

Tech shuttles make streets even meaner

Oversize vehicles bludgeon asphalt, causing millions in damage each year

By MARK HEDIN

TALK ABOUT A DAILY GRIND! Each motor coach that ferries tech workers to Silicon Valley and back damages San Francisco streets 7,774 times more than the average SUV, according to road maintenance experts.

Every mile that they drive on city streets eventually will cost \$1.08 in road repair, according to calculations by the Department of Public Works cited in a March 31 report to the Board of Supervisors on the shuttles' impacts.

The tech shuttles weigh 10-15 times more than the average SUV and do disproportionate damage to the streets — perhaps millions of dollars worth every year.

"The thing with buses is a lot of the weight is just on that one axle. The heavier the vehicle, the more the potential damage. There are forces that multiply many times over," Russell Snyder, executive director of the California Asphalt and Pavement Association, told The Extra. "Pavement that might last 100 years might fall apart in five if it's not designed right."

"Heavy buses and trucks lead to faster roadway deterioration," Rachel Gordon, DPW spokeswoman, wrote in an email to The Extra.

Muni and the double-decker buses that ply Valencia Street, Lombard and Van Ness and other routes through the city weigh between 27 and 31 tons, depending on whether they are empty or full, according to a Pavement Engineering Inc. report cited in the March 31 memo to Supervisor Eric Mar by budget and legislative analyst Harvey Rose. Only garbage trucks are more damaging than tech shuttles — the equivalent of 9,343 SUVs each, the report says. Big rigs are comparable to 4,526 SUVs and delivery trucks a mere 442 times as much, according to the data.

The \$1.08 that the DPW determined the average mile traveled by a shuttle on city streets will cost to repair is a minute portion of the \$1,045,000 it costs to reconstruct a milelong lane of city streets. But no other vehicle plying the city streets, save garbage trucks, stresses the roads so.

The Extra made numerous attempts to determine the extent of shuttle trav-

el on city streets to ascertain the cost of the damage inflicted and was met with a lack of data at every turn. Fred Brousseau, who drafted the policy analysis report for the Harvey Rose memo, suggested taking available data and estimating how many miles each bus might travel through the city on the average run. He suggested 6 miles per trip and immediately acknowledged that was low, since buses have to travel from their parking spots to begin their routes.

The Extra decided on 10 miles per trip. On city streets, the ride from outer Lombard Street to the 101 onramp on Cesar Chavez is 6 miles. And certainly some of those buses wind through many streets as they make their rounds. Once the GPS is aboard, the bus will be beaming all sorts of data. So 10 miles per trip may well prove an underestimate.

Of the 17 firms known to be running shuttles from San Francisco to Silicon Valley, the budget analyst cited a 2012 ICF International survey, conducted for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, that obtained specifics on seven shuttle providers — Google, Apple, Genentech, Facebook, Yahoo, Netflix and Electronic Arts. ICF came up with 273 daily shuttle runs for a total of 8,030 passengers — an average of 29.49 per run. The report further says that there are about 35,000 passenger boardings



PHOTO TOM CARTER

The double-decker shuttle buses, like this one rolling north on Valencia past 24th Street, cost \$750,000 and can weigh more than 30 tons when loaded.

daily when both regional and intracity shuttles are counted. Assuming the same 29 passengers per trip, that's another 930 shuttle trips per day. Multiply 1,203 trips by the 10 mile-per-trip average, by 260 for the number of workdays in the year and the \$1.08 per mile in road repair costs, and the damage comes to \$3,378,024 per year.

The intracity shuttles that typically weigh 7-10 tons would, of course, contribute less damage.

San Francisco is in the midst of a three-year program to rehabilitate its 12,884 blocks, and the Department of Public Works claims to be repaving roads at an unprecedented pace — upward of 900 per year since 2011 when voters approved a \$248 million Road Repaving and Street Safety bond.

San Francisco's Transportation Code Section 501.b has restrictions on large vehicles traveling on 170 particular stretches of road. For instance, vehicles weighing 3 tons or more are barred from

the curvy sections of Lombard and Vermont streets, the steep sections of Taylor and Jones, Gough between Jackson and California, and Fillmore between Broadway and Union.

Similarly excluded are narrow streets such as Grant Avenue between Green and Broadway, or Albion between 17th and 15th and the hilly stretch of Guerrero between 18th and Cesar Chavez in the Mission. Without providing specifics, a San Francisco County Transportation Authority report from 2011 stated that it had "identified six roadway segments where large shuttle motorcoaches weighing over 14 tons may be traversing these weight-restricted streets."

Despite the extent of damage from the shuttles, San Francisco taxpayers have little recourse. As the budget analyst noted, California Vehicle Code Section 9400.8 bars local jurisdictions from imposing "a tax, permit or fee" for the use of its streets, no matter how destructive a vehicle may be. ■

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