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Charter Bus Operators Wince at New Permit Fee;
Out-of-District Companies Say Charge Could Cost the City Tourist Dollars

By Yolanda Woodlee; Washington Post Staff Writer

Chartered bus operators want the D.C. Council to reconsider a law that would require them to pay \$50 for a six-day permit when they transport tourists to the city.

The trip permit fee, which takes effect this year and would raise about \$1 million a year, is buried among changes in the Department of Motor Vehicles Safety Act approved by the council last year. Bus operators say the fee amounts to a tax on their businesses and means extra travel costs for their clients.

"This is a money grab from the city to assert more dollars from people coming to the city," said Peter J. Pantuso, president of the American Bus Association. "It's not in Philly and New York. They welcome individuals with open arms."

The law gives bus operators the option to obtain a "proportional registration" from the jurisdiction where their company is based. In this scenario, operators would pay the District a fee in proportion to the number of trips the vehicle makes to the city, which can vary over months.

Tractor-trailers and buses -- such as Greyhound and Peter Pan carriers, which make regularly scheduled trips -- are required to display those license tags. Chartered buses had been exempt from the tags. Some companies said calculating the mileage per vehicle to certain destinations would be complicated.

This is not the first time city officials have attempted to raise revenue by charging money to out-of-District charters. A similar law was approved in 1998, but it was later rescinded, according to DMV spokeswoman Janis Hazel.

D.C. Council members Kwame R. Brown (D-At Large), head of the Committee on Economic Development, and Jack Evans (D-Ward 2) said they were unaware of the permit fee.

"It does seem to be something that we need to take a look at," Brown said. "We want to keep tourism strong in the District of Columbia."

Pantuso said there are as many as 1,000 chartered buses in Washington each day from March to May, when public school trips peak. The costs of those trips will increase to reflect the permit expense, said David Bolen of New World Tours in Bristow. The permit fees on the company's 34 buses could cost as much as \$100,000 a year, he said.

"It's potentially a tax on each person riding the bus by \$1 a head," Bolen said. "That's a pretty significant fee to charge students, seniors and veterans. You'd be amazed. For some groups, that \$50 is the difference of whether they go or not."

Victor S. Parra, president of United Motorcoach Association, said the trip permits will also cut companies' profits this year, because they will have pick up the \$50 fee for tour groups that paid for their trips in advance of the new law.

"Six-day permits can get costly if you have to do it for the next year or so and can't recoup the cost," said Parra, who represents 900 charter and tour operators. "Most places don't require trip permits, because they want the business. There are 55 wallets on that bus."

Washington is not the only city to require trip permits. Charleston, S.C., and Atlantic City also have permit fees for the buses, officials said. The South Jersey Transportation Authority said it offers day permits that cost \$2.80 and must be displayed in the window.