Hear the buzz? Electric bus may be in Seneca's future

BY GREG OLIVER
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CLEMSON — The city of Seneca could soon begin its foray into electric bus operations if city officials, Clemson Area Transit and the South Carolina Department of Transportation have their way.

All three entities, along with Dave Hill, whose Proterra company manufactures electric buses out of its Greenville plant, met at the new CAT facility this week to discuss that possibility through a pilot program.

Hart Baker, deputy secretary for intermodal and freight programs for the SCDOT, said the joint collaboration just makes sense.

"We have a unique situation in this area, and I think it originally began as ships passing in the night," Baker said. "We have a state-of-the-art green facility here at CAT and an electric bus plant at Greenville and a local community that wants to be green. While all of them have been developing their agendas separately, rather than jointly, I think the nucleus of the agenda has to come through right here."

Baker said the pilot program would fund the use of an all-electric bus for service to Seneca, managed and administered by CAT in conjunction with the city of Seneca's mission to become an all electric city. If successful, Baker said the program could serve as a blueprint for other transit authorities in the U.S.

"We feel this is certainly unique in the U.S. in that no one else can boast of these resources within a 30-mile radius," Baker said. "We would be missing a great opportunity to make this happen if we don't take advantage of that."

Baker said the group is in the process of developing funding sources and timetables that are contingent on those sources.

SEE BUS, PAGE A5



FILE PHOTO

Riders board an electric bus in Seneca during a demonstration conducted earlier this year. A pilot program is under discussion in an effort to begin implementing electric bus service to Seneca in the future.

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FROM PAGE A1

He concedes there are "many contingencies."

"We are going through tough economic times and governments have tightened their belts," he said. "But we are going to continue meeting here every 30 days in order to begin the process."

Seneca City Administrator Greg Dietterick said his goal is to see Seneca ultimately receive not one, but five electric buses.

"It's a stretch right now, but we're looking at all the possibilities," Dietterick said. "We feel that Seneca fits the prototype with routes and technology that electric buses enjoy today."

But Dietterick said even if everything comes together, it would be at least 18 to 24 months before Seneca sees any electric bus service.

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