

Peace Wapiti Public School Division No. 76
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Press Release

Seeking A Sustainable Solution

June 29, 2011

On Friday, June 17th, the trustees and administration of Peace Wapiti Public School Division met with their school bus drivers to review the Provincial Transportation Funding. The history of year after year of deficit transportation funding was explained, acknowledging that more than \$2 million has been channeled from classroom funding (Teacher and Teaching Assistant positions and hours) to finance transportation costs over the past 10 years. The reduction of 8 teaching positions, some centrally supported TA hours, and the loss of an administration support position was insufficient to cover the more than \$1.1 million cut in Differentiated Costs Funding announced in February and it became impossible for Peace Wapiti to continue supporting the transportation deficit from the classroom.

Prior to the Bus Driver Meeting the Board was required to approve a draft budget on Thursday, June 16th and by legislation, was required to submit a 'balanced budget'. By accounting terms this required the Board to request the Education Minister to allow the use of the capital/replacement school bus fund to cover the \$554,000 transportation deficit. While this satisfied the requirement to show a balanced budget, it is still uncertain whether the Minister will ever approve the Board to take this unsustainable step. Using up the capital money for the annual operating expenses of fuel, repairs, wages and benefits will lead to the Board having no money left for the purchase of buses. If the Board continues down this path, it will have to seek contracted bus services for Peace Wapiti students. The Board remains committed to owning its bus fleet staffed with dedicated drivers. Peace Wapiti understands that it cannot expect dedication and loyalty if it is unable to demonstrate equity in the labour market and will work to ensure that its employees' compensation is in line with other school boards.

Looking for solutions to maintain Peace Wapiti jobs, trustees and administration held a face-to-face meeting on June 17th with their non-union bus drivers wrestling with ideas and pitfalls of various choices.

Through evaluating and comparing the choices and looking to align bus driver compensation packages with those provided by other school boards that have their own bus fleets, trustees and administration have looked directly to the drivers to reduce their employer contribution to benefit premiums by 50%. This reduction or proration of the employers' contribution to benefit premiums brings the bus drivers in line with all other part-time employees with Peace Wapiti. This is a very difficult thing to ask of Peace Wapiti's school bus drivers but is viewed as the best of the worst choices for an employer to have to make. If Peace Wapiti uses the capital/bus replacement fund it is really heading toward laying off school bus drivers rather than asking them to take a reduction to their benefits.

For drivers with family benefit coverage this represents approximately a \$160 per month deduction from their pay. Given the potential hardship that this can place on its drivers the Peace Wapiti administration plans to meet with each driver to help minimize the impact. Bus drivers may be able reduce this cost or use other benefits, like the Health Spending Account to off-set some of this additional premium cost. Some drivers who have coordinated coverage through a spouse may be able to eliminate this additional deduction if they choose to cancel their optional benefits with Peace Wapiti.

Without the cooperation and understanding of the drivers that attended the meeting Peace Wapiti would certainly be heading toward more difficult choices of route cuts, longer ride times and contracting of school bus services.

Employees with questions regarding these circumstances and this information have been invited to contact:

- Sheldon Rowe - Superintendent
- Susan Karpisek – Human Resources
- Local Board Trustees