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Published May 20th, 2015

Lamorinda School Bus Program Celebrates 20 Years

By Cathy Tyson



Bus line at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School Photo Cathy Tyson

vehicle trips during the school year, transporting over 1,200 students to school every day, for the bargain basement rate to parents of \$1.27 per ride. This year the Lamorinda School Bus Program is celebrating 20 years of congestion relief.

While it's not uncommon to hear complaints about traffic, those big yellow buses hold up to 71 elementary students. Imagine the increased volume of cars at peak times if each of those 71 kids in a single bus was chauffeured individually to school by a parent or guardian? Bigger kids obviously take up more space, says Juliet Hansen, the program manager who has been running the bus program since the beginning. She estimates 50 to 60 middle school kids can fit in a large bus.

It's a bus bonanza at Orinda Intermediate School every day, probably due to the long commute for families who live in a number of neighborhoods north of the freeway from OIS, which is at the south end of town. Ten buses are transporting kids daily to OIS, the program's most popular destination.

Originally it took some convincing of the Contra Costa Transportation Authority that Lamorinda's share of the sales tax money should go toward reducing traffic instead of building road improvements. Maintaining and improving the county's transportation system are the focus of the agency that manages the sales tax program paid for by Measure C and now Measure J. Passed in 1988, Measure C provided revenue to pay for programs such as a BART extension, freeway improvements, and more. Measure C sunsetted in March 2009.

Voters actually agreed to tax themselves again to carry on with the transportation improvements. With 71 percent of the vote, Measure J was approved in November 2004 to continue the county-wide half-cent sales tax for 25 more years beyond the original expiration date of Measure C. Contra Costa County residents' Measure J tax money paid for the new fourth bore of the Caldecott Tunnel, improvements on Highway 680, over \$350 million for local streets and road maintenance, and improvement and enhancing transit not only for local school kids but for seniors and people with disabilities.

Kathy Fernbacher and Stephanie Sorensen were a couple of the original moms who got the ball rolling. Other key players include Don Tatzin, Amy Worth, Bobbie Landers and Steven Falk. Fernbacher had moved from the south end of Orinda to the Sleepy Hollow area and was concerned about the traffic jams in her new neighborhood. She and other concerned parents attended

About two decades ago a group of plucky parents knew there had to be a better way to get their kids to school. In one of the very rare collaborations in our tri-town area, some parents, the towns and the school districts worked diligently to create something from nothing. Together they were the first in the county to advocate for using Lamorinda's share of Measure C, then Measure J funds - a voter approved half-cent sales tax in Contra Costa County - for reducing car trips to local schools on school buses. While other municipalities preferred to use the money on freeway widening or other construction related projects, the effort here focused on using those funds to cover roughly two-thirds of the cost of providing bus service for Lamorinda students. Parents pay the remaining third.

Now there is a fleet of 21 buses that serve Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda, saving 660,420

"meeting after meeting," said Fernbacher. "We just kept fighting," explaining that parents would like to spend the tax revenue to push for school buses. She recalled, "Eventually they gave in." In the fall of 1994, after two years of planning and negotiation, the first buses got rolling.

"It really did work," commented Ann Grodin who was part of the effort from the start, explaining that studies showed the bus program actually got cars off the road, especially on Moraga Way. "As bad as it is now, (traffic) was worse then." She also remembers the "hard fought vote" 20 years ago to use the tax money for buses, but in her opinion the results are amazing.

The three towns, in cooperation with local school districts, embraced the grassroots effort and formed a joint powers authority that oversees the program. Originally, the Lamorinda school bus program was approved only for a five year pilot, contingent upon surveys and statistical support to prove its value. Now the program, with professional drivers from First Student, has a fleet of clean diesel buses that are equipped with the latest safety features - including seat belts.

Early registration is already open, with special pricing offered for those who sign up by June 15. The round trip annual bus pass will cost parents \$455 for the school year, which comes out to \$2.53 per day or \$1.27 per ride. Keep in mind that 62 percent of the school bus program budget is funded by a portion of your sales tax dollars.



Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School students start filling up buses. Photo Cathy Tyson

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