

## **Bus stands out like a guy wearing pink**

By Ed Grisamore  
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Drew Bucci drove a school bus 2,800 miles from Portland, Ore., to Macon. I've heard of long bus routes, but this one seemed a little extreme. Of course, this was no ordinary school bus, either. Although it was yellow across the front, the sides were painted with green grass and blue skies. In the windows were caricatures of happy school kids. Beneath was a message: "We're breathing cleaner air."

On the highways, Bucci watched motorists tap their brakes and do double takes. "It stands out," he said, "... like a guy wearing a pink shirt." When he arrived at the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce on Thursday morning, he noticed plenty of men wearing pink shirts.

After all, the countdown to the annual Cherry Blossom Festival was less than a day away. But the bus was one-of-a-kind. It was powered by propane, an idea whose time may finally be coming to Bibb County school bus stops. Tim Stewart, the city's director of vehicle maintenance, said Macon already has a number of vehicles operating on propane and other alternative fuels.

But there isn't a single school system in Georgia driving propane buses. Ed White, vice-chairman of the Middle Georgia Clean Cities Coalition, would be tickled if Macon and Bibb County - with their proximity to the Blue Bird school bus manufacturing facility in Fort Valley - were the first.

Several city officials were given a "Cherry Blossom" tour on the bus Thursday. Among those having her ears bent was Bibb school superintendent Sharon Patterson. "You'll have your own chance to experience a propane-powered shuttle bus to and from the balloon glow tonight. The buses will depart from the GEICO parking lot on Ocmulgee East Boulevard".

I noticed a difference on my downtown tour Thursday. It was much quieter than a diesel bus with no dropoff in power or performance. The most noticeable difference was the clean smell.

There is a significant reduction of emissions. That's a major reason why the clean-air folks have hopped on the propane bandwagon. Propane is the most widely used alternative fuel in the world, more than all alternative fuels combined. It's an environmentally-friendly way to reduce our dependence on foreign oil.

At a time when gas prices are at skyscraper levels, propane prices are about 30 cents a gallon cheaper. Gas prices could soar to the \$2 mark by summer. "The timing couldn't be better," said White. There are about 2,400 school buses in oil-rich Texas that run on propane. Right now, White wants to see at least one riding the streets of Macon. Maybe an entire fleet will soon follow. ([www.propaneschoolbus.com](http://www.propaneschoolbus.com))

Since November, Bucci and John Oldani, who designed the fuel system for the bus, have put some 15,000 miles on the odometer. In Colorado, Bucci crossed the continental divide and got out to write his name in the snow. At an altitude of 11,000 feet, he wasn't sure if the bus would restart in such cold temperatures. It did. "It *really* loves warm weather," he said. It should feel right at home in Macon.