

Written Submission to the Board of Education

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Subject: Busing SD 42

We need our school bus!

Living in the most rural areas of Maple Ridge, many in Whonnock, Thornhill, Albion North Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows we rely on school buses to get our children to both elementary and secondary schools. This is for many reasons including that: the distance to schools is too great to walk; transit is either non-existent, unreliable, too infrequent, and lacking capacity, there are no sidewalks or safe walking paths; and there are many wild animals. Learning that the school buses have been eliminated in the 2016/2017 school year is of enormous concern for families who live in these rural areas of Whonnock, Thornhill, East Albion, North Maple Ridge and rural Pitt Meadows.

The decision to eliminate the buses all happened very quickly with little time to gather our thoughts. April 8th was the public presentation, April 15th the budget committee of the whole, April 22nd was the transportation meeting and May 13th was the adoption of the preliminary budget. In just over 4 weeks we went from the school buses being in jeopardy to being cancelled. Many of us did not even find out until after the decision was made and some, who have children in elementary school who may not currently use the bus but who will require the bus for high school, still don't know. Some families in the Thornhill area have just had their catchment changed meaning they thought they would go to SRT a few kilometers away but now are in the Garibaldi catchment more than 10 kilometers away in the other direction with no transit option and now no school bus. At the time of the school bus consultation meetings these families did not know their catchment was going to be changed and therefore were not part of the meeting and did not have the opportunity to express their concerns. Some of us attended the transportation meeting that was held last year, where we reluctantly accepted that if we were going to be able to continue to have a school bus, there would be a fee to ride. Never at anytime at that meeting was there even a hint that the school buses would be eliminated.

In the school district 42 budget it states that there is no specific requirement to provide transportation in the School ACT. It also notes that the provincial government recommended looking at transportation as an administrative savings area to be considered by school districts to meet the provincially established administrative savings targets. We are not clear how school buses can be considered administrative savings as it represents an essential service for many. We believe that when the provincial government said to look at transportation savings, it did not mean to cut all transportation and leave the students in the most remote parts of the district and those without access to transit to fend for themselves.

A few years ago, and after some schools in East Maple Ridge were bursting at the seams even with portables, the school board changed the catchments meaning many families, once their children became school aged, would have to travel a great distances to get to school. The school board made a commitment to bus these kids to school that had space (Whonnock and Websters) but that required them to travel long distances to get there. Now, with the decision to cancel the buses, these families, and those that will be moving into these areas, are forced to come up with a way to get their children to a school that is in some case more than 10 kilometers away from where they live. Many of these families live within walking distance of another elementary school that is full. Because of poor planning, there is

not enough room in the local school to accommodate all of the children in the new subdivisions. They now have to travel great distances often in the wrong direction to find space for their child in a school. In regards to there not being a specific requirement to provide transportation, it has been provided for many years and is the only means of transportation for many.

The School Boards Policy #5400 states that “the Board of Education believes it is their responsibility to ensure appropriate transportation for eligible students to their catchments area school” What is the point of a policy, if, with the stroke of a pen, it can be eliminated. When this policy was made it was the belief of the Board. Those beliefs have not changed, why the policy? How can it just be stricken, like it never existed? And why?

As Maple Ridge has grown and more schools in some parts of east Maple Ridge have been built and transit has become available to more areas, the school bus routes have been understandably reduced. This is not the case for Whonnock, East Maple Ridge, North Maple Ridge and rural Pitt Meadows. When families in these affected communities moved here, many researched the bus routes to ensure there would be a way for their children to get to school. We have lived in these rural areas for years or have moved here knowing that school buses would pick up and drop off our kids from school. Now this service is in jeopardy.

The school buses may not affect a large percentage of the families in district 42, only about 262 families, in fact, but they provide an invaluable service to those 370 students. Children with special needs are not discounted just because they are low in number. We are a special needs community because of our unique challenges as discussed and Whonnock, East Maple Ridge, North Maple Ridge and rural Pitt Meadows families deserve the same sort of support from our school district. After all, we practice inclusion in the classroom, why not on the school buses as well?

After attending the information session at Garibaldi, we are more knowledgeable on some of the issues facing the board. We believe that there are some options available that could reduce the cost to the board, and still allow the bus service to be maintained. Some of our ideas include:

- Renegotiating the contract with the bus company so that we have more flexibility regarding rider ship versus bus commitment. Schedule routes to run all of the buses at full capacity. There is no reason for buses to be running half empty.
- Charge a bit more to parents. We realize the bus fees were not happily received by some, but the alternative of no buses would be a much heavier burden. By our calculations the \$215 fee equated to \$1 a day to ride the bus. Parents pay more than that to drive around the corner.
- Consider corporate sponsorship of our buses. Maybe our bus contractor would agree to allow the buses to be wrapped (at the sponsors expense) to cover part of the cost of the buses. The company’s considered would of course need to be a positive influence on our youth.
- A significant part of the bus expenses (on a per pupil basis) is being spent on Special Needs busing. Whether a child is special needs in Whonnock, East Maple Ridge, North Maple Ridge or rural Pitt Meadows or not, neither can walk the distance from Whonnock or East and North Maple Ridge to Garibaldi or from rural Pitt Meadows to either high school or elementary school. Inclusion is one of the Boards mandates in regards to Special Needs kids. Can we consider inclusion for bussing as well?
- Both the Province and the School Board talk about green initiatives and using transit instead of the single car approach. It appears that getting rid of the busing, where no transit exists, goes completely against any green initiatives and is a huge step in the wrong direction.

Lastly, at the transportation meeting held on April 22nd, we were given the figure of 50,000.00 per school bus as the cost to run a bus. In the 2016/2017 budget it is noted that canceling all school buses for typical student would result in a savings of \$650,000.00. In this 2015/2016 year it appears that we are running with 11 bus routes for a total of 10 buses which works out to 550,000.00. With some re-organization of runs perhaps we can reduce this to 9 buses for a total of 500,000.00. We are all aware that the enrollment numbers for high school have been dropping for the past approximately 4 years with the number of grade 12 students leaving being much higher than the grade 8's coming in to replace them. This will change in the next two years meaning high school enrollment will start increasing and so will the need for school buses. A large percentage of the school bus riders appear to be in the high school years, as there are less high schools and students have to travel greater distances to get there. The district will then be able to recoupe some money from transportation fees to ride the bus. There are plans in place to build new elementary schools in the district in the next few years but no plans to build any high school meaning the distance to high schools from these remote areas will not change any time soon.

In closing, we live in the remote areas of Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows and we need the school bus. We look forward to hearing from you.

I am willing to pay a fee for bus service. If there is no bus, I am unsure how my child will get to school.