

Next year a quarter of the Fowlerville Community Schools' buses used for daily student transportation will sound and smell a bit different from the rest of the fleet. As the result of a grant through the Department of Environmental Quality, the district will be purchasing five buses rather than the usual one to two annually and all five of the new buses will run on liquid propane (LP) rather than diesel.

The grant, formally titled the Fuel Transformation Program Volkswagen State Mitigation Trust School Bus Replacement Grant, incentivizes the purchase of new, lower-emissions buses to replace older buses. To qualify for the grant, schools need to replace daily-use buses from model year 2009 or older with new buses, permanently retiring the old buses from service. The new buses must meet or exceed specific emissions standards. In exchange, the grant will provide a reimbursement of approximately \$120,000 for the purchase of the buses.

Low-emissions diesel buses were also eligible for grant funding, but the district opted to use the funds to pilot LP buses. "It will give us quieter buses and lower emissions," said Fowlerville Superintendent Wayne Roedel. "They provide a cleaner alternative and will save energy and maintenance time in the winter because our mechanics won't have to pre-warm the engine (electrically) and/or start them prior to drivers arriving." Those steps are required for diesel buses when temperatures drop below 20 degrees Fahrenheit.

"The only drawback is lower mileage (per gallon of fuel) for propane buses," said Transportation Director Linda James. Much of the difference in fuel economy is offset by the difference in the cost of a gallon of LP as compared to diesel. There are also financial incentives currently available to further reduce the cost per gallon of propane.

The LP buses will require some changes to the transportation facility. "We need to install a cement pad for the tank with crash posts, electrical availability, and fueling stations," explained James. "We are working on bids for the tank and installation. There are several propane dealers in the area."

The buses will be purchased from Midwest Transit Equipment, headquartered in Marshall, Michigan. Midwest Transit provided further incentive for transitioning to LP buses by making them available for approximately the same cost as their International IC diesel buses that the Fowlerville district has purchased for the past decade.

It is too soon to say whether this is the start of a full transition to LP buses or whether the pilot will prove the transition too costly to continue. Roedel said that the decision "depends on our experience with the five new propane buses. We will review this project at six months and after a year to determine if we will continue to diversify our fleet with propane buses or continue purchasing the most fuel-efficient diesel buses. Long term, the cost of propane could be higher than our diesel fuel rates." Such financial costs could prompt a return to diesel, but the superintendent hopes that will not be the case. "Many districts are trying to become more green to protect the environment," he said. The propane buses are a step in that direction for the Fowlerville district.