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Green pastures for COLTS? Funds sought for switch to natural gas power

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The County of Lackawanna Transit System's executive director wants to power much of the agency's bus and van fleet with compressed natural gas instead of petroleum-based fuel.

Robert Fiume said state Sen. John Blake, D-22, Archbald, has made a funding request on behalf of COLTS to help pay for a natural gas fueling station, plus replacing or retrofitting about 20 of the transit system's 35 buses.

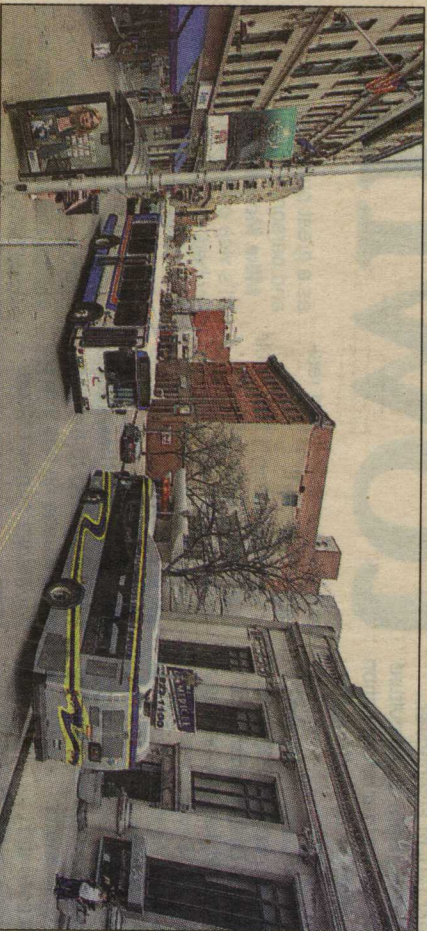
Larry West, a regional director for Mr. Blake, said the senator has put authorization for \$6 million in matching funds for a \$12 million total project into the \$125 million Redevelopment Assistance and Capital Program bill.

"Any time you can lever-

age state money to spur economic development and promote capital gains, that's a good thing," Mr. West said. "Lackawanna County is on the fringe of the gas fields. We hope to utilize those resources and provide a cheaper, cleaner fuel."

Mr. West expected the bill to be voted on by the state Senate this spring. He said even if the COLTS project makes it on the list, it does not necessarily mean it will be funded. Some projects that have been authorized in the 1980s still await funding, Mr. West said.

Mr. Fiume said the plan is still in its early phases, but under current market conditions, switching to compressed natural gas fuel would reduce the cost of fuel by an estimated 40 percent.



COLTS buses drop off and pick up passengers on Wyoming Avenue in Scranton.

MICHAEL J. MULLEN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The COLTS fuel budget for its entire fleet is about \$900,000 this year, Mr. Fiume said.

COLTS now has 13 hybrids and a couple of new diesel buses among its fleet that would not be candidates for replacement or conversion in the near future, Mr. Fiume said. The rate at which the buses and approximately 30-van fleet would be replaced or convert-

ed would depend on the funding and the condition of the fleet when the time comes.

Mr. Fiume said the cost of creating a fueling station at COLTS would be "close to \$1 million."

Each diesel bus costs COLTS about \$350,000, and the buses that run on natural gas cost about \$400,000, Mr. Fiume said. He estimated the cost of converting an exist-

ing bus at \$40,000.

The transportation director said his organization will likely apply for some other upcoming state grants, and federal funding that COLTS gets every year for capital improvements could also be in the mix to fund the project.

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