# Chesterfield adds 20 propane-powered school buses to fleet

**By LOUIS LLOVIO Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Wednesday, February 10, 2016 10:30 pm**

Propane-powered school buses have started rolling out in Chesterfield County.

The school system has introduced 20 of the buses in the past week, with the last five entering service Tuesday afternoon.

These new buses, as well as two purchased last year, cost the county less for fuel and maintenance compared with diesel buses while also being environmentally friendly, school officials say. Still, the price is about $5,000 higher per vehicle, with the propane-powered buses costing the county about $95,000 each.

“We have evolved so much,” said Linda Ramey, a Chesterfield bus driver for 19 years who picked up her new bus a week ago.

She said she remembers driving buses that required double clutching, had no radios and were so loud you could barely think.

The new bus is quiet, allowing her to hear students in the back, and can go much longer distances between fill-ups. And the propane means she no longer has to clean diesel soot coating the inside.

“As time has gone on, they’ve realized buses are like automobiles,” she said.

The 20 new propane buses are part of a larger effort by Chesterfield schools to update an aging fleet. About one-third of the 607 buses are older than 15 years.

The first step was taken last year when the school system bought 21 replacement buses using $2 million in funding from the fiscal year 2015 budget.

For fiscal year 2016, the school system’s budget calls for replacing many of its older buses by leasing 100 diesel buses that will be put on the road beginning in the spring.

A second part of the plan calls for using operational funds and maintenance savings, along with other money, over the next several years to continue replacing the buses.

The 21 buses bought last year included two propane-powered ones that were used as a test.

Jeffery L. Jeter, fleet manager for Chesterfield’s Department of General Services, said that compared with traditional buses, the two propane buses cost the county about $3,000 less in fuel while they were in service for six months last year.

One reason propane-powered buses save the county money is because of the state and federal rebates available, including up to $10,000 per bus, he said. Rebates help make the cost of propane an average of 56 cents less per gallon than diesel.

Jeter said another benefit of using propane is that the cost of maintaining the vehicles is considerably less expensive; diesel vehicles require more upkeep to meet EPA standards, and the cost for parts is far higher.

“Propane buses have none of that,” Jeter said. “It’s basically a gasoline engine that’s been manufactured to run propane.”

Robert P. Wingfield, the school system’s director of public transportation, said that despite the price difference, the propane vehicles end up costing the county less over the years.

“In the short run they’re a little more expensive, but with the rebates and the fuel and maintenance savings they pay for themselves in a very short period of time,” Wingfield said.

The school system purchased the propane buses, manufactured by Blue Bird, from Carter Machinery.

According to a study from the U.S. Department of Energy, schools systems began using propane buses years ago. But in the early 2000s, the only company building them stopped doing so.

“The recent introduction of new school bus product lines with improved engine technologies has revitalized interest in propane as a low-cost option for school bus fleets,” according to the 2014 study. “These new buses incorporate more advanced fuel injection systems that are more efficient and more reliable than their predecessors.”

One of the early adopters when the new lines were introduced was Gloucester County Public Schools. Five of the school system’s 90 buses at the time were propane-powered, according to the 2014 Energy Department’s study.

It could be some time before Chesterfield, the only other county in the region using propane school buses, can convert the majority of its fleet to propane.

The main problem is that the propane buses are limited to using two fueling stations in the county.

This also means that use of the 20 new propane buses is limited to two heavily populated sectors near the county fueling facilities.

Jeter said the county plans to expand the number of facilities with the help of the state. A third is going in now, and he hopes an additional three will open in the next couple of years.