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LOCAL NEWS

Mason County looking at electric buses



A company brought this 30-foot electric bus to Mason Transit Authority for a demonstration. The agency is working with the state Department of Transportation to obtain a grant to purchase a 35-foot electric bus.

By Arla Shephard Bull, Special to the Kitsap Sun

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BELFAIR — In 18 months, if all goes according to plan, Mason County transit users could ride the county's first electric bus.

Mason Transit Authority will join a statewide effort led by the Department of Transportation to procure electric buses

for transit agencies in rural communities, with funding from the Federal Transit Administration.

"We are excited about the possibility of purchasing an electric bus," said Dannette Brannin, the agency's acting general manager. "Electric buses help reduce greenhouse emissions. We want to do our best in providing environmentally safe and friendly options that keep Mason County green."

The funds would pay for the procurement of the bus, as well as the equipment, training, tools and infrastructure needed to support the new addition.

"This is an opportunity that fell into our lap," said Christina Fremont, the agency's outreach manager. "The grant includes infrastructure, such as charging stations, which is huge. The state recognized that small rural agencies like ours can't always go after buses like these ourselves."

Mason Transit has waited to purchase an electric bus in part because of high costs and the understanding that the technology would improve over time.

"Years ago when we first looked at electric buses, the technology was too expensive," Fremont said. "Technology has been moving so fast that the parts for the buses are more affordable now and more companies are interested in making them, which drives down the cost."

Other agencies that invested millions into electric buses years ago encountered problems with the emerging technology, Fremont added.

"The technology is only going to get better," she said. "Rather

than buying cutting-edge buses years ago, we decided we'd rather wait until the product was perfected so we know it can deliver."

Brannin expects that Mason Transit will save about \$26,000 in fuel costs each year, recovering its investment in about two years. The purchase also is a step toward meeting the governor's mandate requiring government entities move toward alternative fuels by 2018.

"While an electric bus costs more than the diesel option, the cost difference is quickly recaptured through fuel and maintenance savings," she said. "We hope to have a beautiful electric bus rolling into MTA in approximately 18 months."

Riders will enjoy the quietness and smooth ride of the bus as well, she said.

Mason Transit board member John Campbell recalled riding electric-powered streetcars in Portland in his youth.

"This sets a precedent and the direction of transportation for the future," he said. "Now we're catching up to the best part of the past while looking toward the future."

Kitsap Transit tried out an electric bus on various Bremerton routes in June 2014 and put another model through the paces three months later. According to its draft long-range plan, it would plan for electric bus infrastructure and install support systems between now and 2020, then buy electric buses in 2021-25.

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