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Department of Education  
Pago Pago, American Samoa



## American Samoa's First Electric School Bus Hits the Road: A Safer, Cleaner Future for Student Transportation

Pago Pago, American Samoa, In a historic milestone for the Territory, the American Samoa Department of Education (ASDOE) proudly announces the launch of the Territory's first electric school bus. This project was made possible through a generous grant from the American Samoa Environmental Protection Agency (ASEPA) under the Clean School Bus Program. This project represents a bold step in promoting student safety, clean energy and community well-being.

This electric bus is the beginning of a larger vision for the Territory. The Department aims to expand its electric bus fleet in the coming years in collaboration with future federal opportunities. The team representatives shared heartfelt reflections on the years of work it took to bring this innovation to our shores. "We've been building the chassis for two years during COVID. Erik Solderholm, of International Company and his team advocated for the EPA's Clean School Bus Program four years ago. Fast forward to today: he returned to American Samoa with a bus. Our previous leaders and the ASDOE team worked collaboratively to ensure that students would be blessed with an electric bus.

"This bus is a wonderful opportunity through the EPA's Clean School Bus Program. It reflects our mission to invest in healthier, safer, smarter transportation options for our students," said Gabby Soderholm.

With zero tailpipe emissions, the electric bus eliminates diesel fumes that once surrounded students during transport. Its quiet motor also reduces noise pollution, creating a more peaceful and community-friendly ride.

The electric bus has already demonstrated superior performance on the island's terrain. It has proven more efficient than traditional fuel and gas buses, especially on hilly routes that are

common on the East Road. The electric motor regenerates energy while braking downhill — a process known as regenerative braking, which recovers energy and returns it to the battery, thereby improving range and efficiency.

“When going uphill, the bus uses energy, but when going downhill, it conserves energy. The bus slows down automatically without pressing the brake by simply taking your foot off the accelerator. This feature recharges the battery and enhances safety by giving the driver more control and reaction time,” explained Gabby Soderholm.

Mr. Eric Brown of ASDOE’s Transportation Division and Vili Loto are currently the only certified drivers for the new electric school bus, which marks a significant milestone as the first of its kind on the island. Mr. Brown shared that this is not only American Samoa’s first electric bus, but it also features a commercial-grade charger.

Last week, professional trainers from Arizona conducted a three-day intensive training for the bus drivers. The sessions focused on safety, navigation techniques and understanding the unique mechanics of electric buses. Equipping the drivers with the essential knowledge to operate the vehicle safely, particularly along the Territory’s hilly and winding terrain enhances their skills and performance.

Mr. Brown was grateful to their long-standing partnership with the International Company (IC), for its unwavering support. He noted the contrast between driving conditions in American Samoa and those off-island: “While other locations have mostly flat roads, here we deal with steep inclines and rugged terrain.” During their visit, partners from the IC had the opportunity to tour local routes and observe firsthand the need for frequent material replacements and diagnostic testing.

“This experience helped our partners understand why our buses require ongoing maintenance and support,” Mr. Brown added.

This "one-pedal driving" function ensures smoother operation, reduces driver fatigue, and adds a critical safety layer for students and pedestrians, especially when approaching intersections or school zones.

Equipped with lithium-based battery systems, the bus is powered by one of the safest technologies available today. "These batteries will not explode," stated Erik Soderholm, a former city firefighter from Honolulu. “As someone who knows what a battery fire is like, I can confidently say this is one of the safest buses ever built. That’s one of the key reasons we partnered on this project—to ensure American Samoa receives the safest, most reliable electric bus available.”

The bus outperforms traditional fuel and gas buses, especially when navigating flat and hilly routes. Regenerative braking enhances energy conservation and improves safety by slowing the bus without requiring the driver to apply pressure to the brake pedal, thereby providing more control in high-traffic zones or near crosswalks.

The electric buses come with an 8-year battery warranty and advanced telematics, enabling remote diagnostics and updates from Hawaii or Arizona. With fewer moving parts and software-driven systems, these buses are cost-effective, easier to maintain, and expected to last 10–15 years. “Electric buses are computers on wheels—a new era of clean energy and smart technology for our students.”

Director Maefau Dr. Mary Lauagaia Taufete’e, expressed her appreciation for finally meeting with IC representatives, the Soderholm bus dealership. This is a significant moment for the Department, as we are excited to receive new school buses. Her sole request is additional buses to facilitate student transportation between home and school. We thank our partners and stakeholders, the ASEPA and ASPA, for their collaboration in preparing us for this endeavor. Lieutenant Governor Pulumataala Ae Ae Jr, alongside the Director, had the opportunity to experience a bus ride, observing the bus performance while climbing a steep hill. They then confirmed that electric buses are safe for our students.

Fa’afetai to our partners, community leaders, and local champions for making this milestone possible!

“This initiative is about more than technology—it’s about transformation,” added Dr. Taufete’e. “We are building the foundation for a cleaner, safer and more innovative transportation future for our children.”

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