

Duke Energy Offers To Help Buy Electric Buses For CATS

WFAE | By [David Boraks](#)

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Jesse Steinmetz/WFAE

Charlotte Douglas International Airport recently began using electric shuttle buses. Could CATS convert its fleet too?

Duke Energy is in negotiations with the city to buy electric buses for Charlotte Area Transit System. The news came as a surprise to environmentalists, who say an all-electric bus fleet would help the city meet its climate change goals.

CATS CEO John Lewis mentioned the talks near the end of Wednesday night's meeting of the Metropolitan Transit Commission, which oversees CATS.

One scenario is for Duke to pay for electric buses up front, and for the city to repay the cost through a long-term electricity purchase contract, according to people who attended the meeting. Lewis gave few details, including who would own or maintain the buses.

Duke Energy confirmed the negotiations, but also offered no details, such as how many buses Duke would buy.

"Part of Duke Energy's aggressive climate strategy is to spur adoption of electric

said. "Earlier this year, Duke Energy submitted a proposal to electrify a portion of CATS buses, and we are pleased they have now chosen to engage in contract negotiations with us to adopt this technology."

Duke has pledged to convert most of its own fleet to all-electric vehicles by 2030. The company also has provided grants to some municipalities to help buy bus charging stations.

Meeting City Climate Goals

Two years ago, the Charlotte City Council adopted a set of goals to fight climate change, including eliminating carbon emissions from city-owned vehicles and buildings by 2030. But Lewis has been skeptical of electric-bus technology and reluctant to move quickly on the idea. Without electric buses, the city can't meet its goal.

Lewis's announcement was unexpected, said Shannon Binns of the environmental group Sustain Charlotte.

"If we want to achieve our goals around reducing our impact and contribution to climate change, we have to do this," Binns said. "So this is a really exciting development."

CATS currently has about 300 diesel and hybrid diesel-electric buses and spends about \$6.5 million a year on diesel fuel — money that CATS won't have to spend if it moves to an all-electric fleet, Binns said. It's still not clear what the net savings might be after the cost of electricity is factored in.

"But it's also great news for taxpayers," he said. "This is a much more reliable and economical source of fuel than the gasoline and diesel that we currently use."

Electric Bus Trials

CATS is already planning to give electric buses a try, separate from the Duke negotiations. A \$3.7 million federal grant announced in June will go toward buying a handful of electric buses and charging stations. The city has not said when that trial will begin. Meanwhile, Charlotte Douglas International Airport [recently began using electric shuttle buses](#) between the terminal and parking lots.

Former Mayor Jennifer Roberts, who now works for the climate change group ecoAmerica, welcomed the possibility of an all-electric bus fleet for CATS.

"We know that electric vehicles are the future," Roberts said. "We know there are some countries that are banning the sale of internal combustion engines after a certain year. We need to keep up. So if Duke is willing to do this, which makes sense because it's more electric customers for them, it's great."

Roberts said she hopes Charlotte moves swiftly to adopt electric buses. And beyond that, she wants to see Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools introduce electric school buses, too.

But in an email to Mayor Vi Lyles, city manager Marcus Jones and other local officials Wednesday night, CATS' Lewis said: "We are excited about the potential for this groundbreaking partnership. However, the devil is always in the details and we are just beginning negotiations with Duke. Stay tuned."

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David Boraks previously covered climate change and the environment for WFAE. See more at www.wfae.org/climate-news. He also has covered housing and homelessness, energy and the environment, transportation and business.

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