

Deal on student busing reached

RTS summer school transportation OK'd

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This is how a controversy over student busing in the city ends: Not with a bang, but a low-key joint news conference.

Officials with Regional Transit Service and the Rochester School District announced a deal Thursday for the public bus system to transport older city students to summer school in July and August. An agreement appears likely for the fall, too, though details have yet to be worked out.

Under the arrangement, more than 90 percent of summer school students will bypass the Downtown Transit Center on express buses, RTS CEO Bill Carpenter said.

The deal will cost the district \$350,000 more than the \$637,800 it paid RTS last year for summer school transportation — a 35 percent spike. Superintendent Bolgen Vargas said the district and RTS would ask the state for the money.

At a news conference at the district

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offices, Carpenter and Vargas said RTS and the district also are in talks about transportation for next school year, with the intent of further minimizing the number of students dropped off downtown.

Carpenter said it should be clear no later than June 17 what arrangements will be in the fall.

How likely is it that RTS will bus city students again next school year?

"I would say that it's very likely," Vargas said. He corrected himself a moment later.

"Not very likely — they will be," he said. "This is our only choice at this point. I'm very appreciative of the fact that Bill is here and our staff is working very hard to work on the logistics."

There would likely be changes in busing plans — for example, the district might use private buses next fall to transport students who attend some of the city's smaller schools, Carpenter said.

The district also plans to change start and end times for a majority of its secondary schools in the fall by anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour. This would allow RTS to use fewer buses to transport students — 71, down from 120.

The announcement was a major turnaround from two weeks ago, when Carpenter announced he had decided not to seek renewal of RTS' \$11 million contract with the district. The contract expires in June.

At the time, Carpenter blamed safety concerns at the Transit Center after a series of assaults involving a handful of the thousands of students who transferred there daily. He said RTS had exhausted its options to fix the situation.

The district fired back, saying the decision came too late in the year to hire a private bus company, and that it would buy students passes to ride RTS buses anyway. The tone on Thursday was markedly different.

"Yes, I backed away," Carpenter said. "Now I'm leaning forward." The deal also means there is likely no need for layoffs at RTS with the end of the school contract, Carpenter said. The authority planned to eliminate 144 jobs, sparking union protests last week.

"It's an encouraging sign," said Amalgamated Transit Union Local 282 president Jacques Chapman, who called for Carpenter's firing last week. "I'm glad that RTS and the school district are talking to each other and trying to work it out in the best interest of the community."

In a May 13 letter to Carpenter, Vargas wrote that he looked forward to hearing from RTS by Friday about the cost and viability for the bus system to provide student transportation next school year.

It was unclear what specifically has changed since Carpenter's announcement in late April. At the time, the district said it already had outlined its plans to change bell times before RTS pulled out of contract talks.

Without offering specifics, Carpenter said both sides had moved from where they were two weeks ago.

On Thursday, Vargas reiterated that most city students are not causing problems downtown. Any deal for the fall must still allow students to use the bus system to get to jobs and after-school activities, he said.

"Indeed, the majority of our students are behaving as they should," Vargas said.

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JACQUES CHAPMAN, AMALGAMATED TRANSIT UNION LOCAL 282 PRESIDENT

