

Muni finally ready to begin rolling out cleaner hybrid buses

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After missing a deadline that required it to begin removing polluting buses from the street, Muni plans to roll out a \$52 million fleet of cleaner hybrid-electric buses in the next year that will help combat one of San Francisco's most pressing environmental problems: soot air pollution from diesel engines, wood-burning fires and power plants.

The program will replace 56 of Muni's oldest and dirtiest diesel buses by the end of 2006 with hybrid versions that will emit 90 percent less soot and 30 percent less greenhouse gases.

San Francisco voters required that Muni replace all of its pre-1991 diesel buses under Measure I, which was passed by city voters in March 2004. Under the measure, Muni was supposed to begin replacing the buses in 2004 and finish by the end of 2006, but agency officials said they could not find the money to begin replacing the buses in 2004. Despite the early slip, Muni spokeswoman Maggie Lynch said they should meet the 2006 deadline.

"We've always taken safe, clean transportation seriously," Lynch said. "We have the largest nonpolluting fleet in the country. Over 50 percent of our fleet is pollution-free." Muni was able to put together a funding package this year, which includes about \$26 million in funding from federal sources, \$24 million from The City's half-cent transportation sales tax, and an additional \$2 million from local sources and bridge tolls.

The Board of Supervisors Budget and Finance Committee is slated to vote on \$29 million of the funding at its meeting Thursday.

A 2005 report by the American Lung Association gave San Francisco — and six other Bay Area counties — a failing grade for short-term particle pollution — the type of microscopic soot produced by buses.

The rankings placed the Bay Area in the top 25 most particle-polluted areas of the nation. Particle pollution has been linked to health problems that include lung cancer, heart attacks and asthma, according to the ALA.

Mike Daly, the Bay Area chapter conservation director of the Sierra Club, said local transit agencies have taken a leading role in moving toward cleaner bus technology.

"There is a conflict with having cheap buses and clean buses, but the companies have really striven to put the cleaner buses on the street," Daly said.

Muni has made it a policy goal to eliminate all of its bus emissions by 2020.

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