



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

Six Questions to Consider Before You Outsource Your Transit Vehicle Maintenance

Helpful advice from an expert.

By Anne Lowder

You have made a decision to hire a vendor to handle your agency's vehicle maintenance. What questions do you need to ask to make sure that the vendor you select is the right one for the job? Halsey King of Halsey King and Associates Inc. Bus Maintenance Consultants spoke about this topic at the Kansas RTAP pre-conference at the Kansas Public Transit Association Conference August 11, 2014 in Wichita, Kansas. He said that, in looking to solicit proposals, it is important ask yourself (and the vendor) six questions—ranging from the capacity to handle multiple types of vehicles to technician skills—to make sure that the vendor you choose can handle your vehicle maintenance needs. It is also important to give yourself some experience with the vendor (in the six question topic areas) before committing to a long-term contract. Below are the important questions small and rural fleet operators need to ask.

1 Does the vendor have the capacity to maintain my vehicles? Some smaller transit agencies have a range of vehicles from 12-20 passenger vehicles to mini-vans and even passenger cars. Do you contract locally with a garage that also works on vehicles for local residents? In this case when you solicit proposals and interview the maintenance vendor, the vendor must understand that you are a regulated agency. You are required to provide a certain level of customer service and, to do so, you need vehicles that are able to return to service as scheduled.



Halsey King of Halsey King & Associates explains the vehicle inspection process to over 50 Kansas transit managers working to improve their vehicle maintenance management.

Is your contractor available to work nights or weekends in order to make sure that your vehicles are ready to transport on a daily basis? Will your contractor make your vehicles priority-one over other customers?

2 Does the vendor understand the rules that govern regulated vehicles? Your agency is regulated by Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT), the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and, to a degree, the Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration (FMCSA) and the Transportation Division of the Kansas Corporation Commission. Additional federal regulations, such as the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), include provisions that impact the design, operation and maintenance of your vehicle.

An average small bus is certified by the manufacturer to meet approximately 35 of the 53 federal motor vehicle safety standards (FMVSS) covering the body, exhaust, seat belts and other driver control systems, King said. The FMVSS apply to all motor vehicles. Not all standards are necessary for each type. For instance, five of the FMVSS standards are for school buses alone. Each standard tells you what type of vehicle it covers, and the date it went into effect. The FMVSS standards can be found at <http://www.nhtsa.gov/cars/rules/import/FMVSS/>.

Here's an example of how regulations and standards influence maintenance on a wheel chair lift. If a shoulder

bolt (the bolt that allows the roll stop plate to go up and down on some lifts) fell off of the lift, and the technician went over to a bolt bin at the garage and replaced the shoulder bolt with a different, plain bolt, was the work done correctly? The answer is no—because the replacement bolt was not a tested-and-approved shoulder bolt specified by the manufacturer. King recommends not replacing a part on a wheelchair lift that was not purchased from the manufacturer. King states, “I am not a lawyer, but in my experience, lifts can create litigation problems.” The worst scenario is that the bus goes back into service, the lift fails, and someone gets hurt.

The technicians working on your vehicles need to be well-familiar with the contents of the manuals for the different systems on your vehicle. The manuals specify if a trained technician is needed, and they specify maintenance schedules for different components of the system. King said a maintenance technician will see your bus come in and can tell by the logo that it is a Ford or Chevy. He will know what to do under the hood, but you need to make sure he understands the maintenance required for the rest of the vehicle. The lift is a different component with its own maintenance requirements, and so is the HVAC unit in the passenger area of the vehicle. If the vendor routinely maintains just what is under the hood, and ignores the maintenance schedules for the other components, the lift and HVAC unit can become out of manufacturer warranty compliance and may cause operational issues with higher cost implications.

Who is responsible for the inspection and service work on the lift? King said that under federal regulations 49 CFR 37-38 and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), it is the transit agency’s responsibility to insure that adequate maintenance is performed on lifts, grab bars, hand holds, ramps, stairs, and all other ADA equipment on the bus. With that in mind, if you are considering subcontracting the maintenance, make sure your potential vendor has the capacity, training, and attention-to-detail to work on your vehicles.

3 Are the maintenance facilities well equipped?

Vehicles are becoming more sophisticated with each vehicle generation, with new features like electronic engine management systems, LED lights and rivetless body parts. Therefore the vehicles require more maintenance than just changing the oil and rotating the tires. It is important, when you inspect a vendor’s site that the facilities are clean, well-lighted and have adequate room for your buses to maneuver without being damaged, and have a way to keep your expensive vehicles secure and safe.

4 How will parts and supplies be obtained? Transit buses are generally made of components from different manufacturers. You may have the bus chassis from one manufacturer such as Ford, the bus body possibly from

ElDorado National Bus Sales, and the lift from Ricon or Braun. Each component on the bus has a preventive maintenance schedule and a manufacturer’s warranty on parts and replacement that need to be followed. In your agreement with your maintenance vendor, the vendor should keep some fast-moving preventive maintenance parts such as belts, filters, and hoses in stock and be made aware that some parts will need to be ordered from the manufacturer.

King recommended always asking for your old parts back and/or for a core credit toward returned and remanufactured parts. [A core credit is much like getting money back for recycling. Parts on your vehicle have life cycles such as water pumps. When the parts are replaced, some can be sold back into the parts cycle to be re-manufactured. It might only be a few dollars, but it should be considered during contract negotiations. The larger the fleet, the greater difference a core credit might make to you.]

5 Technician’s skills, are they adequate? With more sophisticated vehicles the systems and component technology on your buses maybe beyond the technology found in the average automobile. That is why it is important to know the skill levels of the vendor’s technicians and be sure they can operate, repair, and inspect all systems on your buses. Ask to see the each technician’s certification and experience which should include certification from Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) or The New Service Technicians Society. King also recommended asking to look at a technician’s toolbox. He joked that if the box has lots of hammers this is not a good sign (you don’t need to pound on the high-tech components of a vehicle). Instead, the box should be well-organized with wrenches, screw drivers, specialty tools and scanning tools.

Finally, when negotiating a contract with a maintenance vendor, explain your requirements for detailed work orders—which should include a parts listing and work performed. Then each time you have work done, check the work order for time charged to the project, a list of parts worked on or replaced, and other details necessary to track your vehicle’s performance.

6 Has the vendor prepared a realistic budget? The vendor’s proposal should include a budget that covers the level of maintenance you asking them to provide. The vendor’s budget needs to be prepared so that you can understand overall parts and repair costs. Smaller maintenance vendors will more likely submit budgets based on hourly costs. It is best then to run on a verbal or “handshake” agreement. This will allow you to see how their costs are running on parts, time and labor (PTL), without having to commit to a specified contract time and cost. After a time, a contract might be beneficial, especially if the vendor is purchasing the necessary technology to work on your

vehicles and has installed security to safeguard your vehicles while at their shop.

In closing

A final note: Once you have selected a vendor, be sure to maintain regular communication. Meet on a regular basis to review costs, problems with manufacturer warranties and obtaining parts, repeated maintenance on a vehicle, unexpected maintenance, and recommendations on replacing vehicles. You, as general manager of your transit agency, are the person responsible for the maintenance of your fleet, whether the vehicles are maintained in-house or are outsourced. ●

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