BY LADONNA BEEKER
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All charged up



$4.1 million grant creates electric buses for Seneca

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SENECA — Seneca received a $4.1 million grant to retire its diesel buses and create only fare-free electric buses for the area.

On Tuesday, Seneca and South Carolina officials announced the city's grant from the Federal Transit Authority's Transit Investment in Greenhouse Gas and Energy Reduction program. Seneca's footprint into the electric bus arena makes it the first in South Carolina and the nation to go to an all-electric bus operation.

"This is unbelievable," said Al Babinicz, general manager for Clemson Area Transit. "It's a great day for South Carolina. Seneca is on the front page of newspapers across the country."

The EcoRide electric buses will come from Proterra in Greenville, which officials say will create more jobs in that facility that will then bleed into surrounding counties. The new buses will eliminate the use of diesel and cut the city's carbon footprint out of the picture, Seneca City Administrator Greg Dietterick said.

Currently, Seneca's diesel buses get $1.05 per mile in fuel costs with 3.86 miles per gallon. With the Proterra buses, Seneca will see a fuel cost savings when the buses decrease to using 18 cents a mile in fuel and get 24 miles to the gallon equivalent.

"People will come from all around the globe to visit our city and ride on our buses," Dietterick said. "We will use this bus as an example around the world."

Dietterick said Seneca is expected to order the buses during the first quarter of 2012, and the electric buses will take a minimum of 12 months to build. He said he expects to receive all of the buses at one time for a grand ribbon-cutting ceremony. In addition, Dietterick said current employees will be trained prior to the arrival of the electric buses, and there will be no interruption in service when the switch is made from diesel to electric transportation.

Mayor Dan Alexander said 25,000 people ride the CAT bus system a month. The Proterra bus will hold 64 people per bus, which the manufacturer says is more than any other bus in its class.

"It takes great leadership to pull a project off like this," said David Bennett, Proterra CEO. "Most (cities) can't sell this, but Seneca has been able to sell it. We will deliver the project on time and on budget."

During a press conference Tuesday, several leaders spoke about the excitement this announcement brings to South Carolina, but especially to Seneca, as the $4.1 million grant is the largest the city has received in its history.

"We have a lot to be thankful for," Dietterick said. "This is the result of the public and private sectors working together."

Eddie Adams, S.C. Department of Transportation representative for the third congressional district, said this "green" project makes sense for Seneca.

"This money is about creating jobs," Adams said. "It's about placing a model. I know we can make this project a success."

Overall, public officials said while its employees worked hard to get the funds to make Seneca a better environment with the all-electric bus system, they agree that it's county residents that benefit the most.

"It's a new day for the city of opportunity," Babinicz said. "Seneca is the city of opportunity."

ladonna@dailyjm.com | (864) 973-6684

Proterra CEO David Bennett expresses his excitement to complete Seneca's order for electric buses after being awarded a $4.1 million grant. The electric bus rendering is pictured on the left.

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