

District ends activity bus contract with MTA

School Board cites safety, liability issues

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Citing safety concerns for its students, the Shelton School Board last week agreed to drop its 16-year contract with Mason Transit Authority (MTA) to provide bus drivers for after-school activities buses.

Under the partnership, MTA drivers are at the wheels of three district buses as they transport students home from following after-school activities. According to the district's

website, "During the activity bus time, the general public is allowed on the buses as well as groceries, babies, and anyone who behaves. The drivers are in contact with MTA dispatch and if anyone causes problems they can let them off the bus. We provide this as a service for our students."

At the board's Nov. 24 meeting, Brenda Hirschi — serving as board president for the last time — said the district has had the agreement with MTA to provide drivers on the activities buses since 1999. The dis-

trict pays MTA about \$60,000 per year, she said.

Hirschi said she's concerned that the people who drive the buses have not had background checks. Everyone else who comes in contact with the district's students, such as volunteers, must undergo a background check, she said.

The No. 1 goal of the district is the safety and security of the students, Hirschi said.

The agreement with MTA allows the district to terminate the contract with 30 days notice, Hirschi said. The balance of the year is at about \$40,000, she said. The other school board members agreed.

"We're wide open for the biggest lawsuit that ever happens, and that includes the school board members. ... We have no option but to terminate it," said Board member Gene Crater.

Because safety is so important, "I say we do not renew this partnership," said Board member Cheryl Williams.

"It really boils down to the safety of the kids," she said.

The board voted 5-0 to end the partnership.

"It was a difficult decision to make, but I believe the right one," said Superintendent Alex Apostle.

Apostle said there have

been no problems for 16 years, "but it only takes one incident." The district will find an alternative, he said.

"Activity buses are a must," Apostle said.

MTA President Brad Patterson said the arrangement with the district "has been a very valuable partnership." But he said he understands the district's concerns about liability.

"It makes sense for the school district to provide service to the students," he said.

The activity buses only run on school days, and not during the summer, which can be a challenge to riders who aren't students, Patterson said.

CORRECTION

A story in the Dec. 3 issue of the *Journal* on the Shelton School District ending an activity bus contract with Mason Transit Authority incorrectly stated that MTA drivers are at the wheels of district buses as they transport students home from following afterschool activities, and do not undergo background checks. In the partnership, district school bus drivers drive the school buses, and they do undergo background checks.

The *Journal* regrets the error.

Dec. 10th, 2015