

Yellow school buses might be getting a hint of green as districts look to electric transportation

By Ema Sasic

The Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, November 5, 2019

Those iconic yellow school buses seen driving through Bakersfield and Kern County could get a hint of green added to them as local school districts look into electric options.

The Electric School Bus Incentive Program through the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District provides monetary incentives to replace existing diesel yellow school buses with all-electric ones, according to its website. Those grants help as one electric bus costs around \$400,000.

Earlier this year the California Energy Commission announced it awarded nearly \$70 million to state schools to replace more than 200 diesel school buses, which included two in Kern County. The Kern County Superintendent of Schools was awarded more than \$1 million to replace three of its old diesel buses with three new electric school buses, communications director Robert Meszaros explained. Additionally, Taft City Elementary School District was awarded more than \$325,000 for an electric bus.

KCSOS has had "ride-and-drives" with three approved bus makers, but has not yet decided on which will be purchased, but the goal is sometime next year. Meszaros also explained officials are working on getting the correct infrastructure, such as charging stations, in place, which will be funded by a separate grant.

Heather Heinks, outreach and communications manager with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, also said Di Giorgio Elementary School in Arvin was awarded one electric school bus and Shafter's Richland School District received three.

Other county districts are considering the cleaner transportation option.

At Monday night's Kern High School District board meeting, an item on the agenda stated the district will begin to file applications with various agencies in hopes of being awarded an electric school bus. Rosedale Union and Norris school districts have also applied for grants.

"I think electric would provide an alternative way of providing buses for districts and work for emissions," said Rosedale Union School District Superintendent John Mendiburu.

With poor air quality as a top concern in Kern County, having school buses that produce zero emissions could be a necessity.

But the buses aren't a one-size-fits-all option. Heinks said the buses can travel between 100 to 125 miles on a single charge. A full charge takes between six to eight hours.

KCSOS has not decided which schools will use the buses it was awarded, but "it has to be a route that is somewhat short," Meszaros said. Standard gasoline school buses typically have a 60-gallon tank, which results in farther travel distances than their electric counterparts.

KHSD officials also said its routes are long and there are more than 200 school buses in use, so the current technology available with electric buses might not serve the district as well as it could. However, Director of Transportation Jason Fowler said increasing the battery travel range to 250 miles on a single charge and having a shorter battery charge time would make them more feasible.

Electric school buses could be a better fit for a smaller district such as Norris School District, which has shorter bus routes and around 25 buses.

Though it'll take time before the first bus rolls through the county, school officials definitely see electric buses taking over transportation options in the future.

"Just like with commercial vehicles ... the technology will continue to get better and better as more opportunities become available," Meszaros said. "Who knows, in 30 to 40 years, will all buses be electric?"

The first electric school bus to hit Central California was unveiled at Malaga Elementary School in Fresno.

For more information, visit <http://valleyair.org/grants/electric-school-bus.htm>.