

Buses caught idling away

CTA | Evanston man in pollution 'thick as soup' tapes them sitting up to 23 minutes

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The CTA says one of its top budget priorities is to cut fuel costs. CTA President Ron Huberman has said soaring energy prices may force the agency to raise fares next year.

But an Evanston man, without even leaving his house, was able to videotape a CTA bus idling for more than 14 minutes -- in apparent violation of CTA policy. He caught buses downtown idling more than 20 minutes.

"At times, the diesel pollution from CTA buses outside my house was as thick as soup," said Bruce Witty, who videotaped buses idling near his home on Central Street in Evanston between Hastings and Cowper.

Witty caught three buses apparently idling at Washington and Jefferson -- one for about 23 minutes. He said he has seen buses idling for extended periods without having to go out of his normal routine. "I wasn't even trying," he said.

Witty says he doesn't enjoy videotaping idling buses but was concerned about the environmental and health consequences. He said it's "outrageous," considering Chicago's death rate from asthma is twice the national average, that the CTA "unnecessarily pollutes the air throughout the city."

Bus operators are supposed to shut off the engine on layovers of more than five minutes, except in extreme weather, according to Noelle Gaffney, CTA spokeswoman. If it's very hot or very cold, the operator has some discretion to leave the bus running for customer comfort.

Witty took his videos March 17, April 10, 16 and 22 and May 1. On March 17, it was 30 degrees -- on the other days, temperatures ranged from 37 to 73.

To prevent idling, the newest CTA buses have a 15-minute automatic shutdown -- older ones have a 30-minute automatic shutdown, Gaffney said.

The Chicago Sun-Times sent a copy of Witty's DVD to the CTA, which reviewed it. Gaffney said Bus Operations is identifying the operators shown on the video to interview them.

Gaffney said the 23-minute scenario "would seem to be a violation."

One problem with the CTA bus idling rule is that some older buses won't start again if they get shut off, said Eugene Thurmond, a recently retired CTA bus transportation manager.

Thurmond said bus drivers idle buses for the convenience of customers -- to keep the bus a comfortable temperature until it's ready to continue its route and to make sure it's running when customers need it. "We love our customers," Thurmond said.

A 2006 state law prohibits diesel engines from idling for more than 10 minutes, but that doesn't apply to CTA buses on their routes.

The Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago has urged the CTA to cut emissions from buses by attaching particulate filters that will eliminate more than 90 percent of the soot from their tailpipes, according to association spokesman Brian Urbaszewski. The cost would be \$8,000 each.

Despite the idling, CTA says its fuel use is improving. Huberman said that because of redesigned new buses, relocating where some buses begin routes and limiting use of older, less-efficient buses, the CTA saved 355,500 gallons of fuel in May compared with the same month last year, despite driving 35,000 more miles. The CTA also is getting 150 hybrid buses, which it says will save \$565,000 a year.