The Spirit of Independence

by ARBOC Specialty Vehicles, LLC
With the production and deployment of the Spirit of Independence (Independence), ARBOC Specialty Vehicles, LLC (ARBOC) aims to make the safety and dependability associated with its buses into a lower-cost option for agencies of all sizes.

“We consulted with many fleets that indicated they were operating 16-20 passenger buses and were utilizing a very small portion of the capacity. As a result, they asked us for a smaller vehicle offering” says Kim Yoder, vice president of sales and marketing for ARBOC. “Until now, there was no such option in the low-floor sector.”

ARBOC, based in Middlebury, IN, also wanted to introduce a vehicle built on the fuel-efficient Ford Transit T350 Cutaway chassis into its family of offerings. Between the vehicle’s size, build and affordability, ARBOC says the Independence works perfectly as an executive shuttle, hospitality shuttle, non-emergency medical transport or in the assisted living industry.

“We offered various models in the past, but never a Ford,” says Ami Sailor, marketing manager for ARBOC. “It is something we have been interested in building on for several years now and are excited to finally have had the opportunity to do so.”
Designing the Spirit of Independence

The Spirit of Independence has a 96-inch-wide body, with a capacity of up to 15 ambulatory passengers or five passengers using wheelchairs. Occupants will appreciate the superior headroom and comfortable ride, as well as the visibility offered by the large passenger windows.

ARBOC built the low-floor vehicle on a spring suspension using the same tried and true construction methods they apply to all their products.

“It has ARBOC’s full one-piece sidewall, which is extremely durable in the case of a side impact,” Yoder says. “It’s manufactured with a 1.5-inch steel cage structure, making it exceptionally safe for passengers.”

“As with all our products, rider safety is very important,” Sailor says. “This model has a proven design that has undergone extensive safety testing to ensure a comfortable, carefree ride for our passengers.”

The Spirit of Independence is powered by a 3.7L V6 gas or 3.2L Powerstroke diesel engine and six-speed automatic transmission, which ARBOC says allows the bus to achieve a fuel economy of 9 to 15 miles per gallon. It also features a 12-volt electrical multiplex system from I/O Controls.
Test-driving Independence

BUSRide met members of the ARBOC team in Middlebury, IN, at the company’s state-of-the-art manufacturing facility, before driving west to nearby South Bend.

The South Bend Public Transportation Corporation (Transpo) provides fixed-route and on-demand transit service to the communities of South Bend and Mishawaka, IN. The agency’s staff of 118 services a fixed-route ridership of approximately 1.75 million people along with 60,000 paratransit passengers. Transpo’s fleet consists of 48 fixed-route buses (of which 22 are powered by compressed natural gas) and 15 paratransit vans.

Test driving the Spirit of Independence was Manuel “Manny” Vila, a full-time driver for Transpo. Vila has been with the agency for nearly six years. He currently runs “relief run” routes where he takes over a vehicle mid-route, relieving the previous driver.

For the test route, Vila drove the bus away from the Transpo headquarters in downtown South Bend toward the South Bend International Airport, taking a road called Lincoln Way. That route, Vila says, normally leads through downtown South Bend and connects to various points before reaching the airport – touching trains to Chicago, as well as Greyhound and Amtrak stations.

“This route is particularly important to the people in South Bend because it makes so many critical connections,” Vila said. “It matters to locals as well as visitors coming from out of town.”

From there, Vila linked to another busy route for Transpo – one which cuts through downtown South Bend and passes across the campus of the University of Notre Dame before continuing to nearby Mishawaka and the area’s largest shopping mall.

Vila cut the route short before it exited South Bend toward Mishawaka, bringing the Spirit of Independence back to Transpo’s headquarters. On a normal day, he said, a Transpo bus on that route would be filled with shoppers and Notre Dame students.

Assessing the vehicle, Vila first noted its comfortable, smooth ride. “I was extremely comfortable,” he said. “Unfortunately, vehicles are sometimes not well maintained, and you start to feel every crack in the road as you drive. South Bend has been undergoing some much-needed road repairs, but I could hardly feel a bump on this bus.”

Vila praised the vehicle’s handling, brake-to-stop distance and acceleration, noting a good amount of torque as he pressed on the gas pedals. The vehicle, he guessed, would do well at picking up speed even when filled with passengers and wheelchairs.

Vila said the “automotive” feel of the driver’s area lent an ease to his driving a new vehicle, and he was particularly impressed by the cockpit’s accessibility and visibility.

“The panoramic windows offer amazing driver visibility, not only to the front but also to the side,” he said. “It’s so important for a driver to see as much as possible in all directions, and this bus helps me do that.”

“Everything in the driver’s area is within easy reach,” he added. “As drivers, we often have to deal with traffic and passenger activity in addition to handling the vehicle itself. Having an accessible cockpit is critical.”

Affordable and safe

Yoder says that the Spirit of Independence is especially appealing because of its low cost of ownership – the lowest operational cost of any ARBOC vehicle. Furthermore, its chassis can be serviced at any Ford dealership.

“It doesn’t only appeal to fleets who want to spend less money on a smaller vehicle,” she says. “It can also serve as an “entry-level” vehicle for retail customers like assisted living centers, and other potential buyers who want to try a low-floor but thus far haven’t been able to afford one.”

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