Successful electric bus pioneers overcome challenges of early adoption

By Matt Casale, U.S. PIRG Transform Transportation campaign director

Electric buses are a relatively new technological advance. And, like every new mode of transportation, electric buses have faced bumps and hurdles, and a fair share of skeptics.

Take the car, for example—the staple of modern American transportation. Today, around 88 percent of Americans own cars. But in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the technology was new, people weren’t immediately sold. According to a 1930 article by Alexander Winton in the Saturday Evening Post, onlookers often taunted pioneering drivers with cries of “Get a horse!”

Early cars were noisy, unreliable, expensive and plagued by mechanical problems. It was also hard to gas up. The United States simply didn’t have the infrastructure needed for Americans to drive en masse. Over time, as people began to see the potential in these vehicles, and investors poured money into their development and production, the problems that had dogged the early cars were ironed out. Flash forward to 2019, and take a look at pretty much any drive-way in America, and you’ll see how that turned out—for better or worse.

I don’t know of anyone yelling at early electric bus adopters to “get a diesel bus,” but electric buses certainly have their skeptics. Nascent electric buses have had some issues, like all new technologies do. However, user experiences indicate that those challenges are not insurmountable and are far outweighed by the benefits.
For example, King County Metro, the transit agency in the Seattle area, began testing electric buses in 2016. Metro’s service area covers a range of terrain, including rural areas, and dense urban and suburban corridors. In all of these settings, the buses have generally performed well, but with minor problems that, at first, gave the agency “a moment of pause.” In some instances, batteries have depleted faster than expected, and the buses have not been able to travel as far as advertised, particularly during the colder months.

But, despite the early performance challenges, King County Metro’s experience has been positive enough that it has decided to go all-in on electric buses. A big reason why: The agency includes the environmental and health benefits of buses in its evaluation of costs and benefits, estimating that the total societal cost over the life cycle of a 40-foot diesel bus is $121,000, vs. approximately $18,000 to $19,000 for a 40-foot electric bus using renewable energy.

School buses are going electric, too. The state of Massachusetts sponsored a pilot program that designated one electric bus each to three school districts, and their performance was measured over the course of a year. While the buses provided significant greenhouse gas and air pollution reductions, they had mechanical problems and failed to deliver the fuel and maintenance cost savings expected.

Despite the challenges, all three school districts in Massachusetts chose to keep their electric buses. On the other side of the country, Twin Rivers Unified School District outside of Sacramento has had a different experience. Its electric buses have experienced few problems and saved 75 to 80 percent on fuel costs (largely due to very favorable utility rates), exceeding the district’s most optimistic expectations. Early success allowed Twin Rivers to scale up its program, and the district now runs a fleet of 25 electric buses.

Electric buses are a new technology. Will there be challenges in implementing the new technology? Of course. Are those challenges insurmountable? No. And the public health and environmental benefits of switching away from diesel to zero-emissions buses should motivate us even more to overcome whatever challenges arise. Consider this: The Chicago Transit Authority estimates that each of its electric buses will save the city around $55,000 every year in avoided healthcare expenses. That big number sounds great, but it actually undersells the benefit. When you think about it in terms of money, it almost sounds like some kid gets his asthma treatment paid for. It’s better than that. Instead, that kid doesn’t have asthma.
As we keep working toward a ban on Roundup in Maryland and across the country, our members and supporters are also holding the EPA accountable. So far, nearly 10,000 people have joined our national network in calling on the EPA to require warning labels on products containing glyphosate.

DEMOCRACY

New report highlights success of Montgomery Public Election Fund

In Maryland’s Montgomery County, if you wanted to run a campaign for public office funded by small donations from average people, you’d now have a fighting chance against the big-money candidates.

In 2018, candidates participating in the county’s Public Election Fund received over 96 percent more small contributions than their peers, finds a report released by our research partner Maryland PIRG Foundation.

“We are building a democracy where everyone has equal opportunity to participate in county elections regardless of race, gender, age or income,” said Maryland PIRG Foundation Director Emily Scarr. “With the small donor program, Montgomery County is helping ensure county government is accountable to residents, not wealthy special interests.”

To receive the Montgomery Public Election Fund’s limited matching funds, participating candidates choose to forgo donations from large donors. Instead, they may accept contributions of between $5 and $150 from individual donors, which the county matches through the public fund.

HOLD THE ANTIBIOTICS, WENDY’S

We gave Wendy’s a D+ on antibiotic use policies and practices.

What can a fast food chain do to ensure that antibiotics work when we or our loved ones need them the most? Plenty. But many, including Wendy’s, are not doing enough.

On Oct. 31, Maryland PIRG released the fifth annual “Chain Reaction” scorecard, authored by our research partner, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, and NRDC, The Antibiotics Resistance Action Center, Consumer Reports, Food Animal Concerns Trust and Center for Food Safety. The scorecard finds that most of the top fast food chains in the U.S. are selling beef from cattle raised with routine antibiotic use—with Wendy’s earning a D+.

“The bottom line is we can’t afford to lose life-saving antibiotics to produce slightly cheaper beef,” said our Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics Campaign Director Matt Wellington to CBS News. Our report also earned coverage by NBC News, ABC Action News, Wired and Fox Business.

To keep our life-saving medicines working when we need them, we’re calling on Wendy’s and other fast food chains to phase antibiotics out of their beef supply chains.
BEYOND PLASTIC

Baltimore City Council passes ban on plastic bags

The Baltimore City Council has decided it’s time to confront the city’s plastic waste problem.

On Nov. 18, the council voted in favor of a ban on thin, single-use plastic bags handed out by retailers in the city. The legislation promises to help reduce the amount of plastic waste littering Baltimore’s streets and polluting the Chesapeake Bay. Under the bill, grocery and retail store customers can bring their own reusable bags or purchase non-plastic bags for five cents.

Maryland PIRG advocates and volunteers have backed the bill since its introduction and worked to ensure its passage in the strongest form possible. As of this writing, the bill is with Mayor Jack Young.

“This is a big win to protect our environment and reduce litter and waste in our communities,” said Maryland PIRG Director Emily Scarr.

Now, Maryland PIRG is working with coalition partners and Delegate Brooke Lierman to build support for a statewide ban on plastic bags.