Successful electric bus pioneers overcome challenges of early adoption

By Matt Casale, U.S. PIRG Transform Transportation campaign director

Electric buses are a relatively new technological advance. And, like every new mode of transportation, electric buses have faced bumps and hurdles, and a fair share of skeptics.

Take the car, for example—the staple of modern American transportation. Today, around 88 percent of Americans own cars. But in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the technology was new, people weren’t immediately sold. According to a 1930 article by Alexander Winton in the Saturday Evening Post, onlookers often taunted pioneering drivers with cries of “Get a horse!”

Early cars were noisy, unreliable, expensive and plagued by mechanical problems. It was also hard to gas up. The United States simply didn’t have the infrastructure needed for Americans to drive en masse. Over time, as people began to see the potential in these vehicles, and investors poured money into their development and production, the problems that had dogged the early cars were ironed out. Flash forward to 2019, and take a look at pretty much any drive way in America, and you’ll see how that turned out—for better or worse.

I don’t know of anyone yelling at early electric bus adopters to “get a diesel bus,” but electric buses certainly have their skeptics. Nascent electric buses have had some issues, like all new technologies do. However, user experiences indicate that those challenges are not insurmountable and are far outweighed by the benefits.
For example, King County Metro, the transit agency in the Seattle area, began testing electric buses in 2016. Metro’s service area covers a range of terrain, including rural areas, and dense urban and suburban corridors. In all of these settings, the buses have generally performed well, but with minor problems that, at first, gave the agency “a moment of pause.” In some instances, batteries have depleted faster than expected, and the buses have not been able to travel as far as advertised, particularly during the colder months.

But, despite the early performance challenges, King County Metro’s experience has been positive enough that it has decided to go all-in on electric buses. A big reason why: The agency includes the environmental and health benefits of buses in its evaluation of costs and benefits, estimating that the total societal cost over the life cycle of a 40-foot diesel bus is $121,000, vs. approximately $18,000 to $19,000 for a 40-foot electric bus using renewable energy.

School buses are going electric, too. The state of Massachusetts sponsored a pilot program that designated one electric bus each to three school districts, and their performance was measured over the course of a year. While the buses provided significant greenhouse gas and air pollution reductions, they had mechanical problems and failed to deliver the fuel and maintenance cost savings expected.

Despite the challenges, all three school districts in Massachusetts chose to keep their electric buses. On the other side of the country, Twin Rivers Unified School District outside of Sacramento has had a different experience. Its electric buses have experienced few problems and saved 75 to 80 percent on fuel costs (largely due to very favorable utility rates), exceeding the district’s most optimistic expectations. Early success allowed Twin Rivers to scale up its program, and the district now runs a fleet of 25 electric buses.

Electric buses are a new technology. Will there be challenges in implementing the new technology? Of course. Are those challenges insurmountable? No. And the public health and environmental benefits of switching away from diesel to zero-emissions buses should motivate us even more to overcome whatever challenges arise. Consider this: The Chicago Transit Authority estimates that each of its electric buses will save the city around $55,000 every year in avoided healthcare expenses. That big number sounds great, but it actually undersells the benefit. When you think about it in terms of money, it almost sounds like some kid gets his asthma treatment paid for. It’s better than that. Instead, that kid doesn’t have asthma.

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**OSPIRG’s Mission**

When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, OSPIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposés, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. OSPIRG’s mission is to deliver persistent, results-oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government.

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**NEWS BRIEFS**

**HOLD THE ANTIBIOTICS, WENDY’S**

*We gave Wendy’s a D+ on antibiotic use policies and practices.*

What can a fast food chain do to ensure that antibiotics work when we or our loved ones need them the most? Plenty. But many, including Wendy’s, are not doing enough.

On Oct. 31, OSPIRG released the fifth annual “Chain Reaction” scorecard, authored by our research partner, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, and NRDC, The Antibiotics Resistance Action Center, Consumer Reports, Food Animal Concerns Trust and Center for Food Safety. The scorecard finds that most of the top fast food chains in the U.S. are selling beef from cattle raised with routine antibiotic use—with Wendy’s earning a D+.

“The bottom line is we can’t afford to lose life-saving antibiotics to produce slightly cheaper beef,” said our Stop the Overuse of Anti-
Staff Director Matt Wellington to CBS News. Our report also earned coverage by NBC News, ABC Action News, Wired and Fox Business.

To keep our life-saving medicines working when we need them, we’re calling on Wendy’s and other fast food chains to phase antibiotics out of their beef supply chains.

DEMOCRACY

Scorecard shines light on how your state legislators voted

How did your state representatives vote on issues that affect your health, safety and well-being?

OSPIRG’s 2019 Legislative Scorecard has answers. The Aug. 19 report ranks 12 key public interest votes taken during the 2019 state legislative session and explains how lawmakers came down on the issues. One of our top legislative victories? A new bill requiring drug manufacturers to give 60 days notice before significantly raising prices, which passed with overwhelming majorities in the House and Senate.

Generally pleased with some results of this year’s legislative session, OSPIRG State Director Charlie Fisher also pointed toward some shortcomings, like the Legislature’s failure to safeguard personal data online, confront e-waste or set limits on campaign contributions.

“While we’re proud of what was accomplished during the legislative session,” said Charlie, “more needs to be done to make sure the public interest is represented in Salem.”

This year’s Legislative Scorecard can be found in full on OSPIRG’s website.

RIGHT TO REPAIR

Oregonians want to repair their stuff. Why can’t they?

More and more Oregonians just want to fix the things they own.

A new report released by OSPIRG Foundation in August shows that nearly a quarter of Oregonians browsed the popular repair site, iFixit, last year, looking for guides and parts to repair their phones, laptops, tablets, vehicles and more.

But of the 10 most popular manufacturers, Apple, Samsung, Sony and Microsoft still don’t provide adequate access to spare parts or the technical service information needed to repair their products.

“Throwing out a $1,000 smartphone because it needs a $40 battery is absurd,” said OSPIRG Right to Repair Intern Marie Haefliger. “Manufacturers should provide better access to parts and information, and if they won’t, state leaders should step up and enact Right to Repair reforms.”

OSPIRG and our national network are working in states to build support for and to pass Right to Repair legislation.
**TOP STORY:**
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**BAN ROUNDUP**

**Trump administration moves to prohibit warning labels on Roundup**

Does the public have a right to know that researchers for the World Health Organization say the widely used herbicide Roundup is a probable carcinogen?

Not according to the Trump administration. On Aug. 9, the administration’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced it will prohibit companies from putting warning labels on products containing glyphosate, the main active ingredient in Monsanto’s Roundup—even with mounting evidence that glyphosate is linked to non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

“It’s past time to ban Roundup until and unless it’s proven safe,” said our national network’s Ban Roundup Campaign Director Kara Cook-Schultz. “But as long as it remains on the shelf, consumers have the right to know that glyphosate is potentially dangerous.”

Our members and supporters are also holding the EPA accountable. So far, nearly 10,000 people have joined our national network in calling on the EPA to require warning labels on products containing glyphosate.

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**THANKS TO YOU**

Dear OSPIRG member,

The problems we work on impact all of us—from plastic pollution, to toxic Roundup in our communities, to the possibility that our life-saving medicines will no longer be effective. Your support enables us to keep being your advocate for the public interest, working to find common ground around commonsense ideas.

Thank you,

Charlie Fisher, State Director
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