

ASTV Stakeholder Meeting Attendees June 8th, 2006

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Orlando, FL Meeting Notes

Walt Kulyk, FTA Director for the Office of Mobility and Innovation opened the meeting with an overview of his department along with an update of previous meetings regarding the Advanced Small Transit Vehicle (ASTV) study and its purpose. Mr. Kulyk mentioned that the industry will be facing new challenges in the near future, including stricter emissions standards. It is important to take the opportunity to identify the needs and wants necessary to adapt to the new market. This is a resilient industry, but assistance may be needed to provide the best service possible. Mr. Kulyk reminded everyone that this was an informal session and the goal was to gain input from all attendees. Further input is always appreciated, even after the meetings, in writing or phone calls to the project contacts. In addition to the meetings, there will also be a survey of transit agencies, followed by a thorough cost benefit analysis of advanced vehicle technologies. This will lead to a decision point about a year from now in which the FTA will determine their role in the developmental process. The possible involvement of FTA would be to provide support to the industry, and act as a catalyst for new technologies. A possible deliverable from the FTA would be a “white book” (summary of best procurement practices or standard procurement guidelines, including technical specifications) or published functional specifications for a vehicle.

The attendees went around and introduced themselves, the organization they are with and their involvement in small urban and rural transit. It was mentioned that the group of attendees did not include any operators, and that input from those who will be working with the vehicles on a daily basis would be useful to the project.

Del Peterson, Associate Research Fellow with the Small Urban & Rural Transit Center (SURTC), gave an overview of the ASTV Issues Paper. He highlighted a sample of the current inventory of small transit vehicles in the U.S. by manufacturer, model year, and length of vehicles. A Hemily and King (2002) survey table emphasizing issues and concerns with current small transit vehicles was discussed.

Mike Molloy, FTA Engineer, presented background information on the ASTV project. A survey has been prepared for distribution and will be circulated through CTAA membership later this month to gain transit agency feedback regarding their needs for a more cost effective small transit vehicle. Issues with current small transit vehicles that were mentioned included poor fuel economy, accessibility, and safety issues. FTA’s goal to assist the industry in moving forward towards a more reliable and efficient small transit vehicle was Mike’s main objective. He mentioned the ASTV market study would involve heavy cost/benefit analysis of a proposed vehicle to determine its feasibility within the industry. Possible vehicle solutions presented included the Daimler Chrysler Sprinter van, which currently does not meet Buy America standards, the Gruau Microbus, which is a diesel electric hybrid bus developed in Belgium for suburban Paris with a low floor and a ramp at the rear of the bus, and the Brevi Bus developed in Florida which has five prototypes in development which also has a low floor design. Mike highlighted twelve points that were discussed at the last stakeholder meeting, during the APTA Bus and Paratransit conference. These included the cost differential of low floor vehicles, state

control of 5310 funding, the lack of a “white book” for small vehicles, and the success of cutaway transit vehicles based on riding the commercial truck market. The goal of this meeting was to determine the best product and objective of the ASTV project.

Santo Grande, executive director of Delmarva Community Services, began the general discussion. He emphasized the limits caused by state control of 5310 funding. This project arose from the issue of identifying an effective, flexible vehicle for small urban and rural transit that is useful for ADA and paratransit needs. There will be more funding for these areas, and more coordination of services under the new SAFETEA-LU. Input is needed to identify the needs of transit providers and what limits their flexibility. Many providers are given a “shopping list” of vehicle options by the state. This would be improved by including the types of vehicles that would provide the safest and most efficient service as options for providers.

The state DOT in Iowa has a narrow view of FTA guidelines. Providers in Iowa would like to have more say in what vehicles are purchased. They would prefer to have the basic requirements of the vehicle listed, then be allowed to work with manufacturers on their own to develop the best vehicle for their needs. This would not necessarily be a low-bid process, but would provide vehicles better suited to their applications. Currently, they are forced to run cutaway vehicles for 10-12 years.

Another common complaint is with Head Start transportation, and the FMVSS school bus requirements that apply to the Multi-Function School Activity Bus (MFSAB). These pose a significant barrier to service coordination. This program has highlighted the largely unknown, and generally ignored, safety requirements to transporting school children, even in limited situations. In order for agencies to efficiently coordinate transportation, legal issues must be clearly identified, and streamlined to remove perceived barriers. Converted passenger vans have been banned from use for Head Start transportation due to safety concerns. NHTSA has issued multiple warnings on the use of vans for transit, but the FTA still funds a large number of vans every year. GAO will be releasing a report on Head Start transportation soon. It is important not to ignore seniors in this discussion, as they are as vulnerable a population as children. Sufficient safety requirements are necessary for transit vehicles. Most agencies purchase vans based on price considerations.

One reason larger vehicles have longer lifetimes is that parts tend to move slower. In smaller vehicles, mechanisms have to move faster, and wear out sooner. Automobile makers spend billions of dollars verifying vehicles before bringing them to market. The big 3 manufacturers thoroughly test new developments in their vehicles. Conversion companies cannot compete with the billions spent by the big 3. They operate by cutting and adding parts to a production vehicle, verified by one of the auto manufacturers. Vehicles from an OEM will always be more reliable than these. Additionally, off the line vehicles will have parts and maintenance readily available. One agency reported they are currently rebuilding several E450 transit conversions due to rusted frame rails and crossmembers. It is important for cutaway vehicles to have crossmembers that cover the entire width of the body. Partial crossmembers will inherently cause vibration and instability. Some of these problems come direct from assembly of the converted vehicles. As maintenance issues arise, there is “finger-pointing” and aversion of responsibility from the different companies involved in producing the final vehicle. What the agency needs is a reliable,

solid body-on-chassis vehicle, with components that will last a useful amount of time. There are transit vehicles in Europe that have adopted half low floor configurations. This provides the benefit of increased accessibility at a lower cost than a full low floor vehicle. The vehicle should also be easy to work on, so mechanics don't have to be specially trained. The ability to amortize the vehicles would be helpful, especially as 5310 focuses more on coordination.

It has been difficult for transit providers to work with the big 3 on maintenance issues. The manufacturers view the operator as a local shop. The operators need some force, maybe legislative or regulatory, to improve communication with the manufacturers. Even the ability to use diagnostic information stored on-board the vehicle is difficult. This creates a barrier to adopting new technology. Agencies are reluctant to try purchase new technologies without knowing they will have access to long term maintenance. This is seen as an investment in the new technology, and can be risky, especially with newer or smaller companies. A state DOT mentioned they do not run a maintenance department. It was also mentioned that using unauthorized parts, even if they are the only available options, will void warranties.

Azure Dynamics has created a hybrid chassis for transit applications. They have been in the field for 15 years and have 60 full time engineers. They are working with Workhorse/International for maintenance. An operator stated that the FTA needs to provide assistance and incentives for employing new technologies. Another provider also does not have any mechanics and has maintenance problems. The local dealers did not sell the vehicles and is resistant to work on them. No company is willing to take responsibility for maintenance, especially of components and interfaces. The state DOT's, who actually purchased the vehicles in some cases, do not provide any help with assigning maintenance.

There has been limited experience with hybrid technology in transit so far, even in full size buses. Hybrid drive can allow a full size bus to be run by a Ford V10 engine. So far, reports have shown that there is less maintenance in running hybrids. The replacement cost of the engine is also significantly less. The maintenance departments have not found a need for specialized mechanics either. As fuel cell and other technology enters the market this may be an issue, but it is not for hybrids. Hybrid drive technology is over 75 years old, and started in locomotives. The only difference from a normal diesel engine is the addition of a battery. The core technology is long proven in that industry.

A conversion company discussed how they work with several other manufacturers and have to deal with maintenance being passed around as well. Help is needed for small operators with few mechanics. Also, when agencies, or state DOT's, purchase new vehicles, they should have technical advice in creating the specifications. Often, the person writing the spec does not have the knowledge or experience necessary to obtain the best vehicles. There are situations in which an agency would be best served by a \$60,000 vehicle, but the state is only willing to spend \$30,000. The price difference is irrelevant if the vehicle doesn't fill the needs of the agency.

A lot of maintenance problems are with components, perhaps even more than problems with the vehicle itself. One coordinated provider has a road supervisor who is a retire police officer involved in vehicle, including school bus, inspections. They are now having problems purchasing new vehicles and dealing with the state DOT. The road supervisor has significant

experience in vehicle specifications, and the DOT employee writing the specs is new to the industry.

An example of a problem with state assigned vehicles is with the lifts. When state DOT's purchase vehicles, they may select a different model every year. This forces the maintenance departments across the state to know all the lift models in use. The method of assignments is not appropriate either. There is a long and convoluted process and assignments are not made by type of vehicle or service. Generally, the state purchases the cheapest vehicle available and fills orders across the state as much as possible, solely by number of vehicles needed. Providers try to accomplish as much as possible with the vehicles they have. One group delivers food in its 14 passenger vehicles during its downtime. They are not allowed to buy vehicles designed for Meals On Wheels that will also be used for transit. They operate under 5307 because they are in an urban area, but are attempting to accomplish the United We Ride (UWR) objective of coordinating services. A group in Virginia has found that delivering meals to a church parking lot for local distribution can improve the process. Under the state controlled 5310 funding, providers in Virginia are allowed to add options to vehicles, but they must pay the full cost differential.

It was suggested that FTA needs to shift its focus away from low-bid. One of the reasons transit and bus manufacturing are successful in Europe is that they focus on quality and needs. There is currently no incentive in the US to produce an advanced or high quality product. Manufacturers will only provide the most cost effective products. More options are needed to best serve the industry. FTA should work with manufacturers to help agencies get the correct vehicle for their application. Manufacturers need motivation or assistance to get involved with ROI's for new vehicle specs. FTA should be more assertive with the states in the use of capitals funds, especially in working with UWR. GAO will be publishing its Head Start transportation report soon. One of the questions they asked was would the manufacturer find it easier to design a specialty vehicle (like the MFSAB) if NHTSA stated they would allow transit components in addition to the school bus requirements. The answer was a strong "yes", and they admitted they put the agency through a three year test to ensure they were addressing all the regulations. Government agencies need to allow transit providers flexibility to work with manufacturers. They also need to provide information to both providers and manufacturers to avoid creating such a long process to develop a vehicle. Providers should develop experience in vehicle specs and work with manufacturers during the engineering stages. Instead of looking at low-bid solutions, the entire life-cycle should be considered. Factors such as useful life should be included in the purchasing decisions. One provider felt that most of these problems could easily be solved by the combined efforts of the attendees of this meeting.

The issue of developing a white book for small transit vehicles was raised. Many attendees felt this would be helpful in meeting agency and manufacturer needs. The current white book specs are recommendations, not requirements. Performance based specifications for 40foot buses have been developed, but similar specifications for less than 30-foot vehicles have not. No one has ever lead the effort to develop different specifications for small transit vehicles.

Another good point that was made was that the only way the industry will be able to meet the needs discussed within this study in the short run is to alter an already mass produced vehicle

which would lower cost compared to specialty vehicles and provide some name recognition to transit agencies. Also, the service parts will be available for an altered small transit vehicle that is already mass produced. Transit agencies will have to ask specifically for such features as low-floor and hybrid technologies on their buses because state DOTs will not include these features themselves when purchasing vehicles. Agencies must make DOTs aware that there is a demand for these features because the DOTs are not service providers and may be unaware of these needs.