

Uncommon Maintenance Practices Improve Transit Performance

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By R.W. Delaney, Business Writer

Progressive vehicle inspection is the standard in mass transit maintenance — that is, buses receive a major inspection at intervals of 3,6,9 and 12,000 miles and routine maintenance as needed, on a "24-7" basis. But Terry Yeager, Director of Maintenance for Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority (HART) in Florida, adds many other layers of maintenance. HARTline serves a yearly ridership of 7,000,000 in Hillsborough County (including Tampa), and Yeager's department services nearly 200 buses system-wide, to which HART will soon add 27 more coaches.

"Demands on the Maintenance Department are ever-increasing," Yeager concedes. But he doesn't dodge the work or the issues -- even solving peculiar problems that have no textbook answers, such as battling nuisance birds.

Battling Blackbirds

"Tampa is the Migratory Mecca for wandering starlings, grackles and blackbirds," Yeager declares. "They come in droves, thousands upon thousands." And what has attracted the birds most in recent years is the half-mile stretch of dedicated transit lanes through the middle of Tampa's main shopping district. The picturesque street, formed of handsome brick pavers, is tree-lined, with bus shelters staggered at pleasing intervals. But the beauty was obscured as thousands of pest birds roosted in the trees, leaving an unsightly aftermath on the pavers below.

"It was a huge mess," Yeager stresses, "and the filth was a health hazard as well, since bird droppings harbor harmful bacteria. Our crew was pressure-washing the street constantly, which is expensive and time-consuming."

Furthermore, the same birds were roosting on a tower at HART's headquarters and leaving their considerably acidic waste on employees' cars. The combined complaints of employees, bosses and patrons of the county's buses were rising on a massive scale.

"Any amount of feces is not good," Yeager articulates. This is a big tourist territory, and Yeager was sensitive to both aesthetic concerns and health issues. "Besides breeding disease-causing bacteria, the bird droppings were giving our agency a bad image and tarnishing the county's image among visitors and patrons."

Yeager knew it was time to bring in BirdXPeller PRO bird repeller, a sonic device manufactured by Bird-X, Inc. of Chicago. "We installed one unit on the tower," he says. "Instantly, there were no more birds. So we installed ten units along the transit lanes on trees near the bus shelters," Yeager explains. Here, Yeager says, the bird problem is halfway solved. The only power sources for the electronic units are at the bus shelters - which, unfortunately, are placed just a bit too far apart for the sound to travel sufficiently. He's thinking about getting battery-operated ones to fill in the gaps.

Meanwhile, Yeager says, "We've made noticeable headway. The brown brick pavers are no longer chalk white with bird waste," he says.

Clear Objectives.

Our goal," says Yeager, "is to eliminate major problems so that the minor ones will be easier and quicker to take care of." In other words, Yeager's department is applying the time-tested principles of preventive maintenance. His pressure-washing crew, on duty five nights a week from 7:00 p.m. to 3:00 a.m., has a much easier job now, Yeager says. "With the time saved, they aim their hoses into the trees to interrupt the sleep of any remaining birds."

Overall, Yeager is pleased. "The technology works," he says. "It's an inexpensive way of controlling the birds. And," he adds, "no harm is done to the birds. Even the Audubon Society OK's the methodology."

Directors of maintenance departments are "Jacks of All Trades." Yeager is on his way to mastering one more trade: Dispersing unwanted blackbirds, grackles and starlings.

