



OVERVIEW:

Discontinuation of Regular Student Busing

(April 2016)

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BACKGROUND

Like many other school districts across the province, the Maple Ridge – Pitt Meadows School District has had to make many service-level reductions over the past several years due to a number of cost pressures beyond its control.

Prior to the 2013/2014 budget year, the Board closed six schools, eliminated several resource and administrative positions, and lowered district maintenance costs to minimal levels.

2013/2014 Budget Process

The 2013/2014 Budget Process brought with it an operating budget funding shortfall of \$5.66 million. The cost pressures that contributed to this funding shortfall included declining enrollment, an unfunded CUPE wage increase, increased costs for benefits, inflation, and utilities rate increases. To address the shortfall, the Board increased class sizes, reduced teacher librarians in secondary schools by 37.5%, reduced financial staffing classifications, and increased rental fees for community use of school district facilities.

While the Board fulfilled its legal responsibility by submitting a balanced budget, it also continued to add its voice to that of other boards across the province in advocating for adequate education funding. In letters to Minister Peter Fassbender and Premier Christy Clark, the Board outlined its concerns about education funding, and spoke specifically to the effects of funding cuts in the Maple Ridge – Pitt Meadows School District. The budget process was also well covered by the two local papers, which provided generous coverage of the difficult decisions the trustees had to make.

2014/2015 Budget Process

The 2014/2015 Budget Process brought no reprieve. Instead, the Board once again faced an operating budget funding shortfall of \$5.02 million and had to implement further reductions. These reductions were felt district-wide, affecting staffing in Education Administration and Human Resources, Facilities and Maintenance, Information Technology, and Student Support Services. Clerical support to schools was reduced, and class size ratios were once again increased, bringing the kindergarten, primary and intermediate class sizes close to their legislative limit.

Recognizing that regular student busing was a significant expense for the school district, the Board attempted to mediate this expense by introducing transportation fees. The annual rates per family were set at \$215 for the first child, \$215 for the second child, \$100 for the third child, and \$100 for the fourth child. A fee waiver was made available for low-income families. The transportation fees reduced the annual transportation expense for the school district from \$710,000 to \$650,000.

In a March 2014 news release, trustees expressed their collective concern about the effects of cuts on students and families, and urged parents to appeal to local MLAs and the provincial government for adequate education funding. In May 2014, the Maple Ridge News ran an article on the budget reductions under the headline, “Maple Ridge school board tells parents to protest.”

In a June 2014 letter to Minister Fassbender, the Board outlined the impact of its most recent reductions, acknowledging that special needs assessments would be delayed, career-planning support would be reduced, students would receive less individual attention, and that school administrators would need to complete routine clerical functions and would therefore have less time for proactive interventions, teacher growth planning, and other important work.

In this letter, the Board also acknowledged what it saw as the “next conversation,” which was the possibility of having to discontinue regular student busing altogether in order to balance the budget.

2015/2016 and 2016/2017 Budget Process

As they entered their next budget cycle, boards across the province were tasked with the responsibility of finding “administrative savings” they could trim from their budgets. This call for administrative savings spanned two budget years – 2015/2016 and 2016/2017. For the Maple Ridge – Pitt Meadows School District, the administrative savings target set by the Ministry of Education over two years amounted to \$1.34 million.

The Board immediately recognized the implications of this request for the school district. In February 2015, the Maple Ridge News ran an article headlined “School board concerned about impact of provincial budget,” followed by another article the following month detailing the effects of previous cuts to school district staff morale.

In the interview for this article, Board Chair Mike Murray referred to bus services as one of the areas the school district would need to look at for possible cuts, emphasizing that this was not a decision the trustees wanted to make, but one they may be forced to make to keep the cuts away from the classroom. The article also noted that there were 67 secondary classes within the district with more than 30 students, that clerical staff hours had been reduced by 23 per cent, and that school administrators were forced to work far more overtime than was reasonable.

The Decision to Discontinue Regular Student Transportation

After several years of deep cuts that had created an instability in the system, the Board found itself facing two unpalatable options: increase class size for a third consecutive year and adversely affect all students across the district, or discontinue regular student busing and affect those families in remote rural communities who relied on the school district's transportation services.

Before making its decision, the Board requested a robust public consultation process so that it could hear not only from parents/guardians across the district, but also from those families who would be most affected by the potential discontinuation of this service. The school district launched an online transportation survey, which it shared with parents during its April 22 public meeting at Garibaldi Secondary School.

The online survey sought to determine not only how many parents/guardians relied on the district transportation services, but also to identify shared concerns and determine what steps the school district could take to mitigate the impact(s) of the potential cut.

The survey identified the following five key areas of shared concerns: communities with no public transportation, student safety concerns, the issues raised by the need to drive children to/from school, catchment schools that were too far from home, and the hardship that the discontinuation of this service might present to some families. The results of this online survey are available online at <http://www1.sd42.ca/system/files/Transportation%20Handout%20Package.pdf>

In addition to providing the results of its online survey, the Board shared additional information at this public meeting to deepen understanding. It disclosed that the district ran two buses with 54 seats each (transporting 109 students) and ten buses with 48 seats (transporting 261 students). The Board noted that the combined annual cost of these 12 buses was \$710,000, and that the annual student transportation fee of \$215 introduced in the previous budget year recovered only \$60,000 of this expense. The annual student subsidy covered by the school district was still significant at \$650,000.

Having considered all the public feedback including concerns raised in the student transportation public meetings, the Board made the difficult decision to discontinue regular student busing in September 2016, giving families a year to plan for this change.

Trustee Advocacy Work on Transportation

Trustee Correspondence

The Maple Ridge – Pitt Meadows School District trustees have been vocal advocates for increased funding to public education, and have also worked hard over the years to raise public awareness about the negative effects of provincial underfunding on the system.

The June 2014 letter from the Board to Minister Fassbender warned of the potential impact this underfunding might have on regular student busing, and asked – among other things – for a commitment from the Ministry to cover inflationary increases, fully fund additional costs over which boards had no control, and review and revise the current practice of holding back funding. In this letter, the Board also requested an in-person meeting with the Minister and Deputy Minister to discuss these concerns.

In this same month, trustees met with local MLAs Marc Dalton and Dr. Doug Bing to discuss their concerns about the effects of ongoing budget cuts. At this meeting, trustees reiterated the requests they made in their June 2014 letter to Minister Fassbender. These requests included a formal acknowledgement from government that the cuts will have a negative impact on student success in the long term; a commitment to fully fund additional costs and inflationary costs over which boards have no control; as well as a commitment to review and revise the current system of funding.

In February 2015, trustees sent another letter to Minister Fassbender, attaching their June 2014 correspondence for reference, and repeating their call for a meeting. The letter noted that the administrative savings translate to a \$1.3 million reduction to an area that had already been significantly reduced over the past few years. Trustees informed the Minister about the effects of underfunding on school district morale, and also cautioned that any additional budget cuts may well compromise both the safety and the educational experience of students. The letter reiterated the need for proper funding, and opened its final paragraph with the question, “Why is the government not listening?”

The following June, trustees once again met with local MLAs Marc Dalton and Dr. Doug Bing to reiterate the concerns they had raised the previous year, and to inform these local representatives that not only had conditions failed to improve, they had in fact grown worse. The Board's concerns and requests were formalized in correspondence to Mr. Dalton and Dr. Bing, which the trustees sent two weeks after the initial meeting. This letter and all other trustee advocacy correspondence is available on the district website at the following link: <http://www1.sd42.ca/node/2329>.

Trustee Advocacy in the News

Even as trustees worked to raise awareness through formal correspondence to the Ministry, the provincial government and local MLAs, they also expressed their concerns at their regular public meetings and through local media.

In a March 2015 article headlined "Board decries request for cuts," the *Maple Ridge News* documented the Board's response to the call for "administrative savings," noting that as a result of this request, the Board will need to consider cutting regular busing service to balance the school district budget. "These are not things we want to do, but how can we deal with that kind of significant impact, and keep it away from the classroom," board chair Mike Murray is quoted as asking.

The *Maple Ridge Times* article on the subject, published on this same day, captured this same tone, and also referenced the possible elimination of school busing. "We have turned over every possible rock to generate efficiencies. We are now cutting into vital areas that should not be touched," Mike Murray stresses in this interview.

Later that month, in an article titled "School board tries again to protest cuts," *The News* covered the board chair's unsuccessful attempts to question finance minister Mike de Jong about education funding at a chamber luncheon. The article referenced the school board's unanswered calls for a meeting with provincial government, and provided a brief overview of the reductions the Board has had to make over the years.

An April 2, 2015 article in *The News* – "School buses on the chop block" – focused more specifically on the possibility of the discontinuation of regular student busing services in the district, documenting the Board's unsuccessful attempt to have TransLink assume the responsibility of servicing these rural areas so that students have more options for getting to school. "If we're forced to make the choice of eliminating busing, we hope they will help us to lobby TransLink," the article concludes, quoting board chair Mike Murray.

In the April 9, 2015 article published by *The Times* and headlined “Cuts force Maple Ridge – Pitt Meadows school board to make tough call on buses,” several trustees speak to the difficult decision before them. “I’ve been doing this for ten years, cutting funding,” said Trustee Rempel. “It’s either the buses, or the classroom,” said Trustee Clarkson.

Once the decision was made, the story was picked up more widely and within the broader context of cuts to education. Coverage of the cuts by Global News on April 29, 2015 highlighted this as a problem shared by a growing number of school districts, including Maple Ridge – Pitt Meadows (cancelling regular student busing), Peace River North (introduction of busing fees), Vernon (anticipating having to make this cut in the following year’s budget cycle), and Abbotsford (raising busing fees). “With B.C. school districts strapped for cash, buses increasingly on chopping block,” the article headlined.

The following day, April 30, 2015, *The Maple Ridge News* also documented the Board’s decision to discontinue regular student busing, noting that the Board would save \$650K by cutting this service, and acknowledging at the same time the many other cuts the Board has had to make, both in this and past years’ budget cycles. The article pointed out that “every trustee made it clear they were not happy in signing off on the document,” and detailed the drop in per pupil funding from \$5,499 to \$5,205 per student over the past 13 years.

All the press coverage of the Board’s decision to cut regular student busing was made within the context of the provincial budget shortfalls, with an implicit acknowledgement of this school board’s difficult choice.

Regular Student Transportation Statistics as of December 2015

For 2015/2016 school year, the Maple Ridge – Pitt Meadows School District runs 11 regular buses. Of these, 2 buses are shared elementary/secondary, 3 buses are elementary only, and 6 buses are secondary only. A total of 362 students applied to use this service. 300 students are “eligible,” 55 are “courtesy in catchment” riders, 7 are “courtesy out of catchment” riders, and 19 are international students. Of these 362 students, 35 have had their fees waived under the school district’s hardship policy.

The table on the following page details the associated costs for this service for the 2015/2016 year.

	Number	Students	2015/2016 budget
Regular - elementary buses	5	146	\$259,800
Regular - secondary buses	8	216	\$456,900
Special needs buses	4	32	\$273,900
Special needs taxis	2	2	\$3,400
Administration cost			\$10,000
Total			\$1,004,000

A table outlining the routes and schools serviced is available in Appendix A.

Steps Taken to Assist Families

The Maple Ridge – Pitt Meadows School District is taking the following steps to assist families affected by the discontinuation of regular student busing:

- We will be offering an annual \$215 transportation subsidy to low-income families.
- We have asked TransLink to help service more rural routes. (TransLink has in turn responded to say that it had insufficient funding to extend public transportation to these areas.)
- We are working with the City of Maple Ridge to lobby TransLink to improve public transportation services in our school district.
- We are looking at providing before and after school care in the affected schools to extend the student drop-off and pick-up periods.
- With the help of a United Way grant, we have hired a community coordinator who will assist with establishing before and after school activities in the affected schools.

Quick Facts

- For 2013/14, the school district faced an operating budget funding shortfall of \$5.66M.
- For 2014/15, the school district faced an operating budget funding shortfall of \$5.02M.
- For 2015/16, the school district faced an operating budget funding shortfall of \$1.68M in its operating budget of \$130 million, and was also asked to find “administrative savings” in the amount of \$720,000.
- Continuing unfunded cost pressures include:
 - declining enrollment;
 - CUPE wage increase;
 - increased costs for benefits;
 - inflation;
 - utilities rate increases;
 - the annual cost of the compulsory Next Generation Network (NGN);
 - salary increases for principals, vice principals, and exempt staff (whose salaries have been frozen since 2009).
- Before making its decision to discontinue regular student busing, the Board approached TransLink with a request to help service more rural routes in the school district. TransLink responded that it is unable to provide additional service without additional funding. The response of TransLink was forwarded to both Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows city halls.
- The school district still provides busing services to students with special needs.
- Cost per student per year:
 - 2 buses with 54 seats each (transporting 109 students) = \$1,091 per student per year. (\$876 after transportation fees.)
 - 10 buses with 48 seats each (transporting 261 students) = \$2,278 per student per year. (\$2,063 after transportation fees.)

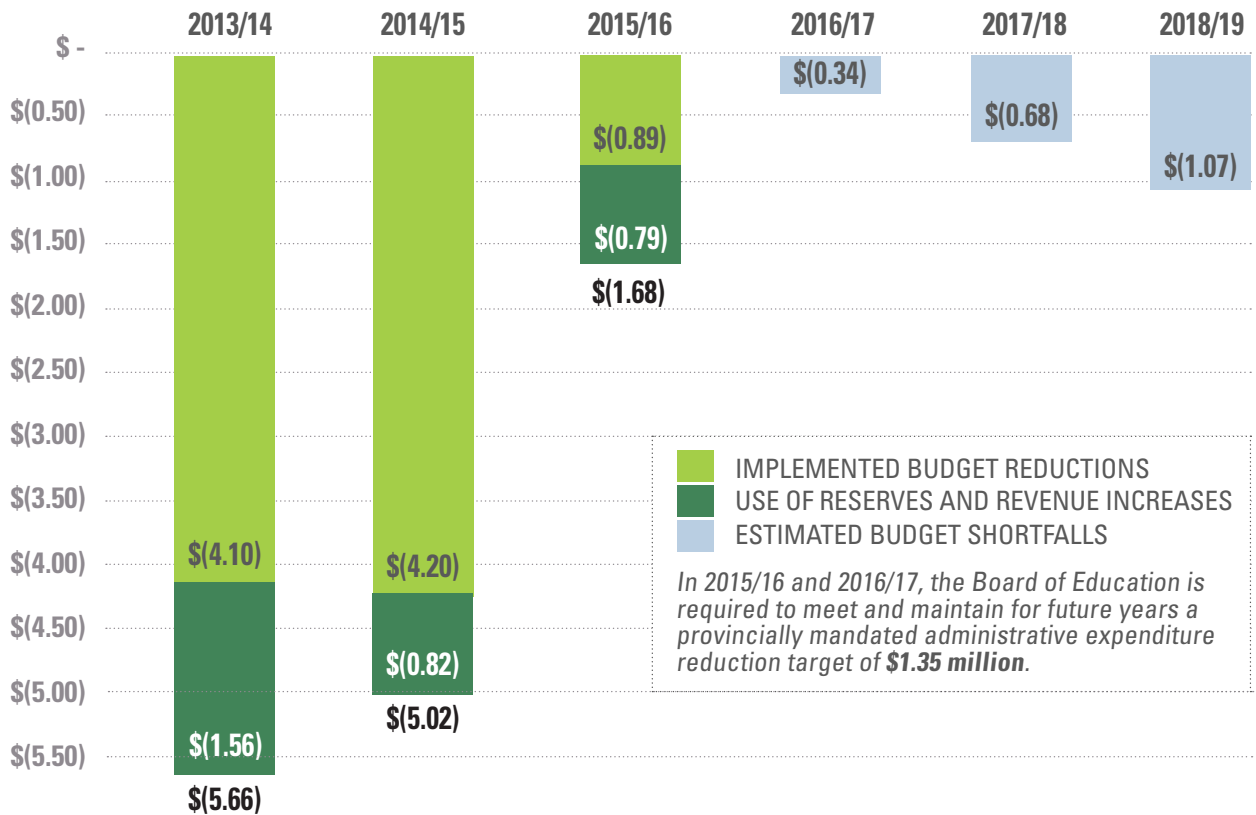
APPENDIX A

Maple Ridge – Pitt Meadows School District Transportation Statistics as of December 2015.

Route	Regular Routes	Eligible	Courtesy in catchment	Courtesy out of catchment	Total	Waiver	International Students
1	Whonnock Elementary	10	19	1	30	5	0
2	Whonnock Elementary	28	6	0	34	6	0
3	Highland Park Elementary	18	7	0	25	1	0
3	Pitt Meadows Secondary	22	2	0	24	2	1
	Webster's Corner						
4	Elementary	43	1	1	45	2	0
5	Garibaldi Secondary	25	1	3	29	1	4
6	Garibaldi Secondary	37	0	0	37	4	5
7	Garibaldi Secondary	13	1	2	16	2	0
	Webster's Corner						
8	Elementary	9	3	0	12	0	0
	Samuel Robertson						
8	Secondary	3	2	0	5	1	0
9	Garibaldi Secondary	33	0	0	33	7	0
10	Garibaldi Secondary	42	0	0	42	4	7
11	Garibaldi Secondary	17	13	0	30	0	2
	Totals	300	55	7	362	35	19

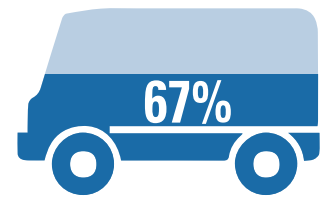
REGULAR STUDENT TRANSPORTATION QUICK FACTS

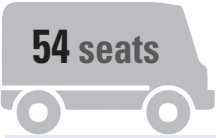
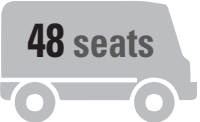
FINANCIAL CONTEXT:



The Maple Ridge - Pitt Meadows School District is running 11 regular bus routes with a capacity of 540 and an overall utilization of 67% for 2015/16.

COST PER BUS: \$53,160 (to and from school, 180 days per year)



	2015/16 ACTUAL SUBSIDY PER STUDENT PER YEAR AT 67% UTILIZATION	COST PER STUDENT PER YEAR AT 100% UTILIZATION <i>To and from school, 180 days per year</i>	ANNUAL STUDENT TRANSPORTATION FEE	SUBSIDY PER STUDENT PER YEAR AT 100% UTILIZATION
 54 seats 2 BUSES	\$1,021	\$985	\$215	\$770
 48 seats 9 BUSES	\$1,518	\$1,108	\$215	\$893

In 2015/16, **300** eligible students received regular transportation services. **35** students qualified for fee waivers. To increase utilization and decrease the subsidy amount per student, **62** students who did not meet eligibility criteria were permitted to use and pay for regular student transportation services.