

Spotlight on the Board

Notes from the District 15 School Board Meetings

July 24th, 2007

This was a Special Board of Education meeting called to discuss the two-tier bus fleet and to go into executive session. **Board Member Nancy Lee Carlson was absent.**

Two-tier Bus Fleet

Background information –

Dr. McKanna, D15 Superintendent said that he received a phone call last week from the business department stating that ten additional buses were needed by the district. McKanna indicated that additional information about this issue was shared with the Board on Monday (yesterday). He further stated that transportation advisory committee meetings had been held with staff and bus drivers for the past few months.

Approximately a week to 10 days ago, transportation data was rolled in with the information on new students for this coming year. The transportation department tried to hold to the parameters set by the Board including 30 minute bus routes and no shuttling of parochial school students.

Based on that information, it was determined that 137 routes were needed for Tier 2, which is when the most buses/routes are required. The district currently has 138 buses in its transportation fleet. The transportation department has consistently indicated that 10% of the bus fleet is needed as reserves (spare buses) due to maintenance issues.

That was the reason for tonight's request to purchase ten additional buses. McKanna asked the transportation department to be present tonight to answer any questions by the Board.

Board Member questions/concerns/comments and the District's responses –

Board Member, Kelly Keenan – Asked if the District already purchased new buses?

McKanna – Said yes, ten buses were purchased that were intended to be replacement buses. **Keenan** - Asked if the District retired the old buses, were they already gone?

McKanna – Said that those buses are already off the property and gone.

Bob Strande, Interim Co-Asst. Superintendent for Business – Said that the dealer had picked up the old buses during the first part of July. They were a trade-in for the new buses that were purchased.

Don Skinner, Interim Co-director of Transportation – Said that regarding the 10% extra buses that the district needs, explained what happens when running a fleet of 130 to 140 buses. The buses are required to have maintenance twice a year. Maintenance can be anywhere from two days to one week. Older the buses, the longer the maintenance. 30% of the district's buses are ten years old or older. They also have to work on the brakes twice year so the buses are out of circulation at that time. They need a 10% surplus because a dozen buses can be in service at any time. Older buses also require body work, major engine and stairwell work.

Board Member, Gerald Chapman – Referred to the idea of recycling buses every ten years. Asked if there were buses older than ten years? Stated if there are roughly about 140 buses, then 14 would need to be replaced each year to stay with the ten year cycle. If the district just bought 10 buses, it wouldn't be making progress on the cycle. So if the district bought ten more, it could run its routes and help accelerate the cycle. Asked what the impact would be next year if the additional buses were purchased now? Would the district still try to stay on that cycle and get rid of the ones older than ten years old?

Strande – Wanted to clarify that the district actually just purchased 12 buses as replacements (July 1st). Two were the smaller 35 passenger buses. Still have catch up to do. **Chapman** – Concerned if the district has a plan? Does the district know how many buses are projected to be replaced next year? Does it have a ten year plan or is that being built? **Strande** – Yes a plan was built and was shared with the Board in the Spring.

Board Member Wendy Rowden – Said the recent purchase of 12 buses was included in the ten year plan given to the Board. Asked why these additional ten buses were not included in that plan. Rowden wanted to know what happened between now and this past March. She was a strong advocate for the two tier plan. Rowden felt like she had all of the information and strongly supported the idea of doing this. Thought that it was within the District's means to do a two-tier plan. All of the data/information she was given said that it could be done with the additional 12 buses and without any additional major expense. There was never an indication that the district might need 10 more buses – roughly \$1million dollars.

Keenan – Said that the Board didn't have all of the calculations. That is why Keenan had voted no for the two-tier plan. The calculations were done for Plan B – and the Board decided on Plan A. The Board did not have all the information and knew it when the vote was taken. (Reference: www.fcwpta.org/pdf/d15_feb_28_2007.pdf Spotlight Notes from the BOE meeting in which the voting took place.)

McKanna – Thinks the excitement of what will happen will still be there in terms of the two-tier plan and that is going to be accomplished. Said that what was presented to the Board on the night they voted was options. Thought Keenan was right, the district probably did not have details on direct routes to the private schools.

Skinner – The transportation department originally thought about a 3 tier plan but moved that aside and didn't present that to the board because of time constraints. They presented a two tier plan based on structuring it around shuttling. There are 25 buses for the parochial schools (20 for St. Theresa). The transportation dept. has to wait until June to roll the student bus population over before it can work on individual routes. Parochial school routes are spread out because those schools draw from all over the district. They are not organized by population area. For example: Thomas Jefferson students go to and are bused to TJ. However, children can live in the far corners of the district and go to and need to get bused to a parochial school.

Linda Fleming, Transportation Routing Coordinator – Indicated that the parochial school routes are approximately 45 minutes long and require 25 buses.

Rowden – Said that if she had been told that back in the Spring, it would have changed her perspective and she would have been less vocal about the shuttling to parochial schools. Stated that this issue is not about the money but knowing what the Board was supporting. These additional 10 buses are almost equal to what the Board agreed to purchase per the ten year plan. Asked how does this appear to the community? Now there is an unexpected expense that has to be made in haste.

McKanna – Thinks that this was probably a bigger project that everyone realized. The district wanted to do it and did everything it could and were optimistic all the way through. What they found that actually sitting there doing it vs. sitting at the table talking about it were two different things.

Board Member Sue Quinn – Disagrees that the district needs to be optimistic when doing things like this. Believes the district needs to be cautious. The original project said that 130 buses would be needed - close to the 138 buses that were in the fleet. There was a 6% margin for reserves/spares and the Board was told that was acceptable at that time. That was being optimistic that the numbers (of routes) wouldn't go up.

Quinn stated that in fact, the District still does not know completely that the routes will not change. Said that when you don't know, then you have to build in the risk - plan for whether the numbers will go up or down.

If the district had done proper planning in the beginning, it would not have let go of the ten old buses. Those buses would have been held onto until the district knew what the routes were really going to be.

The Board did not know there was this issue and did not even know it was on tonight's agenda until tonight. Quinn said that this means that everyone is not doing a proper job of working together and communicating. Those used buses were let go just two weeks ago.

If the district had been planning for the possibility of this happening, it would not have done that. The District would not be in this crisis now and would not have to be making this decision now. Quinn wishes it had been done differently and hopes it will be done differently going forward.

McKanna – Said the BOE was very clear that no children would be on the bus longer than 30 minutes. Asked the transportation department if some of the shorter bus routes were made longer, would that reduce the number of routes?

Fleming – Said that the buses are already full. She has utilized them to the max.

Keenan – Understands Quinn's concerns about not getting info. But repeated that when the Board voted, they knew that they didn't have all of the info.

Quinn – Said that if the Board votes without all of the information, then that should be planned for and build in the risk accordingly. If that was done, the Board would not be voting tonight on whether to buy 10 more buses. The district would already have 148 buses and that would have covered their contingencies.

Quinn stated that the fundamental issue is communication between the administration and the Board. If the Board and administration are working together to actually plan proactively to address these issues, these types of situations can be avoided.

She would like to suggest purchasing the ten buses but consider it an advance on the buses that would have been purchased next summer because that is already in the transportation vehicle plan. Then the district needs to change its 10 year plan to account for the fact that it has a whole new busing base - fleet size.

So then this is not so much ten new buses – it is an advance from next year and try to be rational and proactive. Because the district doesn't know what our routes are and the routes will still settle out even after school starts.

Quinn believes the two-tier system will hopefully not change substantially over time. It should be set for awhile and the district should be able to plan accordingly.

Keenan – Agrees with Quinn. Asked why new buses are better? Asked if older buses are more expensive to maintain? Is it a safety issue?

Fleming – Said that it was not so much safety because the buses are well maintained per state law. As the buses age and with the salt on our roads, the bodies begin to deteriorate. After ten years, the body work is immense. It is very expensive to maintain an older bus and it takes longer.

Keenan and Quinn – Wanted to know what the maintenance costs were year over year.

Keenan – Asked that when the district does the ten year plan if a cost analysis could be done.

Chapman – Curious to know if there was some advantage to making the decision tonight? Wanted to know if there was something the district needed to do to prepare the buses? **Fleming** – Indicated that the mechanics look over the buses from top to bottom. Radios and other equipment need to be installed.

Rowden – Commented that the Board had asked for a transportation study in January. Rowden put her faith in the administration. This amount of money is unacceptable to her – it could be used for classrooms and children. Stated that everyone talks about the appearance of the Board micromanaging the district. Rowden said this is why it happens because she trusted that the Board was getting the information it needed to make a decision. The administration said that “a slight adjustment” would be needed but nothing this major. Wants to avoid these kinds of business decisions. This is not in the best interest of the district and is extremely upsetting to her.

Board President, Tim Millar – Understands the frustration. Only positive is the reimbursement rate on transportation from the state. Millar also stated that the VersaTrans transportation study projected a savings of \$200K a year because of the way the routes would be consolidated. Asked the transportation department if they thought that was going to happen because of the hours of the staff or if it was not going to happen. Millar is frustrated as well. The VersaTrans study did say that the district would need more buses so it isn’t as big a surprise. Although the Board was told that those buses wouldn’t be needed.

Quinn – Also understands Rowden’s frustration and Quinn wasn’t even a seated board member at the time. Asked how can this be avoided in the future? Quinn believes the only way to avoid this type of situation in the future is for everyone to work together as a team – the Board of Education, the Cabinet and the Superintendent. There needs to be a free flow of information and not shuffle it around and hide information and not tell anyone. Everyone wants to help the district and only do what is best for the children. The only way to do that is to take a leap and have trust that we can work together.

McKanna – Doesn’t follow Quinn’s thoughts about not working together because the administration gave the Board its best shot which turned out to be way off the mark in terms of what they thought. The administration gave the Board its best information. The only way around this would have been to do a dry run and wait and do the two-tier plan two years out instead of one year. This two-tier plan is a major change. It is not like yearly scheduling. Asked how often does a school district substantially change their bus routes? Doesn’t think very often.

McKanna said that no one in the administration had experience in doing this particular thing. The routes were only done two weeks ago. The district thought the routes would be done in May.

Said it is not a trust issue in McKanna’s mind – the district gave the Board its best information. It is a much bigger project. Now the district needs to wait until school starts. Thinks the only way for this not to happen would be to take a much more conservative approach and do a dry run, etc. The transportation department is still working on this – not finished yet. They still have to get the parochial school routes roughed in.

Skinner – Explained that the transportation dept. really just started on the routes after the 4th of July. Now the routes are done and this is the impact from going from four to two-tiers plus trying to implement some of the restrictions that the parochial schools have placed on

them. The department has to follow the guidelines approved at the board meeting. Just been working on this for three weeks. Ten more buses are badly needed.

Keenan – Thinks the Board voted with incomplete information. Doesn't think that the Administration, Board and Cabinet didn't work together. Said that the Board didn't have all of the information and went forward anyway. Said that the Board knew what it was voting for so if you want to change something then the Board should wait for all of the information.

Quinn – Said that the Board does have to wait until it has some information but when the district has information, it needs to be communicated to the Board. The transportation dept. knew what was happening with the routes - that things were taking longer, not shaping up as expected. None of that information was communicated to the Board. This was a surprise to the Board to the extent that the Board didn't even know it was on the agenda. That is where the trust issue comes in. It is the communication part. If the Board had been on the top of this evolving story, it would have been a little easier to deal with.

Skinner – They only had the information for three weeks. Explained rollover of enrollment. The routes were built on numbers from last year. Once the numbers are rolled over after school lets out, then the transportation dept. is working with "live data" and it gets plugged in. They knew they were close but didn't know where that rollover was going to take them.

Skinner said that there is no scheduled Board meeting in July otherwise the transportation department would have been to the Board sooner. Said that maybe that needs to be looked at in terms of working together because they would have been there sooner but there was no scheduled meeting.

Quinn – Stated that the superintendent does not have to wait for a scheduled Board meeting to inform the Board about the progress of any situation.

McKanna – The district didn't know until last week until he received a call from George (business dept.) saying that the district has to do something. McKanna told him that the information had to get to the Board.

Quinn – At a minimum, the Board needs to be put on the distribution list for the agenda. This agenda went out to the Press first. The Press knew the Board was going to discuss the two-tier bus fleet before the Board did. **McKanna** – Would agree that in 99% of cases the Board gets a packet before the Press gets it. Asked Quinn if she had gotten any mailings/information at all? Quinn indicated no. McKanna said that this is the first time that has ever happened to his knowledge.

Rowden – Wanted to add that any transportation budget has the potential to be different in August by this much money. That has not happened in the last two years she has been on the Board. Had this potential difference been discussed back in February, it would have changed her support for what the Board was doing.

McKanna – Asked Strande what the projected cost difference would be from the 4 to 2 tier plan? **Millar** – Said the buses are a capital expenditure. He is concerned with the staffing - recurring expense.

Strande – Said that in concept a 4-tier run may take 7 ½ to 8 hours. Now a two-tier run should take less time – maybe 5 ½ to 6 hours. Can't give exact hours now. Said that in theory, at best, the hours are going to be less. The district is adding more routes but should be offset with fewer hours. Does not yet know how many routes are at 6 hours, how many are at 6 ½ hours, etc. to provide cost savings numbers now. That will come in the next couple of weeks.

Chapman – Mentioned that this bus purchase may impact what the district is going to spend next year.

Millar – Wanted to ask, what the rationale was for not purchasing the one-year old buses vs. the new buses? Asked if the used buses were the same product the district had been purchasing in the past?

Strande – Explained some pros and cons. One year old buses have the kinks worked out but then there would be more buses at that age to retire. Instead of 4 or 5 (what was purchased new last year), there would now be 14 or 15 buses. Said that when you purchase new, you have new and the district will be able to run them one year longer.

Strande informed the Board that the used buses had a different body type and engine than what the district normally purchases. That is a downside. Cost difference between the new (\$70,766) and one-year old used buses (\$62,950) is about \$7,800.

Rowden – Wanted to say one more thing on this issue. Explained history of the bus routes/bell schedule issue. Three different times, the Board was told three different things. Feels that she makes decisions based on information and later finds out it was not complete information. Says that everyone needs to be working together. The information keeps changing.

Bob Anderson, Interim Co-Director of Transportation – Said that some of the things the transportation dept. is working with right now with moving from four to two-tiers scares him. Mentioned that the district has three buses that go to Cicero. Those buses are pulled out of the district's fleet and are not ours. There are four buses that go to individual schools out of the district where one bus is driving one child. That is four more buses. They are being challenged on this beyond anything they could anticipate. There is also the difficulty in hiring bus drivers. They wanted to bump the fleet up by 20 buses so have been trying all summer to hire additional drivers. Still need about 9 drivers. **Rowden** – This is something the Board wants to know because at one time, the Board talked that maybe this wasn't worth it and perhaps should look at outsourcing.

Anderson – Said that if the transportation dept. accomplished the Board from not outsourcing, then Anderson is glad. Doesn't think that would be a good decision. He is proud to say that the district provides a Cadillac service to the children.

Keenan – Referred to the Cicero children, said that those buses are used for about 4 weeks in the beginning of the school year and a few weeks at the end of the year. That shouldn't weigh into our decision. (Reference: www.fcwpta.org/pdf/d15_feb_5_2007.pdf for additional information on the subject of transporting Arlington Park racetrack children to Cicero schools.) Also asked about Anderson's mention of the district carpooling one child in a bus. Asked if the district had a van or another way to transport that child instead of using an entire bus?

Fleming – Said that the district decided years ago that the safest mode of transportation for a student was the school bus. Before then, these students would be transported in a Suburban. Said that other school districts do transport special education students by taxi.

Keenan – Asked if that could be looked into again. Also wants to make sure that the Board gets a new 10 year transportation vehicle plan with a cost analysis. And also wants to look into transporting these children that are one-per-bus.

Quinn – Asked how much confidence the administration/trans. dept had that 10 additional buses were sufficient for the district? **Anderson** – Said that they could make it work. If he changed it, he would change it to 15 or 20 buses. Thinks they are being very prudent.

Strande – At this point, the district is asking for 10 buses. Will do their best to live with those ten buses and structure the fleet. If something changes, they will be back to the Board so it gets the information sooner rather than later.

Keenan – Concerned about the four buses transporting individual children.

Strande – Said that issue would have been looked at when it came down to a crunch. The district can't afford to do that from a logistic standpoint. Those students may have to go back to going in a taxi or some other vehicle. District 15 did at one time transport students in a taxi. It is not illegal, it is not wrong.

Quinn – Understands that having 10% of buses in reserves/spares is an industry standard. Wanted to know what District 15's historical average was because its buses are well maintained. **Skinner** – Answered that it is about a dozen buses, roughly 10%.

McKanna – Commented that the district did not decide to change tiers in order to save money. Goal was to not have it cost any more than the 4-tier system. McKanna is anxious to find out what the cost will be. May be pleasantly surprised.

Millar – Inquired if there was any advantage to leasing buses (vs. purchasing new)? The costs appear to be close. **Strande** – Indicated that it is generally not advantageous to lease when money is available. There is money in the transportation dept. reserves.

Keenan – Asked if this could be part of the ten year transportation vehicle study – a cost analysis of purchasing vs. leasing. **Strande** – Stated that Millar is right, that it can be very close. The district can look into this. District 15 leased buses several years ago when money was tight and buses were needed.

Board Action Taken

To award to Midwest Transit at \$70,766 per bus for ten buses totalling \$707,660 using the emergency bid award process due to needing the buses to start the school year. Approved 6:0 (Carlson absent)

To amend the ten year bus study to reflect the current situation with the two-tier fleet and the extra buses as well as leasing vs. purchasing and look into the cost analysis of maintaining an older bus fleet vs. purchasing new buses on a 12 year cycle. (To be presented by the October BOE meeting) **Approved 6:0** (Carlson absent)

Executive Session – The Board went into executive session at approximately 8:15 p.m. It was announced that the Board would not be voting on any items after executive session.

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