

Written Submission to the Board of Education

Whonnock PAC

The Whonnock Elementary School PAC has received numerous letters from our school community regarding the recent decision to cancel the school buses in Maple Ridge. Our community is located in a very rural part of Maple Ridge where few if any transit buses run and where for many the distance to school is too great to walk. The roads in this rural area do not have any sidewalks or much of a shoulder, we have many bears and cougars and other wild animals. Over 70 members of our Whonnock school community, or close to 30% of the school population relies on the school bus to get their kids safely to and from school. When the students who attended Whonnock Elementary move on to the high school, many if not most attend Garibaldi Secondary School, which is more than 10 kilometres from Whonnock Elementary. There are almost 100 Students who live in the Whonnock and Thornhill area and who use the school bus to get to Garibaldi. This means a total of almost 170 students who live in this general area rely on the school bus to get to school and back. This is a larger number of students in area with a relatively small population.

In the proposed budget it states that in the school act there is no specific requirement to provide transportation. It also notes that the provincial government recommended looking at our transportation as an administrative savings area to be considered by school districts in meeting the provincially established administrative savings targets. When the provincial government said this we do not believe they were saying 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. In regards to there not being a specific requirement to provide transportation, it has been provided for more years than anyone could count and has been the only means of transportation for many. As Maple Ridge has grown, more schools in some parts of east Maple Ridge have been built and transit has been available to more areas, the school bus routes have been understandably reduced. There is however still a desperate need for school buses in a few areas of Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows where transit is simply not an option.

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. There may not be a large number of students who require this transportation, 370 in the 2014/2015 school year or 262 families, but for those of us who do, it is an essential service and one that we feel should not be eliminated.

Surely there is a way to amalgamate some of the existing routes to ensure buses are full and yet still offer service to these remote areas. There may even be opportunity to fill some of the buses that are not full by re-doing some of the routes. After hearing that some families in our area are interested in taking the bus but that service is not available, perhaps some research on where the families that do attend the schools out east live would help build more efficient routes with more riders. We are aware that there is a quick way to view this information as we saw it at the recent facilities review meeting. This same analysis could be done in the areas that also currently have school buses such as Webster's, SRT, Garibaldi, Albion and Highland Park. We imagine encouraging families to take the bus has never been something the district has had to take on but this could result in some significant cost savings.

Some creative thinking could also lead to the sharing of services for the buses that transport the children with special needs. Inclusion is in the class rooms and perhaps we can roll this out into the bussing as well. A new and more comprehensive survey to all parents in affected areas would also be recommended. The survey that was on the District 42 website only addressed the current or next year riders. It does not talk to people who will require the bus in the following years or those of us who would like to be able to access the school bus, and who live in affected areas, but where the bus does not currently stop. Maybe we could encourage more families to take the bus to take some of the cars off the road and help eliminate some of the congestions at some of the more rural schools. There are lots of ideas we can come up with to both save money and keep the buses for the kids in the most rural areas of the district.

In closing we realize that much time and energy is being put into the facility review and coming up with exciting new things to make some of the school in Maple Ridge destination school. Unfortunately, many of us who live in the rural parts of Maple Ridge will not be able to participate in these specially school as the distance is simply to great. All we want and need is a school bus to get out kids safely to school and back. We believe we have come up with many ideas on how to both increase rider ship and reduce the cost to the district all without cancelling this essential bus service. We look forward to talking with you.

Whonnock PAC

Christina Shaw on behalf of Whonnock Elementary PAC

Bus contact PAC member Pascale Shaw

* Since this letter was written, GSS and SRT catchments have been changed meaning some students currently attending Whonnock Elementary and who were in the SRT catchment, will now have to travel past SRT to GSS with no bus.