

Greening the municipal fleet

by Marty Logan
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Pilot projects determine switch to biodiesel

If Montreal buses and Brampton, Ontario, snowplows work through this winter with only the usual number of stalls and breakdowns, then spring could bring really hot times for the young biodiesel industry.

Both cities, along with Saskatoon and Toronto, are running vehicles on alternative fuel in a bid to cut pollution and, perhaps in the long run, cost. Officials in Montreal and Brampton say if the new fuel mix flows well in colder temperatures, more of their vehicles are likely to be powered by biodiesel.

“If we can prove that biodiesel is viable, our wish is that all of the transportation authorities in the province would switch,” says Camile Lagacé, director of Montreal’s Biobus project, which has 155 of the city’s buses driving on a blend of diesel and biodiesel for one year.

If the province agrees to drop a tax on biodiesel, he adds, Rothsay/Laurencio – the small Montreal-area firm now producing the new fuel from a blend of animal fat, used vegetable oil and soybean oil – is ready to start expanding to serve Montreal’s entire bus fleet.

At the moment, biodiesel costs more than diesel. That difference – along with the costs of shipping the fuel to a downtown bus garage, publicizing the Biobus project, and helping establish fuel production – is being financed with a combination of grants from the federal government, the province and some private-sector partners. Montreal’s bus authority is paying about one-quarter of the cost of the \$1.3-million project.

Brampton’s 200 public works vehicles have been running on a blend of biodiesel (made from soya) and diesel since July. If they perform well this winter, the city’s buses may be emitting a French-fry-like odour come spring, says Commissioner of Works and Transportation, Alex MacMillan.

“I think [using biodiesel] makes business sense now,” he says. “I think a business case could be made that if we could reduce emissions significantly it leads to better health and a healthier environment... it’s not simply an economic decision.”

Before Ontario dropped a 14.3-cent-per-litre biodiesel tax earlier this year, Brampton was paying about 11 cents more for a litre of biodiesel than for regular diesel. Whether that differential will remain depends on how the tax reduction is calculated on the city’s fuel blend, which contains 20 percent biodiesel.

But MacMillan says the city is not waiting to see if biodiesel will cost or save the city money before it commits to the fuel: it is willing to

pay more. “It’s a trade-off, but it’s a trade-off that everyone seems willing to make... Brampton has been known to be environmentally conscious,” he adds.

Saskatoon also faces higher fuel costs for its canola-based biodiesel but, says Customer Service Coordinator of Transit Services, Wade Coombs, the potential advantages outweigh that consideration.

A University of Saskatchewan researcher who powers his own car with the fuel approached the city looking for a bigger vehicle for his experiment. His initial tests found that biodiesel is more fuel-efficient than diesel and that engines operating on biodiesel wear down half as fast as those running on diesel or other usual fuels. “We said ‘this is something that we would like to be involved in,’” says Coombs.

As in Montreal, the experiment required no modifications to the buses when it started in September. Saskatoon’s \$1.6-million project, which includes four buses over two years, is also being financed by a variety of partners, including the three orders of government and the private sector. There are also hopes that it will create another market for farmers. “We see it as a win-win project,” Coombs says.

The Canadian Urban Transit Association backs the experiments. “For a very modest investment... you can achieve reductions in harmful emissions,” says association CEO and President, Michael Roschlau. Paying more for biodiesel is “the sort of trade off that the transit systems are facing all of the time (but) I don’t think it’s a big trade off at this point.”

A Montreal group that studies biodiesel says tests have shown that while using the fuel does cut greenhouse gas emissions, it does not reduce overall air pollution. Still, biodiesel is the only viable alternative to diesel, says Alex Hill, environmental project officer at Alternatives, which approached Montreal transit with the Biobus idea.

“It makes economic sense for a public transit operator because you don’t have to replace your vehicles [as often],” says Hill. “Yes, your fuel costs will be higher but you will be using a greenhouse-gas neutral fuel.”

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