

OMNIRIDE Demos Double-Decker Buses on Commuter Express Routes

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OMNIRIDE operates a robust commuter express network serving employment centers in Northern Virginia and Washington, DC. The primary vehicle used, a 57-passenger, 45 foot motorcoach, has been the mainstay of the fleet since commuter operations began over 30 years ago. However, since then, other high capacity alternatives have been introduced into the commuter bus industry. Among them is a double-decker bus by Alexander Dennis, a British bus building company based in Scotland with a manufacturing plant in Indiana. These buses are best known for plying the streets of London, but have more recently began operations in the United States and Canada. Most notably, these buses are used as sightseeing vehicles in major cities such as Washington, DC and New York, but they are also used in traditional passenger service in Las

Vegas, Seattle and Toronto.

Alexander Dennis officials approached OMNIRIDE staff several months ago to discuss their new line of double-decker buses primarily focused on commuter operations. The "SuperLo" is a 12'10" vehicle, 45 feet long and seats up to 81 passengers. Could this work in our market? Only one way to find out! After weeks of developing a timeline for the vehicle to visit, the bus arrived in early April. Measurements of various bridges along the interstates, in DC and at the Pentagon were compiled and other possible clearance concerns along local roadways were investigated, then select OMNIRIDE operators were appropriately trained on how to operate the bus.

During an eight (8)-day test run, the bus was in service on various routes in our system. In exchange for a free ride, passengers were asked to fill out a survey regarding the vehicle with questions ranging from comfort of seats, to ride quality and whether they were on the top or the bottom of the bus. Media picked up on this story as well, and the bus and staff were featured live on NBC4 and FOX5 on its maiden voyage from Gainesville to Washington, DC. InsideNova, Potomac Local and WTOP also covered the story.

So What? Should OMNIRIDE Consider Purchasing Double-Decker Buses?

With the demo completed, several factors to be considered before making a purchase of this magnitude are listed below:

Vehicle Cost

The 81-seat double-decker bus costs about \$1 million. The 57-passenger MCI motorcoach buses that are currently in the OMNIRIDE fleet costs about \$600,000. A mid-life overhaul is then conducted, costing another \$250,000, which extends the total useful life to about 16 years (the Federal Transit Administration mandates that any buses purchased with Federal dollars must last at least 12 years or 500,000 miles). Can the life of the double-decker bus be extended by performing a mid-life overhaul? Have other transit systems who operate these vehicles conducted a mid-life overhaul or do they replace them at the 12 year mark? Those questions need to be investigated and answered before making such an investment.

Maintenance Cost

Each type of bus has its own set of requirements to operate. The double-decker bus has different engine configurations, transmissions, tire size differences, as well as a host of other components and parts that are not used on the rest of the fleet. That means the cost for increased inventory and training must also be factored into the equation.

Other Operating Cost

While capacity of the vehicle is increased by 42 percent, the cost differential needs to be compared against the following:

- Overall cost to operate the service
 - Having a larger capacity bus results in savings by needing less bus operators
 - Currently when a trip is overcrowded, additional service hours are used to add a new trip. The larger bus may, in some cases, eliminate that need, saving service hours that could be reallocated to improve other aspects of the service
 - Evaluating the fuel economy
 - Overall cost of operating the vehicle
- Maintenance facility infrastructure
 - We know from testing the bus that the bus can safely fit in the maintenance bays.
 - Modifications to raise the gantries that hold the bus wash brushes and the water nozzles would be necessary to allow for safe passage of the vehicle.
 - The western facility design would need to be evaluated to see if the buses could be serviced at that facility.

Input from Passengers, Operators and Maintenance Technicians

Speaking directly with those that use, drive or work on the vehicles is very important. Surveys submitted by passengers are currently being evaluated and that input will be used in our decision making process. Discussions with agencies that operate these vehicles in commuter operations will also take place to get feedback on their experience using them.

Conclusion

A cost/benefit analysis would need to be conducted to determine if double-decker buses are a good fit for OMNIRIDE.