As more cities and school districts consider buying electric buses, I have to ask: Would I want to depend on an electric bus to get where I want to go?

Electric buses are a new-ish technology. There are legitimate questions about whether they’re ready for prime time, which is the main focus of our network’s recent report, “Electric Buses in America.” But we’re not talking about replacing a perfectly fine, albeit polluting system with a riskier but cleaner system. We’re talking about replacing a system that is … pretty terrible.

Consider my own bus experience.

It was 8:00 p.m. in the middle of a cold and snowy Boston March. After a late night in the office, my coworker Jenny and I decided to head home. She and I lived in the same neighborhood outside of the city, which required taking a bus after the train. A complicating factor was that, after about 7:00 p.m., the buses run only once every hour or so in the winter. We had to make it home quickly to make the next bus.

We got off the train at Sullivan Square in Somerville at about 8:45 p.m., and we looked at the board to see when our bus was due to arrive. The 89 bus would be on its way in 15 minutes. So we waited. Fifteen minutes went by, and … no bus. Then, the bus number went blank. Worse: CANCELED appeared next to our route. And the route after it. No other routes appeared on the board. By that point, it was almost 9:30 p.m.

We trudged through the snow and the icy wind to the nearest clear road, and called for a Lyft to take us home. It was that or walk miles in the snow and cold. Were all the buses canceled because the roads were too dangerous? Or did they break down in the cold? I’ll never know. The MBTA doesn’t explain much.

I wish that was the only “threshold moment” I’ve had with bus travel, but unfortunately, it’s just one of many. Although most days have been
ordinary, with a bus running just a few minutes behind schedule or uncomfortably packed on the morning commute, the more traumatic experiences are the ones that stick with me. Still, I ride the bus rather than drive because it’s cheaper and better for the planet. But there must be a better way—which brings me back to electric buses.

Electric buses are 3 to 4 times more efficient than diesel or natural gas buses.

I read the “Electric Buses in America” study and I’m happy to report that it addresses some of my own questions about the reliability, cost and other issues by evaluating the experiences of cities that have been early electric bus adopters—though there have been glitches.

For example, Seneca, South Carolina, became the first city in the world to launch an all-electric municipal bus fleet in 2014. The rollout wasn’t without problems. The issues ranged from overheating batteries to initial trouble climbing up hills. But for each problem, the electric bus manufacturer is either actively working on a fix, or has already provided a solution.

And, again, electric buses aren’t replacing a perfect system. Seneca’s buses are far outperforming their diesel counterparts and expectations. The city expected the buses would go 30 miles on one charge, which was enough for their routes, but they’re actually getting more than 40. (And these were older models; current models can travel over 100, some close to 1,000.) These buses also require less maintenance. Diesel buses require a brake change every 30,000 to 40,000 miles. After Seneca’s electric buses had hit 100,000 miles, the brake pads were only 50 percent worn down. Less maintenance means more buses on the road, for longer, and lower costs in the long-term. In a big city like Boston, this could mean expanded routes, fewer full buses during major commuting hours, and more buses on the road instead of out for maintenance.

Can these buses stand up to extreme winter temperatures? Chicago’s fleet demonstrates that they can. The city’s first two buses, which entered service in downtown Chicago in 2014, have provided reliable, comfortable transportation even in a city that averages 35 inches of snow per year.

We live in a world where public bus transit could be awesome—with reliable, largely pollution-free buses that are good for our health, great for the planet, and capable of getting us where we want to go when we want to be there. Will there be a few bumps in the road? Sure. But when I consider the dirty, often-broken system we plan to leave behind, I’m ready to take my chances on electric buses. I’m no longer willing to tolerate dirty, diesel buses that break down far too often and cost too much in public dollars, damage to our health and climate change. I’m ready to ride electric.■

BAN ROUNDUP

Rather than require warning labels for Roundup, Trump administration moves to prohibit them

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.”

As we keep working toward a ban on Roundup in Massachusetts and across the country, 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.

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, MASSPIRG 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 Antibiotics Campaign 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.

PIRG CONSUMER WATCHDOG

Buckle up: AutoNation is selling unrepaired vehicles subject to recalls for safety defects

Our research partner’s report finds that America’s largest auto retailer is selling used vehicles with unrepaired safety recalls that make them dangerous to drivers, passengers and others who share the roads.

On Oct. 15, MASSPIRG released “Unsafe Used Cars for Sale,” a report by our research partner U.S. PIRG Education Fund and the Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety Foundation, which surveyed AutoNation dealerships in 16 metro areas across 12 states. The report found that 1 in 9 cars for sale at these dealerships have unrepaired defects.

“These recalls range from explosive Takata airbags to steering malfunctions to seat belt problems that could put the lives of drivers at risk even before the purchaser got home,” PIRG Consumer Watchdog Adam Garber told CBS This Morning. “AutoNation advertises that these processes are worry-free, but they’re not. If I have a car with a Takata airbag in it—that’s something I’m probably pretty worried about.”
NO SHORTAGE OF IDEAS FOR WASTE SOLUTIONS, SAYS JANET DOMENITZ

MASSPIRG members and many others are doing their part to reduce their contribution to the state’s waste problem. It’s time for lawmakers to do theirs.

MASSPIRG Executive Director Janet Domenitz gave state lawmakers a set of options to achieve that goal in her Aug. 13 letter to the editor of the Boston Globe. Among the ideas: expand the state’s bottle bill, to promote the recycling and reuse of more single-use beverage containers; ban polystyrene foam takeout containers and cups; ban plastic grocery bags, as so many cities and towns already have done; and pass right to repair legislation, to make it easier to repair gadgets instead of tossing them.

While the planet has finite resources, wrote Janet, we have a surplus of ideas for conserving them. “Our lawmakers should embrace these ideas, and follow the lead of the people of Massachusetts who are ready to reduce, repair, reuse and recycle our way out of the waste crisis.”

Dear MASSPIRG 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,

Janet Domenitz
Executive Director
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