

Published January 27, 2016

Lamorinda Frustrations Mount Due to Bus Driver Shortage

By Sophie Braccini



A booming economy can have negative unintended consequences, such as the mounting difficulty to find bus drivers. The Lamorinda School Bus Program (LSBP) contracts with the largest company, First Student, which is not immune to the phenomenon. During the month of December, out of an estimated 1,320 runs that month, 25 runs were missed in Lamorinda due to lack of drivers.

"As a working parent and someone who depends on the bus to take my son to school every morning, it was very stressful trying to figure out how he was getting to school this morning with such late notice. I was already on my way to work," wrote a parent about a December incident on route 23 that goes to Stanley Middle School. That parent received a text message sent at 6:05 a.m. by Juliet Hansen, LSBP program manager, who communicates that way with parents and schools every time something affects a route.

One parent yelled at a bus driver for being late, which led to this new driver resigning his position. In a letter to parents, Hansen asked parents not to

take out their frustration on drivers. "This person (the parent) was probably having a bad day and he apologized," said Hansen.

She says that LSBP has been using the text messaging system more than ever before to notify parents of changes in service, often very early in the morning. "However, even with notification, canceled or combined routes create a huge disruption to families who rely on the school bus for transportation. It's been very stressful for everyone," Hansen said. "Our recommendation is to have parental supervision at bus stops and a backup plan for transportation for the students." She noted that the beginning of January was almost flawless.

According to Hansen, First Student currently has four routes without permanent drivers. "First Student asks drivers from Santa Rosa or Stockton to fill in, but it continues to be a challenge." The Cincinnati-based company cannot pull human resources from across state lines, since California law does not recognize bus driver certificates from other states. In its July 2015 edition, "School Bus Fleet" surveyed bus operators nationwide and reported that 94 percent of school bus contracting companies did not have enough drivers, compared to 85 percent in 2014.

When First Student fails to provide service or when buses are significantly late, LSBP charges the company a fee. It amounted to \$19,000 in December. Some parents are now asking to be refunded for the lost days. "I'm hoping that there will be some kind of reimbursement for the days service that was not/will not be provided as we had to make other last minute adjustments to our schedule," wrote one parent on route 17 in Orinda.

The LSBP board will consider in February refunding parents when service cannot be performed. The current LSBP contract does not have that type of provision. The only existing partial refund happens

when students drop a route for the rest of the year. At the Jan. 11 LSBP meeting, staff proposed four different options for compensating the parents: refund them based on actual fee - \$2.53 per round trip day; provide a pass in lieu of daily refunds; provide a voucher toward next year's annual bus pass; offer a choice of one trip pass or a voucher for next year. The LSBP board will decide at its next meeting in February which route they want to go.

"Drivers shortage is a national trend that affects any form of over-the-road transportation, including freight and bus drivers," says Chris Kemper, spokesman for First Student. The company employs 57,000 persons and owns close to 50,000 buses, and Kemper says it is putting more emphasis on recruiting drivers.

Mike Metcalf, the Moraga council member who sits on the LSBP board, said at the recent council meeting that the shortage in our area is also fueled by defections of bus drivers hired by private companies running shuttles that simply double their wages.

"It is true," confirmed Hansen, "and First Student is looking at new wages/benefit packages for their drivers." She adds that if anyone is interested in becoming a school bus driver (retired folks make great drivers), they should call First Student at (925) 363-7327.

For meeting dates and more information about The Lamorinda School Bus Program, visit www.lamorindaschoolbus.org.

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