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.

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.

Driving a car shouldn’t be the only way to get around in Wisconsin.

That’s what WISPIRG State Director Peter Skopec told state lawmakers, legislative staff and advocates at a transportation roundtable in the Capitol on Aug. 21. At the meeting, Peter reported on WISPIRG’s coalition working to promote a 21st century transportation system for Wisconsin.

“Due to best serve Wisconsinites, and to protect public health and our environment, we must continue to forge ahead with clean, accessible transportation options,” said Peter in a July 3 news release applauding clean transportation provisions in Wisconsin’s biennial budget.
Options like expanded bus access, bike paths and electric vehicle charging stations promise to cut more highway waste and air pollution than expanded highway projects, which merely attract more traffic.

WISPIRG and our partners are continuing to push for a cleaner transportation system that works for all Wisconsinites.

CONSUMER WATCHDOG

Bipartisan bill would cap predatory payday lending rates

A bipartisan bill promises to protect vulnerable Wisconsin consumers from predatory lending practices.

The Veterans & Consumers Fair Credit Act, introduced by U.S. Rep. Glenn Grothman (R, Glenbeulah) in November, would cap interest rates on consumer loans at an annual percentage rate of 36 percent. The WISPIRG-backed legislation aims to make payday, car title and installment loans with astronomically high interest rates a thing of the past.

“Payday loans come with average interest rates of 486 percent in Wisconsin,” said WISPIRG State Director Peter Skopec. “An interest rate cap is the simplest, most effective way to stop these debt trap loans.”

Payday, car title and installment loans are often marketed as fast cash for people struggling to make ends meet. But the majority of borrowers are unable to afford repayment and are forced into a spiral of reborrowing that leads to perpetual indebtedness.

“We’re thrilled to see the bipartisan leadership of Congressman Grothman and his colleagues on this critical issue,” Peter concluded.

BAN ROUNDUP

Rather than require warning labels for Roundup, Trump administration moves to prohibit them

Does the public have a right to know that researchers for the World Health Organization say the widely used herbicide Roundup is a probable carcinogen?

Not according to the Trump administration. On Aug. 9, the administration’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced it will prohibit companies from putting warning labels on products containing glyphosate, the main active ingredient in Monsanto’s Roundup—even with mounting evidence that glyphosate is linked to non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

“It’s past time to ban Roundup until and unless it’s proven safe,” said our national network’s Ban Roundup Campaign Director Kara Cook-Schultz. “But as long as it remains on the shelf, consumers have the right to know that glyphosate is potentially dangerous.”

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.
Not one, not two, but five more states ban single-use plastic bags

The number of statewide plastic bag bans in the U.S. has tripled this year, with Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, Delaware and Oregon adding themselves to the list.

The states joined California and New York, requiring retailers and grocers to replace single-use plastic bags them with reusable or paper ones. Americans currently throw away 100 billion plastic bags every year, or 300 bags per person. We use these bags for just a few minutes, but they persist in the environment and impact public health for centuries to come.

“These states are leading the country in addressing plastic pollution,” says the director of our Beyond Plastic campaign, Alex Truelove. “Clearly, momentum is building on this issue. But these states cannot tackle our plastic pollution crisis alone.”

Together with our national network, WISPIRG is running campaigns to ban single-use plastic bags and other harmful plastics in Wisconsin and across the country.

Dear WISPIRG member,

The problems we work on impact all of us—from plastic pollution, to toxic Roundup in our communities, to the possibility that our life-saving medicines will no longer be effective. Your support enables us to keep being your advocate for the public interest, working to find common ground around commonsense ideas.

Thank you,

Peter Skopec, State Director
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