

RCJTC and school bus operators reach an agreement in principle



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School buses have not been running in Renfrew County for over a month as negotiations were stalled between the Renfrew County Joint Transportation Consortium and the school bus operators as of Oct. 6. Justin Jeffrey of the RCJTC and Alan Jackson, spokesman for the school bus operators, provide updates on the continuing negotiations, which critics of the Doug Ford government blame on lack of funding for education in Ontario. This lack of school bus conveyance took a toll on families in Renfrew County, as they had to scramble to make alternate arrangements, if they were able to. However, on Oct. 7, a joint statement was issued by the RCJTC and the school bus operators saying they'd reached an agreement in principle to get the buses running again. The contract negotiations were still stalled between the RCJTC and the school bus operators as of Oct. 2, according to Alan Jackson a spokesperson for the school bus operators. He said at that time that the talks continued but they're still not anywhere near where they need to be. "The consortium and both directors of education hear what we are telling them, but don't seem to care about the operational costs we incur daily in student transportation or will incur in future years without regular increases," he says. These increases include the cost of new buses (71 per cent more than four years ago), bus parts cost increases (50 per cent more), wage increases (38 per cent more) and insurance increases (over 30 per cent more). These operating costs incurred have to align with current funding and Jackson told Bancroft This Week last month that they backed their funding requests with data. But although the operators' buses and drivers were ready to go at that time, since no contract was signed, they couldn't proceed due to insurance liabilities. Jackson further said that they keep telling them that the classroom and student learning will be affected if they cut

elsewhere to enable an increase to their offer to the school bus operators. What they don't seem to understand or care about is our key roles as transportation providers as it pertains to student learning successes. We are always optimistic we will reach an agreement, but when is the key word. Sooner than later, we will be in a state of a serious driver shortage as drivers need to have that extra income just to make ends meet and have started seeking employment elsewhere," he says. Jeffrey said on Oct. 2 that the talks were still at a standstill after two rejected contract offers from the RCJTC and a meeting on Oct. 2 between the consortium, directors of education with RCDSB and RCCDSB and a group representing the school bus companies. He said the representatives for the school bus companies maintained the position that a multi-year contract starting with a 20 per cent increase in the first year with a total increase of 35 per cent over five years is the only offer they'd accept. He said this is the same position the school bus companies have maintained since Aug. 30 and he says it would result in \$8.8 million over five years being transferred from other areas of school boards' budgets to transportation, impacting students' services. Jeffrey says that for the last offer made on Oct. 2 over \$4 million over five years would need to be transferred from other areas of the school boards' budgets to transportation, impacting services to students. He says that the RCJTC continues to explore all options and remains open to meeting with the school bus companies on an individual basis. He said the recent Request for Service Qualifications to identify alternative school bus companies will also be updated to reflect the financial details of the latest contract offer. Critics of the provincial government's lack of funding for education, like the MPP for Ottawa West-Nepean Chandra Pasma, who is the NDP's education critic. She says that the government should be putting more money into the hands of the school boards to meet the financial needs of the school bus operators while not affecting students' education. At the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation virtual townhall Renfrew County Kids Need a Ride! Townhall on the Impacts of Funding Cuts on Renfrew Kids and Families on Oct. 2, Pasma said that the Ford government's funding cuts negatively impacted children in Ottawa, who had some of its own bus chaos last year, and it could happen to anybody in Ontario going forward, as it's happening now in Renfrew County. "I had no idea the impact on Renfrew County families until I went twice last week myself to talk to people and heard first hand about the economic impacts of people missing work, losing jobs, losing hours of work, trying to cobble together solutions to keep work going, paying gas out of pocket, the incredibly long distances people have to drive, the impact on kids who may be walking or cycling in unsafe conditions, who are having to miss out on activities because of the long drives. So even with talk about policies and numbers I do recognize that at the heart of this it's about people and the effect the government choices are having on people," she says. As Pasma mentioned, families in Renfrew County have been suffering with this school bus disruption over the last month. Families like the Hailey family who live in Cobden. Alia Hailey's girls attend the catholic school in Douglas. She said she's been home with both of her kids since June, and when they heard that the buses weren't going to be running in September, they didn't think it would last this long. "Even if I had an available car to get them to school, it's a 25-minute drive in both directions, twice a day. We also only moved to this area just under two years ago, so we don't know any other parents in the area whose kids attend the same school to carpool. We do have one vehicle on the road right now, but with two other adults working shift work, it is rarely available. And mostly just every second weekend. Even so, I think it would be so hard on them if I brought them one day and then I had to tell them I couldn't bring them for the rest of the week," she says. Hailey says they have come to the point of trying to get a family members' used car on the road, but it's like jumping through hoops and costing us way more than we have right now. She says she wants the girls at school, just as much as they want to be at school. "My oldest is supposed to be finishing her Grade 8 before she goes off to high school. This not only means a lot to her academically but to graduate elementary with her friends, which means the world to her. And she hasn't even seen any of them since June. I had reached out to the school the first day of classes and I think by the next week the principal got in contact with us and was able to bring my girls a chrome book and a tablet to do school work. Now my oldest gets assignments here and there, as I find it harder for her to concentrate at home (she normally gets A's and B's in school). As for my youngest, she is in senior kindergarten. There has been nothing for her to do, I have been trying to home school her. Although I have been super worried for her. Back in June, the school had a speech and language therapist evaluate her and said she would qualify for the CHEO program in September at school. So now I'm scared she's going to miss out on that. I feel this is just as hard on the children as being held at home during [COVID-19]. They don't have any friends to contact, as we don't have any of the parents' information. It's not like we have the car to go out and do anything. They're literally stuck at home, and when they ask, "Can so and so come over," and I have to tell them no, they're at school. Then I have to explain to my girls why they're not. And it's so hard on them. Not just with education but mentally," she says. Mackenzie Storie says that the bus shortage not only affected her but also many others she's spoken to about the issue. "I used to take my son out every Friday for a mommy/son date, and we'd also enjoy a few fun activities with his friends. But now, it's limited to once a month, if at all. And I'm not the only one driving him around, if that were the case, he wouldn't be able to do anything at all. It's truly heartbreaking when a child has to choose between education and fun weekend activities. If you look at the petition I created (www.change.org/urgent-action-needed-get-busses-back-on-the-road-for-RCDSB-students/), one parent

even mentioned they're behind on mortgage payments because of this situation," she says. Jody McKone is from Whitney and her daughter is in Grade 11. She says she's been spending \$40 a day and over two hours of her time three days a week to get her to school, but cannot continue to do so. "There are others in this town who have not attended since day one or two and the schools haven't reached out to them. It's extremely disappointing and these kids will not get their credits this semester and that will impact their wellbeing and their future," she says. Bancroft This Week reached out to the Minister of Education Jill Dunlop, but did not receive a reply by press time. However, Conservative MPP John Yakabuski of Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke issued a statement to Bancroft This Week on Oct. 4, saying he appreciates how difficult the situation has been for everyone involved in this matter in Renfrew County and that he hoped the situation would be resolved promptly. "At the insistence of myself and the Minister of Education, the boards and school bus operators have met on three separate occasions. Unfortunately, they have not reached an agreement. The latest offer has been published by the Joint Consortium of the two boards and was sent out in a recently public communication which is also posted on their website. (Route Status Information - RCJTC (onthebus.ca) While we are not directly involved with the negotiations, we have had numerous conversations with both the boards and representatives of the operators," he says. However, late in the day on Oct. 7, an agreement in principle was reached between the RCJTC and the school bus operators, issued in a joint statement by Jeffrey. He said that they met on Oct. 7 to continue contract discussions and that they'd reached an agreement in principle. He says a tentative start date for transportation services will be shared by the bus companies by Oct. 11 with confirmation of the start date to be received by early next week. According to Jeffrey, the agreements will be finalized during the next week, but they can report that these are multi-year agreements that at a minimum will run until the end of the 2028/2029 school year. "Everyone involved in these discussions understands how difficult the first few weeks of school have been for families, students, and the community," he says. "We want to express our collective thanks and appreciation for your patience and understanding during this difficult time." This is a developing story and Bancroft This Week will bring you updates as they become available over the coming weeks.