

RTS to end student busing

Fights at transit station compelled decision

DAVID RILEY STAFF WRITER

Operators of Rochester's public bus system said Tuesday that they plan to stop transporting nearly 9,000 city students to and from school, starting in June.

But it may not be that simple. The district said the transit agency's decision comes too late to hire a private company with enough staff and equipment to bus city students for summer school or next fall. The district plans instead to buy daily bus passes so students can continue to ride Regional Transit Service buses next school year.

Rochester-Genesee Regional Transportation Authority CEO Bill Carpenter announced the decision Tuesday, soon after briefing his board on the matter.

The authority's contract to bus high school students expires in June, and the transit agency will end its relationship with the city schools then, Carpenter said at an afternoon news conference.

RTS considered all other options amid incidents of violence among city students who transfer buses at the au

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thority's Downtown Transit Center, he said. The problems with violence pre-date the Transit Center, but shifted there after the \$50 million facility opened late last year.

The authority no longer can sustain the impact that fights have had on RTS' finances, operations, reputation and customer safety, Carpenter said.

"Frankly, the student-related incidents that have occurred at the Transit Center have been frustrating and disappointing to all of us who worked so hard and took so much pride," he said.

By all accounts, a small minority of the thousands of students who pass through the Transit Center daily cause any problems.

The move would cost the authority about \$11 million out of its roughly \$90 million budget. About 144 RTS drivers, mechanics, office staff and other employees would lose their jobs.

Carpenter said RTS wanted to give the district time to find a new vendor and would assist with the transition.

However, the school district said it doesn't have enough time to hire a private bus company to provide transportation to all city high school students.

"The abrupt decision by RTS to end 37 years of service makes it exceptionally difficult for the district to provide transportation for our secondary students this summer and in the next school year," Superintendent Bolgen Vargas said in a statement. "We will have no other choice but to provide our students daily passes to access the public transportation system."

Buffalo and other cities use a similar model, Vargas noted. The district put its contract for student transportation out to bid late last year. In its statement, the district said it had been actively negotiating a new contract with RTS and worked alongside the transit

agency on plans to reduce the number of students who transfer downtown. Those changes go into full effect on May 4.

Carpenter said no single incident triggered the authority's decision, but two recent incidents at the Transit Center were particularly significant — a fight in which a bystander was knocked down and a stabbing two days earlier. "People have a right to move safely through our system, and we are here to serve our customers," RGRTA Chairman James Redmond said at the news conference. Mayor Lovely Warren, who called recently on the district to get a better handle on how and where it buses students, said RTS' plans would address community concerns about safety. "Safety is our primary concern for all of our residents, especially for our children who deserve safe passage to and from school," she said in a statement. "We are all committed to providing a safer, more vibrant community and an educational environment that allows our children, families and residents to thrive." It probably would be cheaper for the district to pay for daily bus passes for students, but service would be less direct with the loss of express routes designed for students.

District spokesman Chip Partner said about \$5 million of the district's \$11 million contract with RTS went toward those express routes. That said, the district would have to pay more for a private bus company to transport students in high schools with extended day programs, he said.

The public bus system typically has been seen as a better option to accommodate high schools with different closing times and to allow students to get to and from afterschool activities and jobs.

Jacques Chapman — president of ATU Local 282, the union that represents most RTS drivers — said Carpenter briefed him on the plan Tuesday morning.

Chapman said the transit agency should have explored other options, such as continuing to transport students without dropping them off downtown at all.

He estimated that perhaps 30 or 40 people whose jobs are at stake would be in a position to retire. Carpenter said he has proposed an early retirement incentive and transfers to other parts of the RTS system to reduce the number of layoffs.

"It's definitely a big hurt for us," Chapman said.

Carole Dowling, an RGRTA spokeswoman, said there are no plans to raise RTS' \$1 fare.

DRILEY@DemocratandChronicle.com [Twitter.com/rilzd](https://twitter.com/rilzd)



Fights at the downtown transit center have negatively affected RTS, officials say.

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