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By Chantelle Lusebrink

School district cleaning up, one school bus at a time

For two years, Jo Porter and her transportation staff have been working diligently to clean up Issaquah's air one big, yellow school bus at a time.

"We have accomplished so much," said Porter, who is the transportation director for the Issaquah School District. "We have a much more efficient and clean fleet."

After legislators passed the Washington State Clean School Bus Program in 2003, the Issaquah School District became one of the first school districts in the state to begin retrofitting its buses with diesel oxidation catalyst (DOC) filters.

The district and Porter's commitment to bring clean air to community neighbors, students and employees was recently recognized in the January edition of School Transportation News, a monthly national transportation, technology and safety magazine.

The district began installing the DOC filters on 33 of its oldest buses beginning in March 2004. The retrofits cost \$1,500 for each bus and were paid for with grant money from Puget Sound Clean Air Agency (PSCAA) and the state, Porter said.

The filters installed on the Issaquah fleet, when used in combination with ultra-low sulfur diesel fuel, are designed to lower the toxic emissions from buses.

Tom Hudson, an air resource specialist with PSCAA, estimates that the district has reduced its toxic emissions by 20 percent to 50 percent.

The push to pass the 2003 legislation was linked to concerns about the diesel soot coming from buses into the environment. Research provided by Environment and Human Health Inc. (EHHI), a nonprofit research organization, indicated that the developing lungs of children are most susceptible to bus emissions.

The EHHI research also concluded that diesel's toxic emissions have been linked to a variety of respiratory ailments for children because of their higher respiration rate.

"The soot particles are very fine," said Dennis McLerran, executive director of PSCAA. "This allows the particles to go deeply into children's lungs, bypassing the lungs' normal defense systems." The research conducted by EHHI additionally linked diesel's emissions to increases in asthma attacks as well as some cancer-related illnesses, particularly lung cancer.

“School buses are still the safest way to get children to and from school, but there are still improvements that can be made,” said Hudson, who is currently helping the district retrofit the remainder of the fleet.

“Tom is the best,” Porter said. “You have to have people like that, because I’m not an expert but I care very deeply about our community and all of our children.”

Currently, Porter, district officials and PSCAA are working together to install DOC filters on the remaining 20 to 23 buses in the fleet. Additionally, district officials are looking to PSCAA for additional funding to further reduce emissions on their buses by installing closed crankcase filters, or Donaldson Filters, on the engine of each bus.

The additional crankcase filters are designed to significantly reduce the diesel emissions that filter inside bus cabins.

By installing these filters, the district should see an additional reduction in toxic emissions of up to 20 percent, said Jim Enfield, shop foreman for the district’s maintenance division.

“All of this goes back to providing effective transportation for our students,” said Porter, while reading from the colorfully framed mission statement that hangs on the wall of transportation services. “We provide safe, respectful and efficient student transportation ... we keep current with changing technologies and adapt to continually changing situations and daily challenges.”

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