METRO’s annual Bus Maintenance Survey sees a growth in workforce issues compared to the first three installments, while more than 60% of the agencies who responded say they are buying more parts because they have to hold onto buses longer.

BY ALEX ROMAN, Managing Editor

As lack of dedicated federal funding and state and local issues continue to take their toll on public transportation budgets, 64% of respondents to this year’s METRO Bus Maintenance Survey say they are buying more parts due to aging fleets.

Meanwhile, electrical (issues/training) remains the number one issue in maintenance shops throughout the U.S. and Canada for the second year in a row, with training and staffing each jumping into the top five as turnover rates continue to grow due to retirement.

Diesel remains the top type of vehicle propulsion for many fleets, while many continue to explore the usage of alternative propulsion, including hybrid-electric, natural gas, biodiesel and propane.

When asked what questions an agency should ask when exploring the possibility of adding alternatively-propelled vehicles, the top answers were “What are the true costs associated with implementation?” “What is the actual range of the vehicles?” and “What maintenance issues did you experience?”

For the fourth year, METRO sent out its survey to even more maintenance shops, spanning a wide demographic consisting of large metropolitan to small and rural transit agencies as well as university-focused systems. Questions covered topics ranging from fleet size to average age of their fleet, hours of training provided per year and how that training is delivered, and the top issues in their shops to what parts they buy most often.

Agencies varied in fleet size, with the largest maintaining 2,300 buses and the smallest 26, with the mean boasting a fleet of 285 buses. Meanwhile, respondents’ salary levels ranged from a high of $170,000 to a low of $65,000, with the mean earning $93,000.
The average fleet size was 285 vehicles, slightly less than last year's 335 vehicle average. The largest amount of vehicles reported was 2,300, with 26 vehicles the least amount reported.

The average age of fleets continue to go down over the last five years, with the oldest fleet today reported to be 14 years compared with 16 years five years ago. Today’s youngest fleet is three years, with the youngest fleet five years ago also coming in at three years old.

Tied at the top again are 45,000 miles or less and over 60,000 miles, similar to the first two years of the survey in 2011 and 2012. Very few agencies continue to run their buses more than 60,001 miles, with the number shrinking by one percentage point compared with 2013’s responses.
In The Shop

Top 10 biggest shop issues

1. Electrical (issues/training)
2. Engines/Transmissions
3. Exhaust Gas Recirculation Systems
4. Training
5. Staffing
6. Technological Equipment (fare boxes, GPS, destination signs, etc.)
7. Brakes (changes/failures)
8. HVAC Systems
9. Parts
10. Leaks

Electrical issues/warnings continues to be the top issue faced in the maintenance shop, while training and staffing jump into this year’s top five from spots six and eight, respectively. Exhaust gas recirculation jumps from five to three and HVAC systems drops from three to eight.

Number of full-time mechanics on staff

A large majority of this year’s respondents have 40 or less mechanics on staff, with the largest amount reported totaling 650 and the smallest, one. Very few respondents reported having part-time mechanics on staff.

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**In The Shop**

**Hours budgeted for mechanic training per person**

- Not budgeted . . . **45%**
- 20 or less . . . . **18%**
- 40 or less . . . . **14%**
- 41 to 80 . . . . **14%**
- 81 or more . . . **9%**

Forty-five percent of respondents report they cannot budget training — a 25% growth compared with 2013. Thirty-two percent report they are training mechanics 40 hours or less.

**Are you buying more parts due to older buses?**

- Yes ........... **64%**
- No .............. **31%**
- Not sure ........ **5%**

New for 2013, METRO asked agencies if they have to buy more parts due to having older buses in their fleets, as the lack of federal funding continues to make a significant impact on budgets around the nation. More than 60% reported they are indeed buying more parts, while 5% reported they are not able to tell if they have to buy more parts because their fleets are getting older.

**Do you promote from within?**

- Yes ............ **82%**
- No ............. **0%**
- Sometimes ... **18%**

Eighty-two percent of respondents reported they hire from within — an increase of more than 30% compared to 2013. The number of agencies who only sometimes promote from within also shrank by a little over 28%.

**Sources used to deliver training**

- OEMs . . . . . . . . **82%**
- Suppliers/Vendors . . . **68%**
- Dealers . . . . . . . . **55%**
- In-House . . . . . . **45%**
- State, local or national associations . . . . **36%**
- College/school . . . **14%**

OEMs, suppliers/vendors continue to provide the majority of training for transit agency mechanics around the nation. The dealers and state, local or national association categories made jumps this year compared to 2013, while the percentages of agencies using in-house sources or colleges/schools for training decreased. (Note that transit agencies were able to provide several answers so there is some overlap.)

**Top 5 Parts you buy the most of?**

1. Filters
2. Fluids
3. Brakes
4. Lights
5. Tires/Batteries (Tie)

*METRO asked what are the top parts agencies are buying the most of, with filters again topping the list. Cracking the top five for the first time is batteries, which is tied with tires at No. 5.*

**Where parts are sourced**

- OEMs . . . . . . . **65%**
- Third-party . . . . **40%**
- Manufacturers . . . **30%**

Also new for 2013, METRO asked where agencies are sourcing parts, with OEMs coming out on top. (Note that transit agencies were able to provide several answers so there is some overlap.)