



National School Transportation Association

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Docket Clerk
U.S. DOT Dockets
Room PL-401
400 Seventh Street, SW
Washington, DC 20590-0001

RE: Docket No. FHWA-2006-26383

The National School Transportation Association (NSTA), the national trade association representing school bus companies that contract with public schools to provide transportation services, appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Interim Guidance on the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement ("CMAQ") Program.

NSTA, and the school transportation contractors we represent, take pride in the important role that school buses have played in the transportation of the Nation's school children. Every day, school buses provide 50 million passenger trips safely and efficiently, significantly more than public transit's 32 million daily passenger trips. At 470,000 units, the yellow school bus fleet is the largest mass transportation system in the country—2.5 times larger than all other modes of public transportation combined. While the school bus has always been an important tool in preventing congestion, school buses can also play a significant part in reducing air pollution.

Newer technology school buses, particularly 2007 and later models, will greatly reduce the emission of potentially harmful contaminants as older buses are retired and new ones are purchased. There is no need to wait until the current fleet is replaced to enjoy the benefits of cleaner air, however. It is possible now to retrofit existing diesel buses with after-treatment technologies that will significantly reduce emissions of several contaminants from the legacy fleet.

The amendments to the CMAQ program adopted by the Congress as part of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: a Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) clearly establishes a priority for diesel retrofit projects as a way for communities to meet or maintain air quality standards. The experience of our industry is that these projects are very cost effective and do not produce major adverse effects for bus operations. However, since the benefits of clean air inure more to the public as a whole than to the operation of the school bus system, fiscally challenged districts and their bus contractors are unlikely to undertake the projects without financial assistance.

Congress has provided some limited funding for diesel retrofit projects through the EPA's Clean School Bus USA program. Congress has also authorized a new Diesel Emission Reduction Act as part of the Energy Policy Act of 2005. However, those programs are extremely limited and cannot retrofit the Nation's entire fleet of school buses and other diesel vehicles and equipment that will remain in service for decades to come. Access to CMAQ funding will allow many more communities to undertake beneficial retrofit projects. In order to ensure greater success, we recommend the FHWA provide strong encouragement to state DOTs and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to use funds provided under CMAQ for school bus retrofit projects.

In addition, the guidance needs to provide states and MPOs with the appropriate tools to evaluate the cost effectiveness of retrofit projects when compared to other options. In this regard, we note that the information in Appendix 4 of the interim guidance contains a listing of eligible projects showing cost effectiveness at reducing nitrogen oxide (NOx) and hydrocarbons (HC). This list fails to include diesel retrofits. A separate listing of cost effectiveness for diesel retrofits shows cost per ton of particulate matter (PM) reduced. This could confuse community officials who may not realize the distinction between costs per ton of NOx/HC reduced versus costs per ton of PM reduced. We recommend that Figure A be revised to provide communities with a more helpful comparison.

We note that the guidance allows for the purchase of new transit vehicles to include bus, rail and van and also includes language that implies that school buses may be viewed as eligible transit vehicles. Specifically, part VII.D.5 states that "Certain types of transit projects for which FTA lacks statutory authority, *such as diesel retrofit equipment for public school bus fleets*, are administered by the FHWA (emphasis supplied)." We believe that the purchase of new school buses, in addition to retrofits of existing equipment, should be specifically identified as eligible. Furthermore, school districts that choose to contract for their bus service should be entitled to equal access to CMAQ funding for both retrofits and new vehicles. Nationally, almost one-third of all school buses used to transport public school children are operated by private companies under long-term contracts with local school districts. Urbanized areas that are in non-attainment, such as those in the Northeast and Midwest, have a higher percentage of contracted systems. Accordingly, we recommend that the sentence be revised to read as follows:

Certain types of transit projects for which FTA lacks statutory authority, such as diesel retrofits or vehicle purchases for school bus fleets operated by or under contract to public school districts, are administered by the FHWA.

Finally, our industry is committed to increasing ridership on school buses as a way of ensuring the safety of our school children, relieving congestion in our neighborhoods and reducing emissions of harmful contaminants. Studies by the Federal government have clearly demonstrated that school buses are the safest way to transport school children to and from school. Despite that, many parents continue to drive their children to school, causing increased air emissions and traffic congestion around neighborhood schools,

while also reducing the safety of school-aged children. We believe that a national and regional public education campaign could be useful in encouraging parents to use existing school bus fleets to transport their children to school, thereby reducing the number of private vehicles on local roads.

We would like to work with FHWA to design an education campaign that could be implemented both nationally and locally to inform parents of the many benefits of using the yellow school bus to transport their children to school safely and efficiently. The guidance already recognizes the benefits of public education programs and specifically enumerates success stories such as “It All Adds Up to Cleaner Air” and others that have received support and helped to reduce congestion. NSTA recommends that the guidance also note the benefits of encouraging use of available school buses to relieve congestion and reduce emissions. We propose that the following paragraph be added as a penultimate paragraph in Part VII.D.8 of the interim guidance:

FHWA will examine additional national and regional public education programs that can help ease congestion and improve air quality. For example, the Nation’s school bus fleet represents a highly safe and effective mode of transportation that, if better utilized, could significantly reduce emissions and ease congestion. FHWA will work with the school bus industry to develop national and regional public education materials that local communities could use to promote school bus use.”

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the proposed guidance. We will be happy to work with FHWA to implement our recommendations. For further information, please contact our representative, Robin Leeds at 860-751-7138 or robinleeds@comcast.net.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John D. Corr, Jr.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

John D. Corr, Jr.
President