

# Hybrid buses are the expensive route for local transit

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by Gordon Tomb

The Capital Area Transit Authority is buying 11 hybrid buses for \$5.9 million, nine of them paid for by federal stimulus funds. If not for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, CAT would not be getting the buses, which are to be delivered in May.

"We've had customers and members of the public asking us to buy hybrids, but we would not have been able to purchase them without the stimulus funds," CAT Executive Director Jim Hoffer says.

That's because a \$540,000 hybrid bus costs 50 percent more than a standard diesel bus. Among the benefits CAT lists for the hybrid are 25 percent better fuel economy and lower maintenance for such things as brakes. But CAT hasn't established a payback period for the \$190,000 premium each bus commands.

Gillig Corp., the California manufacturer of the CAT buses, says payback typically comes a bit more than halfway through the 12-year life of a bus. However, there are plenty of caveats. Future fuel costs and operating conditions are major ones. Six times the size of the Toyota Prius's, the hybrid's \$45,000 battery, which needs a replacement after six to seven years, is a factor in overall maintenance costs.

Since 2002, Gillig has sold 1,000 hybrids, which comprises 25 percent of its business. Joe Policarpio, Gillig's vice president of sales and marketing, says, "We've had a good experience with hybrids. Many have 200,000-300,000 miles on them."

Yet it is doubtful that hybrids would be used as widely, if at all, without taxpayer funds.

Policarpio looks to the renewal of a federal transportation bill that expired in 2009 to resume funding of local transit authorities and engender continued growth of Gillig's hybrid business. Patrick Michaels, senior fellow in environmental studies at the Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C. think tank, says "I'm not so sure that this bus could roll on its own four wheels without a push from the government."

A skeptic of hybrids myself, I've scratched my head over people buying a Prius after viewing "An Inconvenient Truth," the work of Al Gore, our nation's environmental "doofus laureate" who has credibility with hardly anybody with a scintilla of common sense but still is referenced by the smarter-than-everybody crowd as though his work still matters.

Claims that hybrids reduce greenhouse gases — even if that still matters after Climategate and other embarrassments — fail to take into account that the buses they replace likely will operate elsewhere. Similarly, such claims seem to ignore the so-called carbon foot print of the manufacture, maintenance and disposal of the 600-volt electrical system — battery, motors and cables.

Government subsidies for technology are promoted as a means to advance important technologies that would fail otherwise. Yet there were virtually no subsidies for the many wonders developed from the late 1860s to early 1900s, a period that historian Vaclav Smil says remains "the greatest technical watershed in human history."

The development of the internal combustion engine, modern electrification, inexpensive high-quality metals and synthetic ammonia rested on the initiative, imagination and investments of private individuals. These products are largely taken for granted today, none more than synthetic ammonia, which led to inorganic fertilizer and the saving of hundreds of millions from starvation.

The fascination with hybrids seems more of a passing fancy that will run its course, perhaps

quickly given the austere mood of the electorate. Smil writes that there is no better example of repeated failures to predict the demise of an established technology than the electric motor's supposed imminent supplantation of the internal combustion engine. That prognostication goes back to Thomas Edison, whose recipe for genius was lots of perspiration and a pinch of inspiration. In this case, he probably also needed a boatload of subsidies.

**Gordon Tomb, a freelance writer residing in New Cumberland, is director of energy affairs for the PA Coalition for Responsible Government. He will be writing a guest column through June.**