

VENTURING MAGAZINE

Could a BUS improve your Venturing Program by Joe Garrett

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The author bought his first school bus for his Explorer Post in 1974. He has also owned two ex-greyhound buses and several more school buses for Venturing Crews over the years.

One of the most daunting challenges of many Venturing Crews is transportation. As your Crew grows in membership, this problem gets larger and at some point, may present a challenge that actually prevents further growth.

Many Boy Scout Troops have overcome this challenge by acquiring used school buses. This is a very inexpensive form of transportation for larger groups and works exceptionally well for long trips. Good used school buses can be purchased for as little as \$300 as school districts dispose of them at public auctions. They are also available from bus dealers who take in



entire used fleets as trade-ins on newer equipment. In many states, school buses must be retired after 10 years of service. At ten years old, any school bus that has been maintained properly has many, many years of useful life left. There is not much demand for used school buses, which explains why they are so inexpensive. Many buses in very good condition end up in the scrap yard for the simple reason that they are worth more as scrap steel than as a church or troop bus. Fuel economy is exceptional for such a large vehicle, typically running between 5 and 7 miles per gallon for gasoline power and maybe a bit better for a diesel bus.

As with many great ideas, there are a few "gotcha's" in owning a school bus. One is that you must have a commercial driver's license to drive one if it is equipped with seating for more than 15 people. Another is that insurance can be a problem. A third is that a safe place to park a Crew bus may be a problem. Maintenance is a much lesser problem; especially if you are very careful in your selection. A gasoline powered school bus isn't much more difficult to maintain than a large pickup truck. As long as the tires are good, a bus just coming out of school service is likely to be in great shape with good brakes and all its oil and lubricants topped off and fresh. Tires can be a big issue, so be careful! A set of 6 tires for a full sized school bus can cost as much as \$2400, much more than the expected purchase price for the used vehicle.

You will almost certainly need commercial insurance for your bus. There is a category called "church bus insurance" that may cut your costs dramatically. This kind of insurance only covers named drivers and is intended for infrequently used buses such as those owned by churches and Boy Scout Troops. It is also possible to insure a bus as a motorhome if you do some major modifications, and if it is privately owned. This kind of policy is easier to buy for an intercity (ex-greyhound) style coach than for a school

bus. Many insurance companies will require that you remove all but 15 seats, install a kitchen, and provide some kind of sleeping accommodations



An intercity bus will cost a lot more than a retired school bus, but you can find coaches that are as much as 20 years old and still in good shape. Charter bus companies tend to keep their coaches in very, very good shape because the cost of a break down hundreds of miles from home with passengers on board is very costly. On the other hand, when a coach gets retired, it is often because there is some major maintenance issue so be careful. An engine rebuild on a diesel intercity coach will cost in excess of \$10,000 and is outside the ability of even the best backyard mechanic. Tires for a big coach are even

more expensive than for a school bus because they are bigger and there are more of them. Intercity coaches are more complex than school buses with features like air-ride suspension, air conditioning, climate control, onboard bathrooms, and reclining seats. They are significantly heavier than school buses and require an additional level of skill to safely maneuver because of their length and poor rear visibility. On the other hand, they are much more comfortable, have excellent storage capability for cargo and luggage, and tend to be built for a longer and more demanding service life.

Another option, and possibly the most realistic, is an air-porter style bus. These buses are generally built on a 1 ton or greater commercial van or truck chassis and may not require a commercial driver's license. They usually seat 12 to 15 people in better comfort than a passenger van and when retired are very affordable. They can often be insured as a private vehicle and while larger than a passenger car, do not require any special driving skills. These used buses tend to be inexpensive and often come with comfortable seating, air conditioning, and some luggage storage. If you do not have a commercial driver's license, make certain that your bus is equipped with 15 seats or less.

A full sized school bus or a coach can be outfitted with bunk beds, tables, storage lockers, and all sorts of amenities. Anyone who has spent a week at Philmont Scout Ranch or at the Philmont Training Center has seen Troop or Crew buses parked while their passengers participate in treks. It is not unusual to see a Scout bus at popular National Parks and other outdoor attractions, either. Travelling in a bus or coach is a special kind of adventure for teens, stopping at truck stops for fuel, snacks, or even for a shower. If your Crew activity requires a large amount of equipment like backpacks, scuba equipment, or inflatable boats, a bus is a great way to solve two problems at once. The seats in most buses can be removed and replaced with ease, providing a flexible stowage area in the back of the bus. The emergency exit on a typical school bus also makes a great loading door. Just make sure that the door and the exit aisle are never blocked while you are travelling.

The federal regulations for privately owned and operated buses are fairly rigorous but not overwhelming. If you decide to buy a school bus or an intercity coach for your Crew, you will need to become familiar with the Federal Motor Carrier Regulations for Private Motor Carriers of Passengers. There is a very good summary document available at www.fmcsa.dot.gov/documents/brochure-PMCPs.pdf. In general, you will be required to have a commercial driver's license with a passenger endorsement, appropriate insurance, a USDOT number on your bus, a driver's log of your hours, and to join a random drug testing pool. This may sound like a lot, but it isn't as bad as it sounds, and the rewards for your Venturing Crew can be amazing.

In the years that I have been a volunteer Advisor, I have driven several groups to Florida for scuba adventures, driven the Alaska Highway four times, driven to Philmont Scout Ranch three times, taken a 3000 mile tour of western National Parks and the Oregon Trail, and gone river rafting in Utah, Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and California. Our bus was the key to these adventures, and we also enjoyed working on the bus, modifying its seating arrangements, adding bunk beds, installing tables, a stereo, and adding a television. There are hundreds of young people who had their greatest adventures in my buses over the years and I am very proud to have been able to provide their transportation on these amazing adventures.

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