

Award honors employees who dealt with bus fire

By **BRIANNA LOPER**
brianna@masoncounty.com

When an electric bus caught fire in the garage, four Mason Transit Authority employees snapped into action, and it was business as usual to save the day.

"It was just, 'OK, there's a fire. We've got to put it out,'" said transit authority support tech James Dean, recalling the event.

Mechanics Steven Ellertsen, Brenton Schnitzer, Chris Roetting and Dean last week were recognized through the Above and Beyond Recognition Program for quick thinking and teamwork that saved the garage and employees from the fire.

The recognition came from the Washington State Transit Insurance Pool, of which Mason Transit Authority is a member.

"What you did is something you cannot teach; it's who you are," said Al Hatten, director of the insurance pool, as he awarded each employee with a \$250 check.

In January 2016, the four employees were working in Mason Transit Authority's bus garage on Johns Prairie Road. An electric bus, which belonged to another transit company, was charging in the garage.

"We heard, 'pop, pop, pop,' and looked over, and Chris started yelling, 'The bus is on fire!'" Dean said.

Smoke and flames were pouring from under the hood of the engine, where the electric batteries were hooked up to charge. The batteries overheated, causing the fire, Dean speculated.

The employees grabbed the four fire extinguishers in the garage and ran to the fire.

"We just went to town," Ellertsen said.

The employees quickly emptied the fire extinguishers: the garage was filled with foam. However, the fire continued to



Journal photos by Brianna Loper

ABOVE: Mason Transit Authority mechanic Steven Ellertsen, left, shakes the hand of Al Hatten, director of the Washington State Transit Insurance Pool, March 17 at the transit authority's bus garage. Hatten awarded Ellertsen and fellow employees, from left, Brenton Schnitzer, James Dean and Chris Roetting through the Above and Beyond Recognition Program for their work to put out an electric bus fire last year.

AT RIGHT: From left, Mason Transit Authority maintenance manager Marshall Krier, general manager Danette Brannin, mechanic Ellertsen, Schnitzer, Roetting, support tech Dean and Hatten after Hatten presented the employees with the award.

pour out of the sides of the bus. Roetting hooked the bus to a backhoe and drug it out of the garage.

The doors to the bus were open, and ripped off as Roetting pulled the flaming wreck through the garage door, but the MTA employee said that was a small price to pay for

getting the fire out of the garage. He unhooked the backhoe, and left the burning bus in the middle of MTA's empty parking lot.

One of the employees — they can't remember who — called local firefighters, who kept asking if it was a joke. Eventually, emergency services arrived to help put out the flames.

Dean said MTA has never had a bus fire before, and while employees are trained what to do in the event of a regular fire, they had no electric bus fire training.

"We didn't have experience with that type of battery, because we (Mason Transit Au-



thority) don't have those kind of buses," Dean said. "So we didn't know what would happen. A normal battery would have blown up."

Roetting said the employees were mostly calm as they decided how to deal with the fire. Schnitzer joked that he was annoyed because he had to forgo his break to help douse the flames.

However, MTA and the transit insurance pool did not downplay the bravery.

"We want to recognize you for this incredible act," Hatten said. "You had the facility to react, and that is quite an amazing act. You don't know how much this meant to the

transit community."

MTA general manager Danette Brannin submitted the four employees for the 2016 award. She said she was amazed at their quick thinking.

"We're really honored that they had the desire to not stand back and watch," Brannin said. "They helped protect the agency, protect other people, protect the assets. They really are the heart of our fleet."

Brannin said since last year's fire, the agency has changed its training to include electric buses, although she hopes they won't have to use their knowledge of fires again.

"We heard, 'pop, pop, pop,' and looked over, and Chris started yelling, 'The bus is on fire!'"

James Dean, Mason Transit Authority employee