

RESOLUTION REGARDING SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION MANAGEMENT

Councilors Bowman, Humphrey, Kalis, Ryan, Noel, Downs, Krintzman, Albright, Danberg, Crossley, Greenberg, Leary, Kelley, Norton, Kalis, Lipof, Laredo, Wright, Baker, Grossman, and Markiewicz support the following Resolution.

In recognition of the important role school transportation plays in meeting citywide transportation, climate, and equity goals, we are requesting the Mayor fund a strategic study of the school transportation program in coordination with Newton Public Schools and transportation staff from Planning and DPW.

Goals for the study include: (1) analyze routes to identify opportunities to increase bus ridership and to better serve students, (2) improve the student/parent customer interface, (3) review fees and their impact on ridership, (4) create a plan to transition to electric school buses and vans, and (5) analyze potential savings and improved service possibilities from in-sourcing including opportunities for bus storage in Newton (6) determine the best management structure for student transportation going forward, including budget responsibility

Background

Currently, school transportation consists of two key pieces:

Yellow Bus

- 34 buses including 6 that are shared with METCO student transportation
- In 2nd year of 5-year contract with Eastern Bus
- Costs for the yellow bus are increasing 3.5% this year, with per-student transported cost of \$1,700 for a total cost (before fees) of \$4,080,600
- A student bus pass is increasing from \$350 to \$400 and being re-instated for all students (except where K-6 students live more than 2 miles from their assigned school). Previously elementary students could ride the bus for free
- Bus fees are estimated to cover 24% of operating costs (up from 16% in the prior year)

Special Education Transportation

- In 1st year of a 5-year contract with multiple vendors
- Costs for special education vans are increasing 10%, with a per-student transported cost of almost \$11,000
- In addition, NPS is estimating an increase of students needing transportation of 10%, now nearly 500 students, in total special education transportation is increasing 19.7% to \$5,480,000

Other considerations:

- The city would be well served by ensuring buses are well utilized as students who qualify for the bus but are not riding it are most likely being driven to school, adding to morning and afternoon congestion and safety issues throughout the city.
- Opportunity to reduce costs by providing a location(s) in the city to park buses while not in use, thus reducing the daily rate charged by the vendor
- Transitioning to electric school buses will reduce pollution and particulate matter in the city and specifically for students being transported; electric school buses are a good opportunity to enhance the power grid during the summer when they are more likely to be idle <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/04/18/beverly-electric-school-bus-summer-grid> and could provide a critical source of power during emergencies <https://electrek.co/2023/04/28/how-electric-school-buses-will-keep-canadians-warm-during-emergencies/> There will be opportunities to apply for Federal grants and rebates to reduce the cost of purchasing buses.
- Potential savings and improved service possibilities from in-sourcing, especially given the lack of a competitive bidding process for buses in Newton and across the state, and the complications of relying on vendors to align with other city goals such as fleet electrification. Worcester successfully insourced their bus operations, saving money, improving on-time arrival and implementing important student/family information enhancements. <https://www.wbur.org/news/2022/11/03/worcester-schools-fix-for-school-bus-delays-transportation>
- Given the timing of contracts and the upcoming possibility for electric school bus grants, now is a great time to launch a review of student transportation

THEREFORE, Councilors Bowman, Humphrey, Kalis, Ryan, Noel, Downs, Krintzman, Albright, Danberg, Crossley, Greenberg, Leary, Kelley, Norton, Kalis, Lipof, Laredo, Wright, Baker, Grossman and Markiewicz request this strategic study be conducted with the objective to meet citywide transportation, climate and equity goals.