

Low-floor vehicles improve access

By Ken Becker

On July 26th this year, we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) being signed into law. This piece of civil rights legislation prohibits discrimination and guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in the mainstream of American life.

When asked to write on the subject of *equal access*, I began with asking the question, “Does our industry really provide passengers of all abilities with an equal level of access and accessibility?” This, of course, can only really be answered by someone who lives with a disability, but from a small bus manufacturer’s standpoint, I can say that there have been several evolutionary developments in just the last few years toward bridging the gap.

Equal access in transportation today is something far more reaching, and not limited to only riders with disabilities. People are simply living longer these days and leading more active lifestyles later in life than ever before. According to Census.gov, there are currently 48 million people in the U.S. over the age of 65. This number is expected to steadily increase every year to almost 80 million by 2050. Now consider the increase in the overall demand and popularity for public transportation, and the need for equal access becomes more important than ever.

As a result of the increasing demand for public transportation, agencies have taken a closer look at the services they provide for both their fixed-route and paratransit services. A few things quickly became apparent. Their larger fixed-route buses were almost all equipped with ramp accessibility while their smaller paratransit buses were still equipped with traditional wheelchair lifts that only allow for one passenger to be loaded at a time. Ask anyone who requires the use of a wheelchair, power scooter or walking aid and they will unanimously say that they much prefer the use of a ramp. ADA guidelines say that ramp slope must be a minimum of 1:4. Now ask someone in a wheelchair if 1:4 is a suitable and safe ramp slope and most would say that it can be quite a steep challenge for both entry and egress. Certain low-floor bus manufacturers have risen to this challenge and exceed many of ADA’s current guidelines, including ramp entry with lesser degree slopes of 1:5 and 1:6.

According to the Mid-Size Bus Manufacturers Association (MSBMA) statistics for 2014, there is a strong upward trend showing that transit properties are incorporating additional smaller buses and vehicles into their fleet in efforts to better manage rising costs of operation. Agencies are looking more closely at their passenger capacity needs. Simply stated, if a bus is not filled to near capacity, it might not be the correct bus for that route. Larger buses typically use more fuel, require special driver’s certification testing and licensing and ultimately involve a higher cost of ownership. So being able to accomplish the job for a particular route with a smaller and less expensive vehicle has become common practice. In some instances, agencies will run their larger heavy-duty rear engine buses for peak rush hour transportation and then completely switch over to their cutaway fleet for non-peak



Low-floor bus manufacturers like ARBOC Specialty Vehicles exceed many of ADA’s current guidelines, including ramp entry with lesser degree slopes of 1:5 and 1:6.

hours on the same routes. Instead of looking at a low-floor cutaway as being more expensive than a traditional high-floor, Dallas DART for example considers the cost of the low-floor cutaways in their fleet as being 40 percent of the cost of their full-sized buses since they are used on some of the routes in some of the same ways.

With the introduction of the low-floor cutaway bus in 2009, the opportunity to provide equal access across an entire fleet is now a reality and well beyond just a concept. So how much is a low-floor cutaway bus worth? I have broken this answer down to three good reasons agencies are steadily replacing their high floor cutaway lift buses with low floor cutaway buses with ramps:

1. *Speed of Operation:* We have all heard the saying ‘time is money’. This is especially true in the world of public transportation. Being able to load multiple wheelchair and power scooter passengers can be accomplished with a just single ramp deploy. Agencies are finding that certain routes that used to require two buses can now be done in the same time or even less with one low-floor cutaway bus!
2. *Safety:* The traditional high floor cutaway bus has multiple steps in the passenger entryway. Nearly every driver has witnessed a passenger slipping or tripping on steps during entry or egress. Then there is simply the increased risk of utilizing a traditional wheelchair lift. We have all heard the horror stories. Ramp accessibility virtually eliminates this liability risk.
3. *Passenger Dignity:* This third point is all too often overlooked and its importance underestimated. When a mobility-challenged rider is forced to use a different entrance to board a bus and then secured down in the rear of the bus, their public transportation experience can sometimes make them feel less than equal. A bus that has a single entrance to accommodate riders of all abilities is simply non-discriminatory and provides equal access for all passengers. 

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