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Palm Tran to fuel its buses with biodiesel

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In a cost-saving move that's environmentally friendly, Palm Tran is switching to biodiesel, a clean-burning alternate fuel, to run its buses.

The transit agency also will begin using nitrogen in bus tires as another way to go green and ease the strain on an already-strapped budget.

The two changes are expected to save about \$325,000 annually.

"That's ad valorem (property tax) money," Assistant Executive Director Lorraine Szysms said Thursday.

For the past few years, members of Palm Tran's volunteer service board have been encouraging the agency to buy hybrid diesel-electric buses to help protect the environment. But Executive Director Chuck Cohen said a hybrid bus costs about \$200,000 more than a diesel bus, which has a \$375,000 price tag.

Biodiesel has a lot of merit because it produces less carbon monoxide and other harmful pollutants and is less expensive than diesel fuel, Cohen said. It is a mixture of regular diesel and recycled vegetable or soybean oil.

"We expect the biodiesel fuel will have significant benefits on cutting down on pollution," he said.

Using nitrogen instead of air to inflate tires helps keep the tire pressure from dropping so fast, improving gas mileage and prolonging the life of the tire, maintenance manager Jon Kavaliunas said.

"NASCAR's been using it for years," Kavaliunas said. So has the military and commercial aircraft.

Palm Tran received a \$65,000 grant from the state Department of Transportation to install nitrogen tire inflation systems at its fleet maintenance facilities in West Palm Beach and Delray Beach.

More than 10 million passengers used Palm Tran during the year ending Sept. 30, an all-time record for the bus line. But because of state-mandated budget cuts, some services had to be cut.

The board plans to have an all-day workshop in January to discuss strategies for tapping new revenue sources to restore the services that had to be eliminated and possibly expand into new areas. One suggestion is to meet with top corporate leaders to show how public transportation can benefit their employees and customers.

These are times that call for creative and innovative thinking, board member Maurice Jacobson said.

"If there's ways to be innovative, we certainly want to do it," Cohen said.

