

Trump clean energy pause puts St. Louis school district's electric buses in limbo

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The Ritenour School District school district received a \$9.45 million grant to fund an electric bus fleet.

A pause in federal funding for climate and clean energy programs has left the Ritenour School District unable to pay for electric school buses it ordered.

Ritenour officials were supposed to receive 24 electric school buses paid for by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. The buses would have replaced Ritenour's entire daily fleet of diesel buses.



"We've got a little bit of a bridge to nowhere at this point," said Ritenour Superintendent Chris Kilbride.

The district received three buses and paid for them before a funding pause went into effect last week. More were supposed to be delivered Friday, but the district is unable to access an account to pay for them.

The remaining 21 buses are sitting in a lot in Litchfield, Illinois, unable to be delivered, Kilbride said.

"[I'm] certainly frustrated," he said. "The level of uncertainty and the lack of communication, I think, adds to that frustration."

After the federal funds were obligated to the district last spring, they were placed in an account at asap.gov, said Phil Pusateri, the district's chief financial officer. That account is no longer accessible.

"The first batch for the three buses that we received, we were invoiced for, we paid for them, we drew down the funds. Everything went fine," Pusateri said. "The second batch was about to be delivered, but we wanted to check first, obviously, make sure that the funds were there. And we logged in, and we noted that the account had been suspended."

In a statement, a spokesperson for the Region 7 Environmental Protection Agency said the funding pause was not related to the broad freeze that was blocked by two federal judges last week but instead was because of an executive order related to energy that Trump signed on his first day back in office.



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Environmental Protection Agency Region 7 Administrator Meg McCollister, Ritenour School District Director of Transportation Bryan Sanker, Ritenour School District Chief Financial Officer Dwight Lindhors and Ritenour School District Superintendent Chris Kilbride hold a ceremonial check during a press conference hosted by EPA Region 7 about 2023 Clean School Bus Grant selections on Feb. 27, 2024, at Husky Support Center in Overland. Ritenour School District received a \$9.45 million grant to fund an electrical bus fleet.

“The agency is continuing to work diligently to implement President Trump’s Unleashing American Energy Executive Order issued on January 20 in coordination with the Office of Management and Budget,” the statement said. “The agency has paused all funding actions related to the Inflation Reduction Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act at this time.”

In a ceremony in early 2024, EPA officials visited St. Louis to present the Ritenour School District and the Ferguson-Florissant School District with large ceremonial checks.

Ritenour was promised \$9.5 million for 24 buses and their charging infrastructure, while the Ferguson-Florissant district was promised \$6.3 million for 16 buses.

The EPA was planning to spend \$5 billion across the country as part of its Clean School Bus Program. At a St. Louis-area event, then-Region 7 administrator Meg McCollister said the program would lead to cleaner air for kids — and for everyone.

“Eventually, we would love to see all electric school buses instead of diesel,” McCollister said at the time.

McCollister’s LinkedIn page now says she is the former administrator.

The district also received an invoice for about \$830,000 Monday for the installation of electric bus chargers.

“The work is done, we’ve been invoiced, and we’re not able to pay because the funds have been suspended,” Pusateri said.

The district’s celebration of the buses will still happen Tuesday. Ritenour’s superintendent doesn’t believe EPA staff will be there despite months of planning together.

“We’re still going to hold the event and be able to answer questions,” Kilbride said.

Ritenour officials hope the buses will still be delivered.

“We all entered into this contract in good faith,” Kilbride said. “And you know, we’re expecting that it would be followed through with. Our hope is that that’s the case. But again, we’re committed to not spending local dollars to make this happen.”

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