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## Metro wants new trolley buses to replace older models

Study says trolleys more cost effective than diesel-hybrids

BY SCOTT GUTIERREZ, SEATTLEPI.COM STAFF  
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Trolley bus with auxiliary power unit. Photo: Courtesy Of King County Metro Transit / SL



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King County Metro Transit plans to recommend purchasing a new fleet of electric trolley buses to replace the older models based on a [recent study showing trolleys are more cost-effective than hybrid diesel buses](#), a transit official said Wednesday.

How to replace the aging trolley fleet has been a controversial question since an audit recommended

switching them out for diesel hybrids to save cash-starved Metro about \$8.7 million per year.

Metro needs to replace its trolley fleet because the buses are old, cracking and have outdated electrical systems and parts.

A consultant hired at the request of the King County Council did a cost-benefit analysis of both bus propulsion systems and found the hybrids would actually cost more money. It considered other factors not weighed by the audit, including that the region would lose about \$10 million annually from a federal subsidy for "fixed guideway" transit if Metro replaced the trolleys with hybrids.

Metro officials expect to make a recommendation to the King County Council on May 31.

"We expect to say replace the trolley buses with trolley buses," said Deputy General Manager Jim Jacobson during a presentation on the trolley buses at the Plymouth Congregational Church downtown.

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The consultant, Parametrix, still is finalizing a report that analyzed the annualized costs of trolleys compared to hybrids. Metro is soliciting feedback on the preliminary findings before taking a final version to the council.

In terms of costs, while hybrid buses are cheaper to purchase (\$785,000 compared with \$1.2 million for trolleys), they also have a shorter life span, (12 years to 15 years for a trolley bus). Hybrids cost slightly less to maintain (no overhead wires), but also are subject to rising gas prices.

Jon Perlic, with Parametrix, said when costs are annualized, meaning all costs -- fuel, maintenance, sticker price -- are added and divided over the number of expected service years, the trolleys fare better. In addition, they produce far less noise and greenhouse gas pollution.

Plus, Metro receives grant money from the Federal Transit Administration for fixed guideway systems that it wouldn't get with hybrids. Even if Metro lost 70 percent of that funding, the trolleys still would be more cost-effective.

Overall, trolley buses would cost about \$11.8 million per year, compared to \$15.5 million for hybrids, Perlic said.

Decommissioning the trolley network also would cost Metro at least \$37 million because the overhead wires and substations would have to be torn down. Metro has 159 electric trolley buses that run along nearly 70 miles of overhead wire in Seattle.

And it could cost more because the wires in some cases are anchored to historic buildings. Metro has been advised that removing those anchor bolts likely would be subject to the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which requires federal agencies (the Federal Transit Administration, in this case, because it provides funding) to consider the effects of their undertakings on historic properties.

That could mean more costs and at least more process, such as a study to determine how the bolts should be removed or maintained, said Chris O'Claire, project manager for the trolley bus evaluation.

Metro also is studying trolleys with off-line capability from an auxiliary power source, either a battery or small diesel engine. Buses with battery backups, like the ones used in Vancouver, B.C., can travel up to 2.5 miles off the trolley line -- enough to get around collisions or construction sites. Buses with diesel backups can travel up to 150 miles, but get slower acceleration.

Metro's trolleys logged 19.7 million boardings on trolley routes in 2009 -- about one-fifth of Metro's total average weekday ridership. Residents and city officials love them because they run quieter and don't have tailpipe emissions.

The transit agency did a preliminary analysis of several technologies, including hydrogen fuel cells and battery-powered buses. But Metro says neither technology currently is commercially viable. Metro plans to sign the first order for replacement buses in 2012 after a decision by the County Council.

For more information, visit the [trolley bus evaluation website](#).

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