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On the Bus

By Sophie Braccini

The Lamorinda School Bus Program transports approximately 1,400 students daily to the area's elementary, intermediate and high schools - that's about 25 percent of the student population. This fall, the Lamorinda School Bus Program will also fulfill the Acalanes Union High School District's transportation needs for students enrolled in its English Language Learners program.

Chris Learned, AUHSD associate superintendent, said that the district's 12 ELL students have very different native languages, with a majority being Chinese and Spanish speakers. The English Language Learners curriculum is only offered at Las Lomas High School but is available to any student in the district whose first language is not English and who needs support entering high school - the district provides the transportation.

"We evaluated our transportation costs and it was prohibitively more expensive to transport the ELL students ourselves rather than contracting out," said Learned. The ELL bus route has only eight stops, so most students are picked up at central locations.

The Lamorinda School Bus Program contracts with First Student for bus service. With its 21 buses, First Student is able to service 37 routes in Lamorinda. Orinda has the most - OIS alone has 10 different routes.

Program manager Juliet Hansen explains that state funding for school buses vanished years ago, but Contra Costa County voters passed a half-cent transportation sales tax (Measure J) that funds about half of the cost of school bus service in Lamorinda. Parents pay the rest; the price of a round trip annual pass is \$468 for the 2014-15 school year.

The bus program is governed by a Joint Powers Authority called the Lamorinda School Bus Transportation Agency, which is comprised of elected officials from each of the cities and school districts and is currently chaired by Lafayette mayor Don Tatzin and staffed by Hansen and administrative aide Sue Graves.

"As the school year starts, we would like to remind our students and the whole population of a few important safety tips," said Hansen. Riders should always arrive five minutes early to the bus stop; stay within 10 feet of the bus; wait for permission from the driver before boarding or departing the bus; follow the driver's instructions about crossing the street and always cross in front of the bus, never behind it.

Hansen has a reminder for drivers, too. "All vehicles must stop on both sides when the bus displays flashing red warning lights and extends the stop signal arm. Vehicles may not pass until the flashing red lights and signals are turned off," she said.

There are still seats available on most of the school bus routes - for more information or to sign up, go to www.lamorindaschoolbus.org.

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