

Proposal for hybrid buses is idling but not stalled

The buses may have to wait until the county gets Bus Rapid Transit.

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It will be awhile before buses considered more environmentally friendly motor through Pinellas County.

The hybrids, which run on diesel fuel and electricity, haven't won approval of the county's bus agency's design committee, said Karl Nurse, a Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority board member.

"It's looking less likely it's going to happen," said Nurse, a longtime proponent of hybrid buses, which get better mileage and run more quietly and cleanly than standard buses. The PSTA had given initial approval to getting four hybrid buses about a month ago.

A public hearing about the hybrids, originally scheduled last week, was postponed. It is now set for 9 a.m. Wednesday at the PSTA headquarters, 3201 Scherer Drive in St. Petersburg.

The hybrids - now in use in large cities that include New York, Chicago and Seattle - cost an estimated \$480,000 each, or about \$105,000 more than a regular bus. But they save on diesel fuel costs, because they get about 25 percent better mileage than a standard bus.

Nurse had hoped to move along hybrid acquisition and perhaps have the first ones on the road as early as summer 2008.

But now it's more likely that hybrids will show up when Pinellas County gets Bus Rapid Transit, Nurse said.

Usually known simply as BRT, the system uses buses that make fewer stops, use special stations in busy areas and can make green lights last a few seconds longer to get through intersections.

The timing on BRT startup also is uncertain.

Money to pay for it and disagreement about routes are among elements that are likely to delay its start.

Outgoing PSTA executive director Roger Sweeney has said it may be late 2010 at the earliest before the buses are on the road.

"It may just be a waiting game," Nurse said of the hybrids. "I really think once we experience it, the experience for riders and people working and living nearby will be so dramatic we'll never go back."

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