

OSEA in major fight to save school bus jobs at Parkrose

School Board will vote Feb. 24 on whether to privatize

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Parkrose School District, in outer Northeast Portland, is preparing to outsource its school bus service. Oregon School Employees Association (OSEA) is fighting to oppose it, and save the jobs of 18 school bus drivers, a mechanic, and a dispatcher — its members.

In lawns all over the district, union-made signs shout “Keep it Local.” School bus drivers are canvassing neighborhoods and lobbying parent-teacher organizations and neighborhood associations. Union ads are running online at *Oregonlive.com* and *midcountymemo.com*. School board members are getting phone calls from residents about the plan, and board meetings are preceded by noisy union rallies.

The board is expected to vote at its Feb. 24 meeting whether to contract out, and in the weeks leading up to that, the union will be running television ads targeted to Comcast cable subscribers in outer Northeast Portland.

Parkrose is one of Oregon’s poorest school districts, with about 75 percent of its 3,500 students eligible for free or reduced priced meals. It’s the farthest north of four small independent school districts on the outer east side of Portland, and is situated roughly between I-205 and NE 142nd Ave, and from the airport to NE Halsey. Many Parkrose residents see their community as a small-town oasis on the edge of a big city. But efforts to dump the district’s school bus drivers and contract with an outside firm like giant multinational school bus contractor First Student are putting that neighborliness to the test.

At the Jan. 27 school board meeting, board chair Ed Grassel cut off an elementary school mom who spoke up for the union, then countered her comments with the district’s perspective. And it had taken her a real commitment to get to that point. Parkrose School Board meetings are four-hour affairs, with a talkative superintendent, hours of staff reports, and decision-making on subjects as minute as whether to waive \$174 in space rental fees when the Holly Hills Homeowners Association meets at Parkrose High School.

OSEA has tried to mobilize community members to speak out at board meetings, but the board makes visitors sit through hours of proceedings before providing an opportunity to comment,

and refuses to hear comment from any but Parkrose residents.

Last fall, Parkrose school bus driver Pat Koenig — a former Parkrose resident whose kids attended schools in the district — sat through hours of a Board meeting only to be told he could not speak because he’s not a current resident. The same treatment was given to 15-year Parkrose bus driver and educational assistant Colleen Van Houten, and to Oregon AFL-CIO Executive Board member Tim Stoelb, who is state president of the 18,600-member OSEA. The Board tells its OSEA-represented employees that only chapter president Rick Doyle can speak for them.

And when Doyle speaks, he gets a chilly reception. At the Jan. 27 board meeting, superintendent Dr. Karen Fischer Gray praised board members and every other speaker, but looked down at her papers when Doyle took the podium for his allotted spot. When Doyle called for the district to engage in open dialogue with the union, she shot back in a combative tone.

“I’m here, Rick,” Gray said. “My door is always open.”

Board Chair Grassel moved as if to calm Gray, but she waved him off. “I get to say what I think,” she said.

Gray told the Labor Press the move to outsource busing is dictated by the district’s need to look for economic efficiencies. Budget cuts have resulted in a 182-day school year, down from 191 days before the recession. The district has no reserves, and ended the most recent school year with \$209,000 in its bank account. For a district with a \$30 million annual budget, that’s a cushion of less than 1 percent.

Any contractor would have to offer current drivers a job, Gray said, and would have to pay the same wages; under the OSEA contract, drivers start at \$14.57 an hour, and rise to \$17.32 after six

years.

Gray also defended the board’s public comment policies.

“You do not, by any law, have to give any union president time at your board meeting,” Gray said.

“People showed up to that meeting that have never showed up to a meeting in my district ever,” Gray said. “I’ve never seen those people. They haven’t been in all the meetings we’ve talked about busing. Why are they showing up now?”

The union may challenge the outsourcing effort in court. In the 2009 session of the Oregon Legislature, OSEA was able to win passage of HB 2867, a law that requires local public employers — when they’re considering contracting out services normally provided



OSEA members and supporters rally Jan. 27 before a Parkrose School District board meeting. The board is considering contracting out school bus service.

by their employees — to conduct a cost comparison estimating the cost of doing the work in-house and by a contractor. If the estimate shows savings come solely from lower wages and benefits, the law says they may not contract out the work.

But OSEA legislative director Tricia Smith says some employers are gaming the law, claiming non-personnel savings without substantiation, in order to move forward with outsourcing.

“Districts are thumbing their noses at the intent of the law, creating bogus cost analyses with made-up numbers,” Smith told the Labor Press.

Smith said the Parkrose School District is a good example. To comply with the law, Parkrose paid transportation consultant John Fairchild \$3,500 to produce a two-page spreadsheet. The cost comparison, which includes no written explanatory notes, claims the district would save \$26,677 a year in material costs — and \$247,368.67 a year in salary and benefit costs.

Because the district is required to negotiate with the union over the impact of laying off its drivers, OSEA staff representative Hal Meyerderk had an opportunity to question Fairchild about the spreadsheet. In the meeting, Meyerderk says, Fairchild confirmed that the personnel cost savings would come from slashing worker retirement and health benefits.

Meyerderk says he asked Fairchild what his estimates of non-personnel cost savings were based on. He says the consultant replied that an assumption of 30 percent lower materials costs was based on his “gut feeling” and 30 years experience in the transportation industry. Meyerderk pointed out that profit had been left out of the cost comparison, and Fairchild added an estimate of \$30,000 profit.

A similar analysis by Fairchild for the Central Point School District, near Medford, was the basis of a legal challenge by OSEA. The school district won in a lower court, but OSEA has an appeal pending before the Oregon Court of Appeals.

Parkrose school bus driver Steve Wilson lives less than a block from the bus yard. But he says he’ll move if First Student gets the school bus contract. Wilson previously worked for First Student — after his career driving a semi truck was cut short by medical limitations. He says he would not go back, because First Student annually terminates its drivers at the end of the school year with no promise of rehire, leaving them to collect unemployment insurance and lose their health insurance unless they can afford COBRA payments.

OSEA’s Meyerderk says First Student has 30 percent annual employee turnover.

For the union, the most important part of the Jan. 27 board meeting was a vote to accept Fairchild’s analysis. OSEA urged board members to reject the Fairchild cost comparison, but in the end the board voted 4-1 to accept it. Board member Erick Flores, a Portland school teacher, was the sole member to vote no.

“Nobody is in favor of giving up our school buses,” Flores said at the meeting. “I haven’t received a call from anybody saying this is a good idea.”

Parkrose board member James Trujillo, a senior HR manager at the Port of Portland, explained his yes vote.

“In a resource-constrained environment, it is our duty to augment the resources that make the biggest impact on student learning,” Trujillo said.

The board will hold a work session Feb. 10 at which it will give 30 minutes to OSEA Budget and Research Special-

ist Sara Connors to present a counter to Fairchild’s cost comparison. It’s expected to vote at its Feb. 24 meeting. If it contracts out, the employees would be laid off at the end of the school year. They’d be eligible to stay on with the new contractor, but most likely would not have benefits.

OSEA is calling on supporters, particularly Parkrose residents, to call school board members. It hopes to send a message that the employees aren’t “just” bus drivers; they look out for the kids, model behavioral expectations, and teach them right from wrong. School bus drivers are the first district employees the children of Parkrose see in the morning, and the last they see at the end of the day. Current drivers have many years of positive relationships with students, something a high-turnover contractor could never match. And it’s anti-worker to outsource school bus transportation, OSEA argues, since over 90 percent of the estimated cost savings would come from slashing health and retirement benefits.

Chair Ed Grassel
503-253-0988

Vice Chair Thuy Tran
503-267-3262

James Trujillo
971-285-2195

Erick Flores
503-686-1655

Mary Lu Baetkey
503-253-4423

Superintendent
Dr. Karen Fischer Gray
503-408-2135