Illinois utility tries using electric school buses for bidirectional charging

Wauconda has had the two buses for three years, with two years of funding left. Rick Strauss, director of transportation for Wauconda, said that while he is hopeful for the success of the pilot, the electric buses have already posed significant challenges for the district, leading him to doubt whether the buses can effectively give back to the grid.

For example, Strauss said that the district will put an average of 10,000 miles on a diesel bus per year. “But after three years with our electric buses, with the amount of issues that we had, each one of them had less than 1,000 miles on them after two years of service,” he said, adding that the buses probably spent more time “on a tow truck” going to get fixed than on their actual routes.

Strauss also listed among the issues a lack of certified mechanics that can work on the buses when they break, frequent

technological failures, and buses losing functionality in cold weather.

Although he said he recognizes the benefits of electric buses, such as quieter motors, better air quality for students, and less diesel fuel emissions, the lack of functionality of the buses overshadows potentially positive outcomes. After the five-year grant runs out, he’s not sure whether the district will continue to use them.

“It’ll be interesting to see the metrics and what we get back from ComEd versus what it costs to run these [buses],” he said, adding that the cost of two electric buses “would take my entire bus budget.”

ComEd is prioritizing testing the technology as well as anticipating challenges moving forward. Botero said the goal of the current testing is “making sure that the technology is well understood” and to answer any questions.

The companies are also determining the exact way to compensate school districts before further evaluations and eventual modeling to “see what a program would look like” at a larger scale.

Botero said that they will be getting results from the pilot testing at the end of the year and will design the next phase of the pilot based on those findings.

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