

MCI Public Sector Commuter Coaches

by Larry Plachno

Photos courtesy of MCI
unless otherwise noted

Every weekday more than 100,000 commuters and similar passengers are whisked from home to office, school and appointments on modern, comfortable MCI Commuter Coaches. Many of these coaches are equipped with WiFi and 110-volt outlets for passengers who want to use their commute time profitably. Others have satellite TV and seat back audio for passengers who wish to be entertained while they travel. Numerous coaches are equipped with new technology safety features including Electronic Stability Control, a SmartWave tire monitoring system and a fire suppression system. In addition, many of these coaches are helping the environment by Going Green with clean diesel engines, CNG fuel or even hybrid power.

Today, there are commuters who prefer to ride the Commuter Coach rather than driving because they can use their time profitably while on the coach. Others enjoy the fast and comfortable ride while some prefer to take the Commuter Coach in order to better our environment. Regardless of the reason, all of this is relatively new technology and MCI has been in the forefront developing it.

Those of us who have been around the industry for a few years will remember the old days when every city of any size had a bus company that provided local transit service as well as coaches for charters. When municipalities and transit agencies took over the local transit service, many of these private companies continued to operate long distance charter service or scheduled intercity route service with their coaches. At least initially, it was rare for transit agencies to operate intercity coaches.

There are at least four situations I know of that moved public transit agencies towards Commuter Coaches. One of these is the fact that some of these routes, particularly in the Northeast, were earlier operated with GM Suburban type buses. When they were no longer available, Commuter



MCI Commuter Coaches have made a big difference in public sector bus operations in the past three decades. Today, MCI Commuter Coaches provide a high quality of service with numerous passenger amenities rivaling commuter trains. Shown here is CNG-powered MCI Commuter Coach operating in the fleet of New Jersey Transit.

Coaches were the logical replacement. A second reason is that people began to move further out of urban areas and bedroom communities in search of affordable housing. This stretched commute times out to an hour or more in many areas. The infrastructure could not keep up with the traffic demand. Commuter Coaches provided a viable alternative to sitting in a personal vehicle on a congested highway.

A third reason was to enhance the image of the agency. Expanded use of Commuter Coaches by transit agencies followed the

increasing need to develop suburban routes offering amenities similar to commuter rail that would attract executive and upscale passengers. Commuter Coaches were the obvious choice for this. Some cities have established commuter coach routes in order to establish demand for future commuter rail lines. Finally, a fourth reason for Commuter Coach use was the increasing number of transit agencies that encompassed areas extending beyond the limits of one city. A transit agency covering only one city had little need for coaches while an agency covering a much larger area did.

The classic example in this category would be New Jersey Transit, an agency that not only serves the State of New Jersey but also also some surrounding areas. It effectively is the successor to Public Service Coordinated Transport, a private company that operated service throughout New Jersey with streetcars, buses and intercity coaches. New Jersey Transit today is the largest operator of Commuter Coaches in the United States.

Modern Commuter Coaches

Most historians trace the start of modern public sector Commuter Coach service to New York City and New Jersey in the early 1980s. Predecessor operations had run GM

coaches on various routes so it was not unexpected that New Jersey Transit decided in 1982 to acquire 900 MCI MC-9 coaches with some transit type features including special destination signs and transit-type doors. In 1984, MCI became the first coach manufacturer to offer a wheelchair lift as a factory option. Additional commuter coach orders from MCI in 1987 and from Eagle in 1989 expanded the New Jersey Commuter Coach program. While the coaches were purchased with New Jersey funds, many of them were assigned to private companies for operation on their routes. This was the first time that a vehicle with touring class roots was used by a public transit system for long distance routes.

At least in the early years of Commuter Coaches, both Neoplan with their plant in Lamar, Colorado and Eagle with their plant in Brownsville, Texas supplied Commuter Coaches because they could comply with Buy America provisions. Both of these companies went out of business leaving MCI as the dominant manufacturer in Commuter Coaches. As has been a tradition for years, MCI Commuter Coaches are framed up in Winnipeg, Manitoba and then transported on a flatbed truck to MCI's plant in Pembina, North Dakota where they are completed. The resulting coach then complies with Buy America provisions for transit agencies using federal funds in the the purchase of equipment.

Moving Up to State-of-the-Art

Commuter Coach operations took a major step forward at the turn of the century. The New Jersey Commuter Coach program had been highly successful but many of the coaches were now 18 years old. In April of 2000, New Jersey Transit approved a contract with MCI for the purchase of 1,244 Commuter Coaches over a period of four years. Noteworthy improvements included LED lighting, an electronic destination sign and front cap that was less pronounced than on the previous Commuter Coaches, and more glass in the front door for safety. The wheelchair system was vastly improved and now included an automated sliding door. Perhaps most important of all, this was the first order of intercity Commuter Coaches produced with a multiplex system.

The initial order for 1,244 coaches was split into three different models. The largest group involved 862 MCI model D4000 coaches that were 40 feet long and 102 inches wide. Of these, 648 were kept by New Jersey Transit while the other 214 went to private operators. Next came 285 model D4500 coaches which were 45 feet long and 102 inches wide. New Jersey Transit kept 70 while the remaining 215 coaches went to private operators. Finally, the remaining 97 coaches were designated as model D4000N. They were 40 feet long but only 96 inches wide. These narrow coaches were intended for use through the Holland Tunnel where width restrictions applied. The original plan was for six of these coaches to be retained by New Jersey Transit while 91 would go to private operators. However, only four of the 96-inch wide coaches were actually built.

This did not set a new record for an intercity coach order. In 1947, Greyhound ordered 2,000 new coaches from GM to update its worn, Wartime fleet. This included 1,643 PD3751 coaches and 357 PD4151 coaches. However, this New Jersey Transit order was certainly the largest order for Commuter Coaches and may have set records for transit agency bus orders.

MCI Commuter Coaches date back to the 1980s when New Jersey Transit acquired 900 MCI MC-9 Commuter Coaches for upscale commuter service. Special features included the bifold front door and a special destination sign. Most of them remained in service for 18 years or more. NBT.



New Jersey Transit began replacing their MC-9 Commuter Coaches with newer models in 2000. Most of these were the 40-foot D4000 model like the one pictured. This one was photographed following a blizzard in February of 2003 while operating on 10th Avenue in New York City. J.C. REBIS JR.



Going Green

One of the nice features of MCI Commuter Coaches is that they offer operating agencies three different ways to improve the environment by “going green” with power. Agencies that require conventional diesel power will be pleased to know that new MCI commuter coaches come with a “Clean Diesel” Cummins engine that meets or exceeds all Environmental Protection Agency requirements.

A second power option on MCI Commuter Coaches is Compressed Natural Gas (CNG). This dates back to 1999 and 2000 when MCI delivered 77 CNG-equipped commuter coaches to New Jersey Transit. These coaches are equipped with a Detroit Diesel S-60G 12.7L engine and are still in service with more than 500,000 miles on the odometer.

In 2010, MCI borrowed one of the CNG-powered Commuter Coaches from New Jersey Transit and re-powered it with a current technology Cummins ISL-G engine. It was driven on a nationwide tour to gauge the interest of transit executives in CNG power. The results were very positive and as of late 2010 MCI is now offering CNG power as a regular option on Commuter Coaches. It will involve a Cummins ISL G 8.9 liter engine meeting or exceeding all EPA 2010 requirements.

The third green power option on MCI Commuter Coaches is the Allison Hybrid System. This system creates electricity from regenerative braking and stores that power in an Energy Storage Unit like a battery. When starting up after a stop, the Allison Hybrid Drive combines this electrical power with diesel engine power to bring the coach up to speed. The big advantage of the hybrid system is that it can use a smaller diesel engine and hence saves on fuel and reduces emissions. Reports indicate that this system is incredibly smooth and quiet. There are now more than 140 coaches with this system in revenue service in the United States and Canada.

MCI pioneered this system in coaches in 2003 when they delivered four MCI D4000 Commuter Coaches with Allison Hybrid Drives to New Jersey Transit. They were equipped with the Cummins 8.9-liter diesel engine and the Allison EP50 hybrid propulsion system. These coaches are still in service today and have provided extensive operating experience.

In 2007, MCI was awarded a contract to provide Commuter Coaches to Houston Metro with the Allison Hybrid System. These were the 45-foot MCI D4500 model equipped with the Allison’s EP50 Hybrid System and a smaller Cummins engine. MCI continues to offer the Allison Hybrid System with a smaller Cummins engine as



MCI pioneered hybrid Commuter Coaches in 2003 with coaches for New Jersey Transit. Houston Metro placed a major order for MCI hybrid Commuter Coaches in 2007. Shown here, the Houston hybrids are 45 feet long with the Allison hybrid system and a Cummins engine.



New York City is so large that its Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) operates MCI Commuter Coaches on several routes within the city limits. Due to the distance between the five boroughs of New York, MTA operates Commuter Coach routes serving Manhattan, Staten Island, Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx. Some of these routes only operate in rush periods.

an optional power system on Commuter Coaches.

MCI Commuter Coach Operators

Today, more than 4,000 MCI Commuter Coaches are in regular operation from New York to Hawaii and from Texas to Canada. Each operation seems to have its own personality but many of them have selected MCI Commuter Coaches for similar reasons that include providing high capacity and riding comfort, attracting executives and upscale

passengers out of their cars, providing safety and comfort for higher speed service, and strong service and parts support.

Known for building robust models with favorable life-cycle cost profiles, MCI has offered the kind of curb appeal and amenities that can lure commuters out of their cars and into rapid transit – since these coaches are designed for high-speed highways. These coaches also allow transit agencies to move 57 passengers with only one driver while occupying only 45 feet of valuable curb space.

The following list is far from complete but does provide an interesting variety in operations and uses.

The New York City area has the largest need for commuter service in the United States. Through an interesting quirk in geography, most of New Jersey is actually closer to New York City than most of New York State. Hence, it is not unexpected that New Jersey Transit operates the largest fleet of MCI Commuter Coaches. There is a wide variety of Commuter Coach service including routes that were intercity in nature in prior years, routes that parallel railroad lines, routes that provide high class commuter service where no rail lines exist, and even routes operated by private companies using New Jersey Transit coaches. Most of the New Jersey Transit Commuter Coach routes operate into New York City for commuters and day trippers.

New York City's Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) is also a big operator of MCI Commuter Coaches. Like most municipal transit agencies, New York's MTA also runs local routes using conventional transit buses. Unlike most municipalities, New York City is so large that there are several routes where express Commuter Coach service is not only practical but highly desirable. The most obvious of these operate from the borough of Manhattan to the other boroughs including Staten Island, Brooklyn, Queens



Basically a crosstown line, the Tappan ZEE Express line operates east and west in an area north of New York City. The line gets its name because it uses the famous Tappan Zee Bridge to cross the Hudson River. Three MCI Commuter Coaches were recently acquired by Rockland County for use on this line.

and the Bronx. Several of these routes only operate in rush periods.

One of the more interesting MCI Commuter Coach operations in the New York area is the Tappan ZEE Express line. It is essen-

tially an east-west crosstown line several miles north of New York City from Rockland to White Plaines. The route is named for the famous Tappan Zee Bridge, which the bus line uses to cross the Hudson River. There is a connection with Metro-North

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MCI Commuter Coaches are also used effectively in providing service to smaller cities. Yolo County Transportation District operates their Yolobus service west from Sacramento, California.



The County of Hawaii operates MCI Commuter Coaches in its Hele-On service on Hawaii's largest island of Hawaii. Routes not only cross the island but also serve the volcano district on the southern shore.

Trains (the old New York Central line along the Hudson) for commuters and day trippers going to Grand Central Station. The New York State Transit Agency recently purchased nine MCI Hybrid Commuter Coaches. Three of these coaches will go to the Rockland County Department of Public Transportation for use on the line.

GO Transit (Government of Ontario) is the largest operator of MCI Commuter Coaches in Canada. Unlike many other transit operators that use Commuter Coaches where rail lines do not exist, GO Transit uses their Commuter Coaches to supplant and feed their commuter rail system. Go Transit operates seven primarily rail routes out of Toronto with most commuter trains only operating inbound in the morning rush period and outbound in the evening rush period. On most routes, midday service is provided by the Commuter Coaches that also provide some service extending beyond the rail lines.

As its name implies, Houston Metro serves the entire Houston Metro area. It was an early user of Commuter Coaches operating both Eagles and Neoplans in years past. Metro operates an integrated transit system that includes light rail transit, bus rapid transit, commuter rail transit and 25 Park and Ride lots. Since 2001, Houston Metro has been operating a fleet of diesel MCI Commuter Coaches from its Park and Ride locations, many operating in HOV lanes.

In 2007, Houston Metro ordered 52 Hybrid MCI Commuter Coaches with options for a total of 142 units. The MCI Commuter Coaches are also used on the Airport Direct service that operates every 30 minutes between downtown Houston and George Bush Intercontinental Airport.

Proving that MCI Commuter Coaches can be found most anywhere is the Hele-On service on the Island of Hawaii, the largest of the Hawaiian Islands. Operated by the

County of Hawaii, these 40-foot MCI Commuter Coaches seat 49 passengers and operate on longer routes including the cross-island service from Hilo to Kona. Another route serves Ka'u on the southern shore of the island near the volcano area. It most likely is the only place in the United States where you can ride an MCI Commuter Coach within sight of an active volcano.

Not all MCI Commuter Coaches operate in major metropolitan areas. Based in Woodland, California, the Yolo County Transportation District signed a five-year agreement with MCI in 2010 that could involve as many as 131 MCI Commuter Coaches for YCTD and other California systems. YCTD operates routes west from Sacramento serving western Sacramento County, Yolo

County, and northeastern Solano County. Routes serve Downtown Sacramento, Sacramento International Airport, University of California at Davis and Cache Creek Casino Resort. Yolo is also running an MCI CNG-powered D4000 Commuter Coach.

MCI Commuter Coaches also work well in smaller operations where there is a need. A good example are the four MCI Commuter Coaches recently purchased by the City of Valpariso, Indiana. Located southeast of Chicago, Valpariso saw a need for commuter service into Chicago for its residents and launched its new ChicagoDash service in October of 2008. Operations are limited to inbound commuter service to Chicago on weekday mornings and outbound back to Valpariso on weekday

The largest operator of MCI Commuter Coaches in Canada is GO (Government of Ontario) Transit that is based in Toronto. Many of the coaches are used to provide service during non-rush periods along commuter rails when the trains do not operate. Some coaches also provide connecting service to the rail lines from more distant areas.



evenings. The coaches are equipped with WiFi, 110-volt outlets and a satellite TV monitor system.

Modern Commuter Coaches

As the industry faces a new era of fuel conservation and energy awareness, MCI continues to move ahead with green solutions for public transit. These include 2010 EPA-compliant clean diesel engines as well as the availability of CNG power and Hybrid systems. In addition to complying with Buy America provisions, MCI's Commuter Coaches have completed Altoona testing with the new EPA-compliant engine and the Hybrid drive system.

In 2009, MCI began to make three-point passenger seat belts available on its full line of coaches. This effectively made MCI the first manufacturer to offer three-point passenger belts in the transit market segment. Other safety options now include asset tracking and video surveillance.

A wide range of options are available in and on MCI Commuter Coaches. These include individual passenger air vents, stop request systems, two wheelchair positions, a lavatory and a special dashboard designed for electronic fare collection systems. MCI also offers large transit-style front, side and rear electronic destination signs and a bi-part entry door. Both energy absorbing front and rear bumpers and bike racks are available. Drivers appreciate the fact that the coach has a steerable third axle for ease of maneuverability in urban centers yet is designed to operate smoothly and quietly at sustained highway speeds. Passengers



Heading MCI's Commuter Coach department is Michael Melaniphy, vice president of Public Sector. Melaniphy has numerous success stories to tell about working with public sector transit operations that got passengers to leave their cars behind and hop on board modern MCI Commuter Coaches that are friendly to the environment while providing attractive passenger amenities.

appreciate the higher level of MCI Commuter Coaches where they can see above the traffic and enjoy their ride.

"Our models are focused on cleaner power and improved aesthetics designed to attract drivers from their cars," said Michael Melaniphy, MCI vice president of Public Sector. "MCI has made the investment and can offer public transit authorities their choice of 2010 EPA-compliant engine technology

in either a clean diesel, Hybrid diesel-electric or CNG configuration to power a 45-foot Commuter coach that is compliant with both Buy America and the FTA Altoona bus testing requirements. The MCI Commuter Coach is a solution to successfully curb the traffic congestion caused by urban sprawl. With the Hybrid and CNG, we're giving cities and communities the means to be innovative and help meet their emission-reduction targets."

A wide range of new technology and safety features are available to make your MCI Commuter Coaches state-of-the-art. Included is Electronic Stability Control (ESC) that assists the driver. Developed by Meritor WABCO, ESC senses any instability in cornering, sudden changes in direction and dangerous conditions like slippery roadways. ESC helps the driver control the coach in these conditions while maintaining the smooth MCI Commuter Coach ride. Also available is the Smart-Wave tire-pressure monitoring system that constantly checks for high tire temperatures, low tire pressures or a tire failure. MCI also offers a fire suppression system on their coaches.

"Transportation is now the second-highest expense in most households," said Melaniphy. Agencies using the MCI Commuter Coach on their longer routes are finding that riders appreciate a comfortable alternative to their car with the amenities that keep them connected and productive. Our Commuter Coach has proven to be a successful solution to connecting communities and easing traffic congestion." □

New MCI Commuter Coaches offer a wide range of green power options, passenger amenities and safety features. Clean diesel engines, a hybrid system and CNG power are all optionally available. Coaches can tempt upscale passengers out of their cars with WiFi and 110-volt outlets while Electronic Stability Control, tire monitoring systems and fire suppression systems add to coach safety.

