



The first students to ride School District 64's new electric bus on Salt Spring arrive at GISS on Jan. 3.

NEWS

First electric school bus on Salt Spring roads

By **ROBB MAGLEY**

January 11, 2023

The bus fleet at Gulf Islands School District (SD64) officially began its transition to electrification after the winter break, as driver Rick Neufeld safely delivered the first students to Gulf Islands Secondary School at 8:37 a.m. Tuesday, Jan. 3, on SD64's new fully electric school bus.

District director of facilities, capital projects and transportation Colin Whyte said the bus would continue to run Route 6, which serves high school, Salt Spring Elementary and Phoenix Elementary students and runs chiefly along Long Harbour and Mansell roads. Once the district's second electric bus is in service, it would pick up and deliver students on Route 2.

"We're still working on the big charger installs," said Whyte, who said they were waiting on parts to have the charging system fully operational. "Once we get that installed we can run both buses. But we can run one to start, and we won't have to burn any more diesel — at least for one route."

A feasibility study done in 2019 estimated a full transition to electric school buses would eventually save the district some \$50,000 each year in fuel and maintenance costs. To facilitate the shift from diesel, the district is installing 20-kilowatt "Level 3" DC fast chargers; these will generally be charging buses during the day in between runs, as well as overnight.

“It’s got enough kick to keep the buses charged, even if we bring them down to almost nothing,” said Whyte.

In addition to not burning fossil fuels — or emitting exhaust — the buses are significantly quieter than the diesel vehicles they’re replacing. But Whyte said the new bus wouldn’t be sneaking up on any unsuspecting pedestrians.

“Below 30 kilometres per hour, it has a noisemaker on it, so people can hear it coming,” said Whyte. “It turns off above 30 because the tires are making enough noise to be heard.”

SD64 has said the district plans to gradually replace its diesel bus fleet with electric buses as existing vehicles age beyond service requirements.

“Seeing students riding the first electric bus in the SD64 bus fleet is heartening,” said superintendent Scott Benwell. “It shows the district’s commitment to a reduced carbon footprint and is but one step in the overall adjustments to operations that will be necessary in the years to come.”