

# Schools' busing plan faulted

## Impasse looms over student transportation

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The Rochester School District and public bus system appeared to be at an impasse Wednesday over the future of transportation for students.

The Rochester-Genesee Regional Transportation Authority announced on Tuesday that it would stop providing transportation for city high schools, starting in June. But the district said it has too little time to hire a private bus company for next school year, and that it would buy passes for students to ride regular public buses to school this summer and in the fall.

Paradoxically, that could mean more students on Regional Transit Service buses and transferring at the Downtown Transit Center.

RGRTA CEO Bill Carpenter warned on Wednesday that the transit system isn't set up to handle what the district has in mind. The district's operations chief, Michael Schmidt, acknowledged that the schools' plans present several challenges, but he said the district has few other options, given the timing of RTS' decision.

Superintendent Bolgen Vargas has noted that Buffalo uses a similar model.

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But the district may be holding out hope for another solution.

"We are very hopeful that we can still come to some sort of an agreement with RTS," Schmidt said Wednesday. "We've had a good partnership for many years. I would hate to eliminate that from the conversation."

#### **RTS: District's plan 'will not work'**

Carpenter said in a written statement that RTS stands by its decision, and he questioned the district's plan.

"I have explained repeatedly to the district's leadership that the Buffalo model will not work," he said. "Purchasing daily passes will not provide the necessary level of service to students when and where it's needed. We remain willing and stand ready to work with the district and the other transportation providers who responded to their recent request for proposals to assist with the development of a suitable transition plan."

The city schools' plan would run counter to what RTS said it hoped to accomplish by ending its 37-year relationship with the district. The transit authority said it had exhausted efforts to curb violence among a minority of students at the \$50 million Transit Center, which opened late last year. Carpenter said RTS no longer could sustain the impact on its finances and operations, nor on the public's perception of safety. When the district's contract with the transit authority expires in June, that will mean the end of express routes designed to carry students to and from schools without stopping downtown. The district said it paid about \$5 million a year out of an \$11 million contract for the authority to design and run express routes.

Most of the roughly 9,000 city students who ride RTS buses take these routes. As of mid-March, 3,785 students had passes allowing them to travel through the Transit Center in the afternoon, according to the latest figures from RTS.

Route changes that began last month and go into full effect on Monday will trim the number of students who can transfer downtown to 1,805, according to RTS.

But the district's plan means that large numbers of students would have to catch public buses that may not go directly to their schools or neighborhoods, at times that may not align with when their classes begin or end. And in effect, it could mean more students end up having to transfer buses downtown.

### **District will 'consider every option'**

Schmidt, the district's operations chief, acknowledged that the plan raises concerns about student attendance, among other potential complications.

But private bus operators can't hire enough drivers or have enough buses available in time for summer school or the fall, he said.

"We have a responsibility to provide students options to get to and from school, and we're going to have to consider every option we have."

The district put its transportation contract out to bid last October. Gary Smith, the district's procurement director, said Wednesday that at the same time, the city schools asked RTS for a proposal to continue its service. It submitted one, for about \$10.4 million for the next school year, according to Smith.

Two private bus companies sent in letters in response to the RFP, declining to bid because of the size of the contract, he said.

The district has met with First Student and Monroe Transportation to negotiate services and costs for busing elementary school students.

Meanwhile, the district had been in negotiations with RTS about a new contract until Tuesday, Schmidt said. Among other things, the district had agreed to change school schedules to try to limit the number of express buses running at any one time, according to Schmidt.

"We were not privy to any indication that they were not going to provide service until yesterday," he said.

### **Union chief: Replace Carpenter**

The episode led the head of the union representing most RTS drivers to call Wednesday for the transit authority to replace Carpenter. Jacques Chapman, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 282, said the decision to end the school district contract is the latest sign of mismanagement at RTS. He also pointed to a driver shortage that led to trip cancellations in February.

"His plan is just running the bus company into the ground," Chapman said of Carpenter. "He needs to be replaced."

RTS has said it would have to cut 144 jobs when the school contract ends, including drivers, but Chapman said the transit agency would end up needing many of those employees to handle an influx of students on public buses if the district goes ahead with its plans. An RTS spokeswoman declined to respond to Chapman's remarks.

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Passengers at the RTS Downtown Transit Center last year.

FILE PHOTO 2014

# 4 veggies to never eat:



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