



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 13, 2017

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East Chicago students to benefit from propane school buses

Project funded in part by BP CADER grant is first of its kind in Region

EAST CHICAGO — East Chicago public school students are the first in the Region to ride on school buses powered by propane, thanks in part to a grant provided by BP's Whiting Refinery, project partners announced Monday.

"Our district was in the process of purchasing new buses," School City of East Chicago Superintendent Dr. Paige McNulty said. "The decision was made to purchase buses that benefitted the community ecologically as well as improved safety. Additionally, the district will have eventual cost savings over time."

The project was announced Monday morning at a press conference at the School City of East Chicago's Administration Building. The six, Blue Bird Vision Propane buses were designed, engineered and manufactured by ROUSH CleanTech. The buses emit 80 percent fewer smog-producing hydrocarbons and virtually eliminate particulate matter when compared to diesel-powered buses.

The school buses began running in East Chicago at the beginning of the month and are serving students in every school in the district. The School City of East Chicago serves just over 4,100 students.

"Replacing diesel-powered school buses with propane-powered alternatives shows the value the School City of East Chicago places in lowering tailpipe emissions from their school bus fleet as well as improving the quality of life for those that ride, repair and reside around these buses," said Shawn Seals, senior environmental manager for the Indiana Department of Environmental Management's Office of Air Quality.

The funding for the school buses was provided in part by the BP Whiting Refinery Cleaner Air through Diesel Emissions Reductions (BP CADER) grants, the program for which was administered by South Shore Clean Cities.

The BP CADER program was created as part of a 2012 settlement agreement between BP's Whiting Refinery and several environmental groups.

The program provided \$450,000 through a competitive grant process in 2013 and 2014 aimed at reducing diesel emissions in Lake County municipalities, schools, not-for-profit hospitals and county government. The goal was to improve air quality through projects that leveraged other funding sources to provide the greatest public health impact.

School City of East Chicago Transportation Director Robert Garcia was an early champion for the district's efforts for cleaner school bus technologies and worked with South Shore Clean Cities to apply for the BP CADER grants.

The School City of East Chicago received \$46,388.60 in the first round of grants for the installation of Telematics vehicle-tracking systems for 31 school buses designed to monitor and reduce idling.

In the second round, the School City received \$20,948 toward the conversion of two diesel-fueled school buses to propane. After the grant award was announced, School City officials indicated the matching funds were not available to cover the remaining costs.

Shortly after Dr. McNulty became School City of East Chicago superintendent in August 2016, she, Garcia and other district staff members reached out to South Shore Clean Cities, saying they remained interested propane-fueled school buses.

South Shore Clean Cities Executive Director Carl Lisek noted there were funds remaining in the BP CADER account and after discussions with BP representatives, presented a check for \$10,000 to the School Board in September 2016 to assist in the purchase of six new, propane-fueled school buses.

The School City of East Chicago purchased the six propane-fueled Blue Bird Vision school buses from MacAllister Transportation in Indianapolis. A propane autogas fuel system manufactured by ROUSH CleanTech powers each bus.

"South Shore Clean Cities was pleased to be a part of the process to bring cleaner buses to the School City of East Chicago for the benefit of the students, faculty and staff as well as all of the citizens of East Chicago," Lisek said. "Working with South Shore Clean Cities members MacAllister Transportation and ROUSH CleanTech to provide state-of-the-art vehicles that provide financial savings and improved air quality helps the Hoosier economy and the environment."

Propane-fueled Blue Bird school buses create up to 20 percent less nitrogen oxide, up to 60 percent less carbon monoxide and up to 24 percent fewer greenhouse gas emissions than diesel-fueled school buses, according to ROUSH CleanTech.

The switch to propane, which will be provided by Ferrellgas, also will save the School City of East Chicago fuel and maintenance costs. Districts that make the switch can expect to save an average of \$2,000 to \$2,500 per bus per year on maintenance costs and 40 to 50 percent less on fuel, ROUSH CleanTech representatives said.

"School City of East Chicago has made an environmentally friendly decision by purchasing Blue Bird propane powered school buses, which is a fuel that burns clean for students, mechanics, drivers and the entire East Chicago community," said Ryan Campbell, transportation sales manager for MacAllister Transportation.

"MacAllister Transportation is proud to be a partner with South Shores Clean Cities and commend School City of East Chicago in their initiative to improve the air quality and emissions, while enjoying the benefits of a quiet ride, reduced fuel and maintenance costs and the elimination of cold start issues."

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About South Shore Clean Cities

South Shore Clean Cities is a 501(c)(3) organization managed by Legacy Environmental Services, Inc., a woman-owned, certified Women's Business Enterprise. The U.S. Department of Energy's Clean Cities coalitions are nonprofit organizations designed to reduce petroleum consumption in the transportation sector by advancing the use of clean fuels and vehicles, idle reduction technologies, hybrid electric vehicles, fuel blends and fuel economy while reducing dependence on imported oil.