Arlington School Bus Replacement Levy

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On the November 4th ballot, Arlington School District voters will be asked to approve a new two-year Transportation Vehicle Fund Levy. The School Board has placed this levy on the ballot to request funding to replace 26 aging school buses. If approved, depreciation funds generated by the purchases will provide additional state revenue to maintain a current fleet for many years to come.

Why is it important to have an up-to-date fleet of buses and what does that mean? The state considers school buses to have a 12-year lifespan; some small buses have only an eight-year lifespan. Up-to-date doesn’t mean “new”. Up-to-date means buses operating within their designated lifespan. Operating a current fleet is important for three reasons: 1. Student safety, 2. Efficient operations, and 3. Cleaner air.

Up-to-date buses have substantial safety enhancements over older buses. These improvements include better compartmentalization, additional emergency exits, improved braking and traction control systems, improved ergonomics and driver safety.

Compartmentalization is a big word for a simple concept. Compartmentalization is simply the protective bubble of foam that surrounds children while riding a school bus. Buses built in the past several years have additional foam that is also substantially thicker both in front of and behind the children’s seats. This passive restraint system is designed to absorb much of the energy during collisions, thereby providing students more protection.

Newer buses also have additional roof and side emergency exits. Newer buses, like modern cars, have antilock brake systems, traction control systems, improved driver visibility and ergonomics. All of this combines to make newer buses safer.

Only 50% of our fleet is current by State standards. Half of our buses are more than 12 years old. Our oldest bus is 28 years old. Our fleet is aging. State-provided depreciation funds are declining as more buses become fully depreciated. If left unchecked, ten years from now only 30% of our fleet will be current (12 or fewer years of age).

Based upon our maintenance records, the school district is spending a disproportionate share of its financial resources maintaining older school buses. Buses 13 years and older cost 260% more to maintain per mile driven than our buses that are newer. Parts for our oldest buses are becoming increasingly more difficult to purchase. Several of our buses have engines that have not been manufactured in nearly 20 years. Like all things mechanical, school buses just wear out from continued use. Wooden flooring rots, paint fades, and engines and transmissions fail.

The third reason to maintain an up-to-date fleet is newer buses meet modern emissions standards. They are significantly cleaner burning and thus better for our environment. If you have ever been stopped behind an older school bus at an intersection, you have seen the soot
that comes from the tailpipe when the bus accelerates. The emissions of soot and other harmful particulates and gases are dramatically reduced in newer buses. The Environmental Protection Agency states that

“More than half of today’s school buses have been in service for over a decade. These older buses lack today’s pollution control and safety features, and emit nearly twice as much pollution per mile as a semi-truck. School buses built to meet EPA’s 2010 standards emit 95 percent less pollution than pre-2007 vehicles and are 60 times cleaner than pre-1991 buses!”

(http://www.epa.gov/cleanschoolbus/replacement.htm)

Twelve percent of our fleet is pre-1991 buses and 63% of our fleet is pre-2007 buses.

The two-year transportation levy, if approved, will provide $1.5 million for each of two years. The levy will cost property owners in the district approximately 49 cents per $1000 of assessed valuation. Exemptions to this property tax may be available for residents 61 years of age and older or who are disabled.

The levy will fund the purchase of 26 new buses. Future depreciation funds received from the State from these new buses will continue to provide adequate funding for bus replacement for many years to come. If you have questions or concerns about the Transportation Vehicle Fund Levy please contact me at 360-618-6238 or our Public Information Office Andrea Conley at 360-618-6217.