

T&E COMMITTEE #2  
April 30, 2012

**M E M O R A N D U M**

April 26, 2012

TO: Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy and Environment Committee  
*60*  
FROM: Glenn Orlin, Deputy Council Staff Director  
SUBJECT: Briefing—bus fires on Ride On buses and Metrobuses

Five Navistar Champion-model Ride On buses have been destroyed by fires since 2009. None of the fires have caused an injury, but the obvious concern has resulted in an exploration by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Recent fires have also plagued Metrobuses. Press accounts about the fires are on ©1-4. The Chair has requested this briefing for the Committee to better understand these problems and to determine what steps are being taken to alleviate them.

There are 60 Champions in Ride On's fleet of 339 buses, although only about 50 of them are in regular revenue service. The Champions are the smallest buses in the fleet and are used on routes that must negotiate narrow residential streets. The 60 buses are all from the 2007 model year; 11 of them are gas-powered, and reached the end of their normal useful life in 2010; the other 49 are diesel-powered, which has a useful life that should reach until 2014.

Aside from the fires themselves, Ride On has encountered a host of mechanical and operational problems with the Champions, and the County has been anxious to phase them out for some time. The Ride On Bus Fleet CIP project tentatively approved by the Council in March—this is the project that funds Ride On bus replacements—includes funds to buy replacements for all 60 Champions. Because there is at least a one year lag between when a new bus is ordered and when it is delivered, 28 new small buses will be put into service in June 2014 and 32 more new small buses will be put in service in June 2015: 2 and 3 years from now, respectively. (*Note:* Council staff's understanding is that the Executive will shortly be forwarding a revision to the Ride On Bus Fleet project; it will likely be transmitted prior to this worksession.) In the meantime, Ride On will be deploying the Champions as little as possible, but some will need to be kept in operation in order to provide service on the existing routes and schedules.

David Dise, Director the Department of General Services, will be on hand to talk about the Ride On fires. Charlie Scott, Maryland Liaison for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) will speak briefly about the situation with Metrobus.

# Ride On bus fires in Montgomery prompt federal safety probe

By Dana Hedgpeth, Published: April 11

Federal safety officials are investigating some of Montgomery County's Ride On buses following fires that have destroyed five of them since 2009.

The buses, part of a fleet of 50 Navistar diesel vehicles purchased by Montgomery, had problems with electrical panels and parking brakes that caused the fires, officials said.

In an e-mailed statement Wednesday, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said it is looking into the buses to "determine if a safety defect exists in these vehicles." Officials there said they do not know when their investigation will be finished.

The most recent fire happened in March and is still under investigation, Montgomery officials said. No passengers were aboard the buses when the fires occurred. One driver bumped his head as he tried to escape a fire and was treated for minor injuries, according to Montgomery officials.

Montgomery officials said they continue to operate the 45 remaining Navistar buses as "infrequently as possible" for the Ride On service, which provides 26 million passenger trips a year. The county's bus fleet totals about 300.

The small size of the Navistar buses — about 30 feet long — enables them to navigate neighborhoods and other areas with tight streets. Montgomery officials said they carefully inspect the buses every 5,000 to 6,000 miles for preventive maintenance.

"We will not put a bus on the street that we believe is unsafe," said David Dise, director of Montgomery's Department of General Services.

Representatives from Local 1994, a union that represents bus operators, have expressed concern about the safety of their drivers on the buses and have filed a grievance claiming that the county has failed "to enforce safety and health obligations" of the employees and the public and demanding that the problem buses be taken out of service. Montgomery is looking to replace the buses over the next six months, but union officials are still worried.

"That's not soon enough," bus operator and union leader Nelvin Ransome said in a statement. "The possibilities are still too great we'll see more incidents in the next six months."

Navistar spokeswoman Karen Denning wrote in an e-mail that the bus fires "appear to be isolated to Montgomery County."

"Navistar has participated in the investigation of the incidents in Montgomery County where our bus chassis were involved and most have resulted in inconclusive findings," she wrote. "On March 22, 2012, NHTSA opened an investigation on the buses in Montgomery County. No documentation has yet been provided about the questions they intend to ask. Navistar will, of course, cooperate fully with NHTSA."

Montgomery spent \$8.75 million in 2007 to buy the 50 diesel buses.

When the first bus fire occurred in September 2009, Montgomery officials said, they idled the fleet of Navistar buses, made repairs and put the buses back into service in July 2010.

But further incidents occurred, including cases in which the parking brake would activate when the bus was being driven, Disce said.

“There clearly have been a lot of issues with these buses,” Disce said. “It has to do with the wear and tear. These are buses that are not keeping up with the conditions we need them to put up with. They haven’t held up as long as they should have.”

“We’re running them as infrequently as we can, but we have a lot of people who rely on bus service.”

Montgomery officials said that the county has spent about \$13,700 in repairs to the buses and that the rest of the repair costs have come from Rohrer, the dealer that sold them the buses.

The county is looking to several sources for alternatives. It has spent about \$190,000 total buying 15 used buses from the city of Pittsburgh. Officials said the county may also buy used buses from Metro and the city of Philadelphia.

Montgomery eventually plans to buy new, more heavy-duty buses at a cost of \$426,180 each, Disce said.

What happens to the 45 Navistar buses once the new buses arrive? One word, Disce said: Scrap.

# Another Metrobus Catches Fire, Prompting Another Recall

Posted by Shani Hilton on Apr. 17, 2012 at 2:34 pm



Today in hot transit news, a second fire in as many weeks has prompted Metrobus to recall 94 Orion VI buses. NBCWashington reports:

An Orion VI bus caught fire just after 6 a.m. Tuesday on Route 50 between Interstate 95 and the MLK Highway in Prince George's County.

No passengers were on the bus at the time of the fire and no injuries were reported. A mechanic was driving the bus at the time.

Last Thursday, an Orion VI bus caught fire on I-66 in Fairfax. There were no passengers aboard and no injuries.

Taking the 94 buses out of the fleet of 1500 isn't the most noteworthy part, if you ask us. What's noteworthy is that this isn't the first time spontaneous bus fire has prompted a recall of this particular group of buses.

In September of 2010, WMATA removed 99 Orion VI buses from service after one caught fire on I-495. At the time, WMATA wrote: "Metro's Orion VI buses have been out of service since

Thursday, Sept. 9, when Metro officials took proactive steps to remove 99 of the buses from service to repair a hydraulic pump, which may have contributed to a fire that damaged a Metrobus on Interstate 495 near Springfield on Sept. 9." The buses were put back into service after WMATA made temporary repairs and approved plans for permanent fixes.

Two years later, we're interested to know whether WMATA ever instituted the permanent fix it planned for the buses—and whether the latest fires are related to the hydraulic pump problem the agency identified in 2010. We've reached out to WMATA for comment, will update as needed.

**UPDATE:** WMATA's **Dan Stessel** writes over email that hydraulic problem on the Orion VI buses was fixed in 2010, and inspectors are trying to figure out what caused the two latest fires.

The 2010 fire/recall was the result of a hydraulic fitting that broke, requiring a redesign by the manufacturer. The redesigned fitting was installed on all of the Orion VI buses before they were returned to service. We can confirm that in both cases over the past week, there was no damage to the hydraulic fitting in question. We have outside fire protection engineers on the property this afternoon performing inspections on the two incident buses.