing opportunities. For many it's better to miss a few chances than to feed too many bulls.

There are a couple of ways to maximize usage. One is to be sure your fleet is versatile. You don't want to lose work because some of your buses lack normal amenities or seats. Nor do you want to be forced to send your rootin'-tootin' limobus to the circus with a kindergarten class.

You can work with other bus companies, swapping equipment as your high season meets their lows. Plus, there are suppliers out there with coaches available to help supplement your fleet.

There are no "mirror seasons" where you can send a bus away for a busy six months, and bring it back for six. Spring and fall are almost always busy everywhere, but there are peaks and valleys that can be explored.

Deal only with folks you trust in terms of quality and integrity... too many companies have seized opportunities over the years, and then not gotten paid, or had their reputation besmirched when the company they hired performed poorly.

Make sure they have appropri-

ate insurance because the customer contracted with you, and if something happens — guess where their lawyer will look?

Without enough insurance, your future is in the hands of their worst driver. Think about that.

One driver for Great Big Busline (GGB) managed to operate a charter business with minimal cost. He served his customers by simply "borrowing" a coach off the ready line, and running the trip, while pocketing all the money. Heck GGB even paid for the fuel.

The customers assumed it was a GGB charter, and all was well until he was late for a pickup, and the customer called GGB. For some years afterward, the state provided free room and board. He really knew how to gather freebies.

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



Dave Millhouser



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Calendar

SEPTEMBER 2010

29-30 BusCon Expo 2010, Chicago. Info: Go to www.busconexpo.com.

OCTOBER 2010

5 Bus & Motorcoach Academy Fall Semester Begins, Registration info: www.uma.org/academy.

5 Northwest Motorcoach Association Annual Meeting, Trade Show and Banquet, Clarion Hotel and Conference Center, Yakima, Wash. Info: Go to www.nwmotorcoach.com.

5 Are You Ready for CSA 2010? briefing, Cavalier Trailways, Boston. Info: Call Mass. Dept. of Public Utilities, (617) 305-3773 or (617) 305-3559 (Sylvia).

6 Northwest Motorcoach Association Bus Rodeo, State Fair Park, Yakima, Wash. Info: Go to www.nwmotorcoach.com.

12 North Carolina Motorcoach Association Picnic, Trolleys, Charlotte, N.C. Info: Go to www.nwmotorcoach.com.

23-26 California Bus Association Convention & Trade Show, Rancho Las Palmas Resort & Spa, Rancho Mirage, Calif. Info: Go to www.cbabus.com.

New CEO for largest U.S./Canadian bus operator

ABERDEEN, Scotland — Moir Lockhead, the man who assembled the largest bus operation in North America, is retiring after more than 21 years as chief executive of FirstGroup PLC and its predecessor company.

FirstGroup is the parent company of Greyhound Lines; Bolt-Bus; First Student, the largest school bus operator in the U.S., and First Transit, the largest manager of public transit agencies.

Other North American operations include First Services, which provides fleet maintenance, facilities management, and computer laptop mounting solutions, and First Canada, the leading provider

of school transportation, transit management and bus contracting services in Canada.

FirstGroup also has extensive bus and rail operations in the United Kingdom, where it originated. Its headquarters is in Aberdeen, while U.S. operations are based in Cincinnati, Ohio.

American Tim O'Toole, former managing director of the London Underground, will succeed Lockhead. O'Toole became FirstGroup chief operating officer and deputy chief executive two months after Lockhead turned 65 in April.

While British financial analysts described the management change as positive, the 55-year-old

O'Toole clearly faces challenges when he takes over Nov. 1.

The economic downturn has hit FirstGroup's U.S. operations. Cuts to public-sector and school budgets have hurt the school-bus business, where First Student has eliminated more than 5,000 jobs.

One London-based financial analyst told *The Wall Street Journal* that Lockhead had done a good job building the group but the outgoing chief executive "is widely seen as an obstacle to the restructuring the group needs, such as selling off underperforming businesses."

When FirstGroup acquired Laidlaw International and Grey-

hound in February 2007, it was widely believed it would attempt to spin off or sell Greyhound, whose returns have lagged behind other FirstGroup divisions. Three-and-a-half years later and Greyhound is still around and closely tied to FirstGroup America.

Lockhead, who will remain with FirstGroup until March 31, was responsible for FirstGroup's transformation from a management and employee buyout of Grampian Regional Transport in 1989, with 500 employees, into one of the world's largest passenger transportation operations with revenue of nearly \$9.5 billion and more than 130,000 employees.

People

FARIBAULT, MINN. — ABC Companies announced that *Clint Guth*, regional vice president and general manager of its Western region, also has been given responsibility for sales management of the Midwestern and Canadian regions.

The realignment of territory management resulted from a contract between ABC Companies and Greyhound Lines Inc., calling for ABC to refurbish 250 Greyhound motorcoaches. (See *June 1 Bus & Motorcoach News*.)

Lee Loper, former regional vice president and general manager of the Midwest region, is serving as vice president and general manager of the Nappanee (Ind.) Bus Refurbishment Center, which is handling the Greyhound project.

ABC and Greyhound conducted a ribbon-cutting ceremony late last month to officially kick off the first phase of the coach rehab project.

Guth is a 16-year veteran in the bus and motorcoach industry. Prior

to his employment with ABC, he held a director's position with a luxury motorcoach conversion company. He became regional vice president and general manager of ABC's Western region in 2007.

He currently serves on the board of the **California Bus Association**.

ELKHART, Ind. — **ASA Electronics**, a leading manufacturer and supplier of mobile audio and video equipment, has promoted

Joe Camacho to national OEM accounts manager for its commercial bus division.

In his new position, Camacho will be responsible for Jensen audio/video equipment and Voyager Blind Zone camera system sales and programs to bus OEMs, including motorcoach, transit, shuttle and school bus markets.

Camacho has been with ASA for four years in its commercial truck division.

Popular Chris Harrower dies in fire

REAMSTOWN, Pa. — Chris Harrower, a frequent and popular figure at state bus association meetings throughout the eastern U.S., was killed last month during a tragic fire at his home near here.

Mr. Harrower, 50, was pulled from his burning house by firefighters, but he did not survive and was pronounced dead at the scene.

A past member of the Pennsylvania Dutch Convention & Visitors Bureau board of directors and recipient of the CVB's 2005 Team Spirit Award, Mr. Harrower was group sales director for Dutch Apple Dinner Theatre in Lancaster, Pa., and previously worked for the Choo Choo Barn in Strasburg, Pa.

The fatal fire occurred around 4 a.m. and by the time firefighters arrived flames were ripping through much of the Harrower home. Within an hour, the house was totally consumed and the family left homeless. Reamstown is 50 miles east of Harrisburg, off the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

Firefighters believe Mr. Harrower had gone back into the master bedroom of the flame-engulfed house to help his wife, Linda. Mrs. Harrower was rescued by firefighters but was critically injured.

Five of the couple's seven children were in the home and escaped the fire safely.

The Harrowers' 20-year-old daughter, Bethany, helped two of her younger siblings out of the house, while Courtney Harrower, 12, broke out a bathroom window so she and her brother, Jonathan, 14, could climb onto a roof area.

"This was one of the most wonderful people in the travel and tourism industry," said Victor Parra, president and CEO of the United Motorcoach Association, of Harrower. "I was just with him...at the Virginia Motorcoach Association convention. He was always so upbeat and positive, willing to help anyone, anytime."

Parra's views were shared by many who said the tourism industry had lost a passionate colleague and friend.

Tom Groff, founder of the Choo Choo Barn, observed that "Chris and I both had a zany personality and clicked from day one. In the six years he worked for us he worked very hard to get us into the group travel industry. Because of his outgoing personality, he became very well known with group leaders and tour operators as 'that guy from the Choo Choo Barn,' moving on to be 'that guy from Dutch Apple.'

"His reputation quickly earned him a name in the group business and his presence representing Lancaster County will be sorely missed."

Chris Barrett, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Dutch CVB, described Mr. Harrower as "always so positive and supportive of the CVB and myself, personally. I feel his loss as I would a family member. He would want us to soldier on and continue to make the Lancaster County guest experience the best that it can be. I know that he'll be with us always."

Through his association with Dutch Apple Theatre, Mr. Harrower was active with many state motorcoach organizations, including the New England, Pennsylvania and Virginia bus associations, as well as the Greater New Jersey, Maryland, North Carolina, Florida and Tennessee motorcoach associations.

He also was active with several national coach industry groups.

In addition to his wife and seven children, Mr. Harrower is survived by two brothers, Gordy and Tim.

A fund has been established to assist the Harrower family with medical costs, housing, and family-related expenses. The fund address is: Fulton Bank, Chris Harrower Family Fund, 727 Olde Hickory Rd., Lancaster, PA 17601.

Donations to aid the Harrower children, who have been taken in by their oldest, married sister, are being accepted by the Mohn's Hill Evangelical Congregational Church, 708 Mohn's Hill Rd., Reading, PA 19608. Gift cards to national stores, like Wal-Mart, and restaurant chains also have been suggested.

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