

Ten Tips to Stretch Your Fleet Budget

By Bill Dakuras

The versatility of utility vehicles has caught the attention of farmers, hunters, fire crews, search-and-rescue teams, municipalities, and even the National Park Service. Likewise, utility vehicles are routinely used on college campuses for facilities and grounds maintenance, security, quick transport and delivery, snow removal, event support, and many other applications. Their uses range far and wide, and their usefulness in the campus environment cannot be denied.

Compact and customizable with task-oriented accessories, they can increase productivity, stretch your budget, and boost your sustainability footprint if you use electric or more fuel-efficient gasoline vehicles.

If you are considering adding a utility vehicle to your fleet, careful planning, long-term thinking, and the following tips will boost both your hard and soft savings:

1. Avoid makeshift and recreational vehicles.

Neither golf cars with boxes on the back or utility vehicles built for recreational use are designed to tackle many campus applications. To keep your crews on the move, look for vehicles that are specifically engineered and built for work, with long-lasting frames and strong suspension systems.

2. Don't let rust destroy your investment.

Since water and fertilizers used on campuses can cause rust, vehicles with rustproof, corrosion-resistant aluminum frames and aluminum bed boxes are a more cost-effective option. Steel frames, even when coated, may rust in these environments.

3. Boost sustainability and power with advanced engines equipped with electronic fuel injection (EFI).

Not all EFI engines are the same. Some single-cylinder overhead valve engines with EFI are poorly designed, producing less power, torque, and fuel efficiency. In comparison, a single-cylinder overhead cam engine with EFI can deliver twice the miles per gallon, boost hill-climbing power and torque, and reduce maintenance costs.

4. Reduce travel time and costs with 500-amp controllers.

Many electric vehicles have 350- or 400-amp controllers, so they don't carry or tow as much weight as those with more powerful controllers. They also may stall on hills or long runs, causing downtime.

A midsize vehicle with a 400-amp controller and 48-volt battery pack has a bed load and towing capacity of just 600 lbs. (272 kg). A comparable vehicle with a 48-volt battery pack but a 500-amp controller delivers a bed-load capacity of 800 lbs. (362.8 kg), 200 lbs. more than the first vehicle.



5. Prevent lost time on electric cars with smart, onboard chargers with reel retractors. Smart solid-state chargers tell you when the car is plugged in and receiving power, and issue state-of-charge alerts that prevent dead cars, increasing uptime. Onboard chargers and reel cord retractors let your crews charge their cars during lunch breaks and other free time, rather than having to return to the car shed. Charging batteries more often and before they deep cycle also improves battery life.

6. Boost productivity with task-oriented accessories. The right accessories can also save time and money. Look for a vendor with a wide range of commercial accessories like strobe lights, stake sides, ladder racks, van and tool boxes, dump kits, integrated cabs, and limited slip differentials that allow two-wheel drive vehicles to perform almost like 4x4s.

Juan Zamora at St. Thomas University learned the value of commercial accessories when he equipped his utility vehicles with a configurable, removable, track-based bed attachment system.

“The attachment system let us carry everything we need. Now we’re not always running back and forth to the shop. The system reduces round trips, keeps crews in the field, and protects our equipment because we’re not throwing things on top of gear in the bed,” says Zamora.

Other universities create dedicated vehicles for painting, delivery, housekeeping, and other tasks.

7. Enjoy major savings by eliminating full-size vehicles. Replacing full-size vehicles with utility task vehicles (UTVs) can save thousands of dollars per vehicle.

Georgia College and State University was considering using vans and shuttle buses to provide free security escorts and rides across campus during night hours, but opted for customized utility vehicles instead.

“The UTVs were much less expensive to purchase, operate, and insure than vans or shuttle buses would have been,” says Chief Mechanic Charles Gettis. “They require no fuel and less maintenance and let us put fewer miles on our public safety cars.”

8. Consider tax-exempt municipal leasing. While many commercial buyers are leasing their fleets, public colleges and universities still generally

purchase their vehicles because of budgetary and organizational restraints. Many don’t realize they are eligible for another alternative called “tax-exempt municipal leasing.” Ask your sales professional how this may lower your monthly payments—sometimes considerably—and cut your overall fleet costs.


9. Cut red tape and reduce costs with a government purchasing cooperative. Look for a vendor affiliated with a government purchasing cooperative. This guarantees best government pricing, eliminates the bid process, and simplifies the purchase.

“When we leased our last vehicles,” says Carol Schnitzer, director of purchasing at Skidmore College, “we saved \$2,940 on four gasoline utility vehicles when compared with our previous pricing.”

10. Work with a single vendor and develop a comprehensive transportation strategy. Working with a single vendor can help you preempt problems and costs in the years ahead. It standardizes maintenance schedules, warranties, parts inventory, safety training, charging, and more.

“In the past, we purchased cars as needed from various vendors,” says St. Thomas University’s Zamora. “But after working with a single vendor who designed a strategic transportation plan for us, we have cut our maintenance costs and downtime considerably and stabilized our monthly transportation budget. Working with a single vendor is the way to go.”

To be sure, the quality and performance of utility vehicles range far and wide, so don’t shop by price alone—compare the features, benefits, and warranties of various brands and models.

Most importantly, consider firms that understand the campus environment and can help you choose the best vehicle options for *your* specialized and individual needs. 

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