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City to Buy Diesel-Electric Buses, Not Natural Gas Ones

By [SEWELL CHAN](#)

New York City Transit, which has been under pressure for years to reduce harmful emissions from its bus fleet, has decided to buy hybrid-electric buses instead of those that use compressed natural gas, a significant shift in its strategy for gradually replacing diesel fuels with cleaner ones.

The decision, to be presented for the first time tomorrow, suggests that the agency will no longer buy both types of clean-fuel vehicles and will focus entirely on the hybrids, which run on diesel and electricity. Hybrid buses began running as a pilot project in September 1998 and entered regular service in April 2004. So far, 325 hybrid buses, or 7 percent of the total fleet of 4,512, have been ordered. Now, the agency hopes to buy up to 500 more.

Officials have argued that the gas vehicles require expensive maintenance facilities and that the hybrid buses are just as clean. But the shift away from compressed natural gas could be controversial. In 1998, Gov. George E. Pataki promised to convert the huge Manhattanville Bus Depot into a compressed natural gas center, a decision supported by West Harlem residents who believed that diesel bus depots had contributed to high rates of childhood asthma, other respiratory ailments and cancer.

Five of the six active Manhattan bus depots are north of 96th Street. In 2000, a local advocacy group, West Harlem Environmental Action, filed a civil rights complaint with the United States Department of Transportation, arguing that the disproportionate concentration of depots amounted to discrimination and environmental racism.

This month, the department, which has jurisdiction because the transit agency gets federal grants, formally closed the case, saying that it had not found evidence of discrimination. But it upheld some of the environmental group's concerns, said Peggy M. Shepard, the organization's executive director.

In an interview yesterday, Ms. Shepard said the group was still negotiating with the transit agency over greater environmental controls at the five depots and participation by community representatives who live near them.

Transit officials first hinted last year that they might renege on the 1998 pledge, saying that cleaner diesel technologies had made the \$50 million conversion unnecessary. The agency has two compressed natural gas depots: the Jackie Gleason Depot in Brooklyn and the West Farms Depot in the Bronx.

Ms. Shepard did not directly criticize the proposal to stop buying compressed natural gas buses. "We do understand that C.N.G. and hybrid diesel buses are measuring about the same level in terms of emissions," she said. "But without an agreement in place on a variety of environmental measures that we want them to implement in Harlem, I cannot say we are not opposed."

A transit agency spokesman, Paul J. Fleuranges, said he could not discuss the matter until the proposal

was presented tomorrow to the New York City Transit committee of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's board. The board is scheduled to vote on the matter at its monthly meeting on Thursday.

Ms. Shepard added that she was surprised to learn that the board might vote on the proposal so soon. "We had no way of knowing that they were moving ahead with it this week," she said. "My concern is that they have not gone to the community at large to tell them anything about this."

A summary of the proposal, which a board member provided to The New York Times, details New York City Transit's intention to reallocate money that had been budgeted for 120 compressed natural gas buses and 55 extra-long diesel buses. The money would instead be used for 100 hybrid-electric buses, with an option to buy 400 more in the future, and 20 extra-long hybrids.

New York City Transit's clean fuel bus program, begun in June 2000, has relied on both gas and hybrid buses, but the gas buses require special facilities and equipment - like compressors, maintenance bays and fueling stations - that are expensive to build and maintain.

Compared with the compressed natural gas buses, the hybrids have better fuel economy and equal or lower emissions, the agency's chief maintenance officer for buses, John P. Walsh, said in a recent interview.

The buses, which have rear diesel engines as well as lead-acid batteries mounted on the roof, cost \$125,000 to \$200,000 more than regular diesel buses, but are expected to make up for the added expense through savings on fuel, he said. He added that the buses were quiet and easy to operate and braked smoothly.

Of the 325 hybrid buses that have been ordered, 65 are at the Mother Clara Hale Depot, also in Harlem; 60 are at a depot in Middle Village, Queens; 135 will be assigned to a depot in Fresh Pond, Queens; and 65 will be assigned to the Manhattanville depot, which is on West 133rd Street between Broadway and the Henry Hudson Parkway.

In addition to buying clean-fuel buses, the agency started using ultra-low-sulfur diesel fuel on its entire diesel fleet in September 2000. By the end of this year, it plans to retire two-stroke diesel engines, which produce some of the highest levels of pollution, and to retrofit all diesel buses with particulate filters, which trap the minute fragments of soot that have been linked to respiratory and other illnesses.