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.

School buses are going electric, too. The state of Massachusetts sponsored a pilot program that designated one electric bus each to three school districts, and their performance was measured over the course of a year. While the buses provided significant greenhouse gas and air pollution reductions, they had mechanical problems and failed to deliver the fuel and maintenance cost savings expected.

Despite the challenges, all three school districts in Massachusetts chose to keep their electric buses. On the other side of the country, Twin Rivers Unified School District outside of Sacramento has had a different experience. Its buses have experienced few problems and saved 75 to 80 percent on fuel costs (largely due to very favorable utility rates), exceeding the district’s most optimistic expectations. Early success allowed Twin Rivers to scale up its program, and the district now runs a fleet of 25 electric buses.

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.

### NEWS BRIEFS

#### ZERO WASTE

**The most comprehensive plastic pollution reduction bill in the country stalled in California. Here’s what we do next.**

California came close to passing the most ambitious legislation aimed at reducing plastic pollution in the country. But not close enough.

On Sept. 14, the California legislative session ended without lawmakers bringing the state’s Plastic Pollution Reduction Act to a vote. The groundbreaking bill would have put the state on a precedent-setting path to reducing single-use packaging and foodware by 75 percent by 2030.

“We’re in the midst of a plastic pollution crisis, and we have to move beyond plastic as quickly as possible,” said PIRG’s Beyond Plastic Campaign Director Alex Truelove. “The fact that California came close to passing this bill is a sign that momentum is building to reduce our reli-
HOLD THE ANTIBIOTICS, WENDY’S

We gave Wendy’s a D+ on antibiotic use policies and practices.

What can a fast food chain do to ensure that antibiotics work when we or our loved ones need them the most? Plenty. But many, including Wendy’s, are not doing enough.

On Oct. 31, CALPIRG released the fifth annual “Chain Reaction” scorecard, authored by our research partner, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, and NRDC, The Antibiotics Resistance Action Center, Consumer Reports, Food Animal Concerns Trust and Center for Food Safety. The scorecard finds that most of the top fast food chains in the U.S. are selling beef from cattle raised with routine antibiotic use—with Wendy’s earning a D+.

“The bottom line is we can’t afford to lose life-saving antibiotics to produce slightly cheaper beef,” said our Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics Campaign Director Matt Wellington to CBS News. Our report also earned coverage by NBC News, ABC Action News, Wired and Fox Business.

To keep our life-saving medicines working when we need them, we’re calling on Wendy’s and other fast food chains to phase antibiotics out of their beef supply chains.

HEALTHCARE

Governor’s signature ends drug companies’ pay-for-delay deals

It’s called “pay for delay”: One prescription drug company pays another to keep a generic drug out of the marketplace. And it’s costing us, as consumers and taxpayers, an estimated $3.5 billion each year.

But a new CALPIRG-backed law, signed Oct. 8 by Gov. Gavin Newsom, promises to stop drug manufacturers from cutting these costly closed-door deals.

CALPIRG’s analysis of the top 20 drugs impacted by pay-for-delay deals reveals that these secret agreements have delayed generic medicines by an average of five years, forcing patients to buy brand-name equivalents with costs 10 times as high.

“It’s outrageous that drug companies get away with making sweetheart deals to keep lower-priced generic medicine off the market,” CALPIRG Executive Director Emily Rusch told the Los Angeles Times in June.

Gov. Newsom’s signature, which follows months of action by CALPIRG staff, lawmakers, patients and health care advocates, now prohibits these “sweetheart deals” in California.
TOP STORY: Successful electric bus pioneers overcome challenges of early adoption

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.

BAN ROUNDUP

Trump administration moves to prohibit warning labels on Roundup

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.

THANKS TO YOU

Dear CALPIRG 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,

Emily Rusch, Executive Director
info@calpirg.org

The EPA has prohibited companies from putting warning labels on pesticides containing glyphosate, the main active ingredient in Monsanto’s Roundup.