



DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

NEWS

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A new Federal policy governing full-size transit bus design was announced today by Robert E. Patricelli, Administrator of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA).

Patricelli said that the new Federal policy will provide for "advanced design buses which can be produced in a competitive marketplace." He noted that the new design which will be made available to the American transit rider will have design features "which will substantially improve the accessibility to the vehicle for all riders--especially for the elderly and handicapped."

The UMTA decision mandates that all new transit buses to be purchased with Federal grant funds and advertised for bid after February 15, 1977 have effective floor heights of not more than 24 inches. This will require both a lowering of bus floors from the current 34 to 35 inches and incorporation of a deflatable air bag or "kneeling feature," to lower the front of the bus when it stops. Patricelli added, UMTA had concluded that "it was not appropriate or feasible to mandate the 22-inch floor Transbus design," because of the high cost and unproven componentry involved in going that further step at this time.

The Administrator noted that the UMTA Transbus program had fulfilled its two primary objectives: to bring into commercial use a new generation of urban transit buses that would provide better and more attractive transit service;

and to encourage competition in the supply industry by providing equal opportunity to transit bus manufacturers to produce advanced bus designs. The final policy, Patricelli said, "fulfills the major objective of the Transbus program."

The new policy applies to all full sized transit coaches which will be purchased under the UMTA program. UMTA currently assists local authorities in the purchase of the majority of the buses currently being produced in the USA.

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For further information contact the UMTA Office of Public Affairs at (202) 426-4043.

UMTA POLICY STATEMENT ON TRANSBUS

I. Introduction

The Transbus program was first conceived to serve two objectives: to bring into commercial use a new generation of transit buses that would provide better and more attractive transit service; and to encourage competition in the supply industry by providing equal opportunity to the three transit bus manufacturers to produce advanced bus designs. Since the issuance of the Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA) "Policy for Introducing Transbus Into Nationwide Service" on January 8, 1975, there have been a number of developments:

- The market has seen a continued disturbing escalation in the purchase price of transit buses, estimated at 25 percent during the past two years and over 76 percent since 1971;
- Prototype vehicles were successfully developed by each manufacturer, providing a useful test of new design techniques and transit industry and consumer reactions;
- Based on these prototypes, a Transbus vehicle performance specification was developed in cooperation with the manufacturers and with the American Public Transit Association (APTA). While there has been

a consensus on most elements of the specification and the accompanying standardized contract, quality assurance, and warranty documents, there is continued disagreement over the issues of bus floor height and whether the use of any standard performance specification should be mandated by the Federal Government;

- Two manufacturers have announced their intention to produce "interim" or advanced design buses which incorporate most of the design features of the Transbus but which would have floor heights (29-32 inches) between those of current buses (34-35 inches) and the Transbus (22 inches or less). These interim buses would offer important operational cost savings, and a strong market demand has developed for their acquisition;
- UMTA has issued final regulations on Transportation for Elderly and Handicapped Persons (41 CFR 18234, issued April 30, 1976). These regulations mandate that service be provided to these groups of users, and further mandate that new buses to be acquired with UMTA financial assistance must have front step risers that do not exceed eight inches in height, have no more than eight inches in vertical distance from a standard six-inch curb to the first stair tread, and offer wheelchair accessibility packages (including lifts or ramps) which transit properties may order as an option. UMTA has taken a strong position in these regulations and in testimony, however, that the Federal Government should leave to local jurisdictions the choice of whether to use such wheelchair accessible transit buses or separate specialized services, or some combination, to meet the transit needs of wheelchair users and semi-ambulatory persons;
- On May 5, 1976, the Administrator of UMTA held a day-long public hearing, announced in the Federal Register on April 14, 1976, on a number of bus design and procurement policy issues. The central issue had to do with whether the Federal Government should mandate or encourage the use of the Transbus performance specification and, if so, with what bus floor height specified. Another issue posed in that hearing was the date after which transit buses had to meet the eight-inch front step riser and wheelchair accessibility

option requirements of the UMTA Elderly and Handicapped regulations. That date had been left open pending testimony from manufacturers and others on feasibility.

II. Policy Decisions

UMTA has had the benefit of numerous meetings with manufacturers, transit operators, and public interest groups, as well as written submissions, Congressional testimony, and a special public hearing on these issues. Based on that body of information, UMTA makes the following determinations:

1. New transit buses to be purchased with UMTA financial assistance and advertised for bid after February 15, 1977, must have front step risers which do not exceed eight inches in height, and must offer a wheelchair level change device as an option which transit authorities can order. The UMTA regulation on Transportation for Elderly and Handicapped Persons will be amended to insert this February 15, 1977 effective date in the relevant provisions.
2. New transit buses to be acquired with Federal financial assistance and advertised for bid after February 15, 1977 must have effective floor heights of 24 inches or less after use of a "kneeling feature" on the bus. In other words, some combination of kneeling feature and lowered floor height must be capable of producing a net floor height of 24 inches or less. The aforementioned regulation will be amended to include the above requirement.
3. The purposes of the Transbus program have been largely fulfilled by the above mandate of an effective floor height of 24 inches, and with the introduction of newly designed, more efficient and more attractive transit buses into production in a competitive environment. It will remain an UMTA objective to continue to assist manufacturers to produce buses which are superior in a variety of respects, including having floor heights which do not exceed 22 inches. This floor height objective should be attained in an evolutionary fashion when the technical componentry is satisfactorily developed and when the prospective costs and benefits support a move to a lower floor height. Having in mind these necessary conditions, however, UMTA concludes that it is neither feasible nor appropriate to mandate a transit bus floor height of 22 inches or less at this time.

Finally, use of the quality assurance program and standard contract and warranty documents developed as part of the Transbus program will be strongly encouraged in the procurement of interim buses.

The reasons for these determinations are as follows:

1. February 15, 1977 Effective Date of Front Step Riser and Wheelchair Access Option Requirements. The policy decisions to require these items had been made in the context of the April 30, 1976 regulations; only the effective date had been left open pending information to be received in the May 5, 1976 hearing. At that hearing, one manufacturer testified that these requirements could be met for actual bus deliveries within 14 months after publication of the rule; a second offered a proposed effective date of January 1, 1978 for deliveries; and the third suggested 18 months from the date of the hearing. The date of February 15, 1977 represents a compromise reflecting further discussions with the manufacturers, and backdating from delivery dates to the advertisement for bids.
2. Effective Floor Height of 24 Inches or Less, With Kneeling Feature Mandated. The mandate of an effective floor height of 24 inches is based upon UMTA's finding that such a result is technically possible through a combination of lowering the floor height of a bus and incorporating a kneeling feature. Both manufacturers currently planning interim or advanced design buses stated that they would be able to provide 29-inch floor heights on those buses within about one year. The third manufacturer said that he could bring the floor height of his improved current bus to about that level within 18 months. In all cases, the key technical hurdle appears to be the development of a bus tire of smaller diameter which can withstand the necessary loads. Such a tire is now being produced by a foreign manufacturer and its successful domestic production appears probable. Deflatable air-bag devices which permit the front-end or front right corner of a bus to "kneel" down by four or five inches are now offered by all three manufacturers as an option on their current buses at an additional cost of \$300-\$400.

The benefits of mandating an effective floor height will be twofold. First, where the driver cannot draw up alongside a curb, he can use the kneeling feature to keep the first step from ground to front stair tread to eight inches or less, providing eased access for all riders. Second, a net 24-inch floor height, when combined

with the further offset of a typical six-inch curb, may permit use of a ramp instead of a more expensive lift for wheelchair access (although assistance to the wheelchair user may be necessary, depending on the length of the ramp). Thus, for an increase in price of less than one percent per bus, features which substantially improve the accessibility of the vehicle for all riders, and especially for elderly and handicapped persons, can be added.

In light of testimony received at the May 5, 1976 hearing, it is not practical to mandate rear step risers of eight inches or less.

3. Continued Support of Improved Bus Design With Lowered Floor Heights, But Without a Federal Mandate of a 22-Inch Floor at This Time. An important set of reasons militate against a 22-inch floor height mandate:

- This would have the effect of delaying the introduction of newly designed transit buses into commercial use from three to five years. Manufacturers are likely to defer introduction of advanced design buses, which are available for delivery within a year, in order to develop tooling and production facilities for the lower floor vehicles. Yet, these more attractive and efficient buses are needed as soon as possible to meet current demand;
- According to testimony from manufacturers and APTA, aspects of the 22-inch floor design (e.g., axles, tires, differentials) are not yet proven or production ready;
- The additional capital cost of the low-floor bus is variously estimated at seven to twenty-five percent above that of interim buses. Given the substantial concern at all levels of government with escalating bus prices, we believe that it is unwise to force up those prices even more at this time by Federal regulation. Further, the operating costs of the low-floor bus are likely to be slightly higher than those of the interim buses, and the low-floor bus would be less fuel efficient and would offer fewer seats;
- At least two of the bus manufacturers do not currently have the financial capacity to retool for low-floor bus production. While they endorse a low-floor mandate, they want the Federal Government to finance all or most of the development costs of the vehicle, for example by paying for retooling costs through high

cost negotiated contracts for initial vehicle production runs. UMTA believes such a procurement approach would be both unwise and probably unworkable at this time. Further, to mandate the low floor now would cause a wasteful discarding of some of the new tooling already developed for advanced design buses;

--Most of the objectives of the Transbus program have been met: the market is supplying new products in a competitive fashion, and the advanced design buses include most of the design improvements put in motion by the Transbus investment (e.g., improved suspension, cantilevered seats, more easily maintainable exterior surfaces, etc.). An effective bus floor height of 24 inches is being mandated. As a matter of general policy, Federal regulatory mandates should be limited when the market is properly responding. Further, the public transit operators' association strongly opposes a Federal mandate.

It is certainly true that floor heights of 22 inches or less would offer some advantages: better ride quality (although at least one interim bus will include independent front suspension which will also provide a better ride than current buses); speedier passenger flow because of wider doors and one less step (although the interim buses will offer lower steps and a wide front or rear door); and greater accessibility to the elderly and handicapped (one less front step and easier accommodation to a less expensive ramp device for wheelchair access). UMTA concludes, however, that the marginal additional benefits in going from an effective 24-inch floor height (with kneeler) to a 22-inch floor height do not merit the substantial additional costs involved in any such Federal mandate imposed at this time.

Nevertheless, the lower bus floor height will continue to be a policy objective for the UMTA program. Any manufacturer who wishes to offer such a bus for purchase will be assisted through sole source procurement arrangements and progress payments. Further, in order to maintain progress toward achieving the low floor objective, the UMTA Research and Development program will assist manufacturers to develop the reliable componentry which is still needed before the low floor can become a reality.

In summary, UMTA has determined that the major objectives of the Transbus program have been met. Permitting the advanced design buses to be produced and competitively marketed should permit the financial condition of manufacturers to stabilize,

hold down development costs, and let the new buses be proven out and made operationally efficient. Under procurement guidelines already discussed with the manufacturers, interim bus purchases will be supported when performance specifications that do not unfairly restrict competition are used. Riders will see new and better buses within a year rather than having to wait for three to five more years.

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Robert E. Patricelli
Urban Mass Transportation
Administrator

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