

Clean Buses Mean No More Dirty Black Soot



Publisher: North Gate News Online
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 Date: September 27, 2006

TREASURE ISLAND- San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom stood balanced atop a ladder at the rear end of a public transit bus. After holding a crisp white handkerchief to the exhaust pipe poking out of the top of the bus, he asked, "Where's all the black stuff?"

Publicity stunt? Yes...but one worth noting. Newsom, regional transit and environmental officials gathered on Treasure Island Tuesday to celebrate a program that is slashing the amount of harmful exhaust that spews from public transit buses.

By year's end, public transit agencies from San Jose to San Francisco to Vacaville will install diesel exhaust filters on more than 1,700 buses—more than half of the regional public transit fleet, according to Metropolitan Transportation Committee officials.

The exhaust filters trap 85% of the black "soot," called particulate matter by scientists and regulators. The Bay Area Air Quality Management District estimates that that this retrofit will catch more than 50 tons of the particulate matter annually.

In 1998, the California Air Resources Board labeled diesel exhaust particulate matter as a toxic air contaminant. Two years later, they introduced new emissions standard meant to cut particulate matter in diesel exhaust by 75% over a decade.

Public transit agencies, which rely on diesel-powered vehicles, found themselves in a tough place. While cleaner burning diesel engines had come to market, agencies like the San Francisco Municipal Railway already owned buses expected to run 20 years.

"It's a double-edged sword, the durability," said Michael Coates, spokesman with the Diesel Technology Forum, a coalition of diesel industry manufacturers and technology companies. The long life of buses makes it nearly impossible to keep up with new technology.

The exhaust filter provides a cost effective way for transit providers to meet environmental goals without breaking the bank on a new fleet. A new bus, with a cleaner-burning engine, cost roughly \$140,000, but the exhaust filtering system runs only \$18,000.

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San Leandro-based Cleaire developed the exhaust filters in 2001, and the MTC began a regional plan to install the filters starting in 2003. Cleaire Chief Technology Officer Brad Edgar said the retrofit program has taken nearly three years to complete because the filter installation process takes a bus out of commission for two days.

The exhaust filters also require a new ultra-low sulfur blend of diesel fuel, which only recently became widely available in California. Before September 1, when the new blend became standard in the state, local refineries were only producing small amounts of the newer fuel.

Cleaire president Kevin Shanahan said, as a local company, they were glad to help improve the local environment. "We live here, work here, and most importantly we breathe the air here." #