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## School bus plan on hold, but routes still may be cut

By Sora O'Doherty

The Lamorinda School Bus Transportation Agency Board backed off its plan to immediately cancel the El Toyonal bus route and eliminate stops on some other Orinda school bus routes, but it appears to be a dim hope that the busses might operate the routes for the next school year.

At a meeting jam packed with upset parents and bus supporters, the LSBTA decided that more research was required, and tabled the matter until its next meeting on July 13 - a date that upset many parents even more because it will cause their children to miss the Stingray Ball at Orinda Park Pool that same evening. To make matters even worse, on June 5 there was another accident involving a school bus on El Toyonal. No children were present and little damage was sustained when a white pick-up truck sideswiped a school bus and failed to stop.

A steady stream of parents and children addressed the LSBTA board on June 8. Although Board President Don Tatzin urged the audience to withhold applause lest they discourage any speakers from voicing a contrary opinion, the applause was frequent and enthusiastic and all speakers seemed to be unanimous in their opposition to the proposed route changes, especially the elimination of route 18, which serves El Toyonal, although other routes were also represented.

The parents begged the board to delay a decision on the bus routes until the end of the next school year, to allow for further research, but the board members expressed grave doubt that they could continue to allow the routes to be operated that have been deemed dangerous. The parents were also dismayed that the next meeting will occur when many affected families will be on their summer vacations.

The board and parents also heard from Orinda Director of Public Works Larry Theis, who explained some of the realities of dealing with Orinda's narrow, twisting roads. Theis talked about such issues as the possibility of removing double yellow road striping, and replacing it with another form of striping. He also addressed the issue of improvement to the roadway to increase the available width. As a capital improvement project such work would probably require a year to accomplish, from planning and city council approval through actual modifications of the roads.

One of the issues that was raised by the parents was that the striping was uneven on the section of El Toyonal involved in a 2014 bus accident: the lanes were unevenly divided so that the lane the bus was traveling in was only seven-and-a-half feet wide, while the other lane was over 11 feet wide. Theis agreed that stripe placement is discretionary, and it was suggested that the placement of stripes should always be such as to accommodate school busses where possible. The public works director also indicated that he would need to hire a special consultant to quickly accumulate the data on the road conditions of the bus routes.

Many of the concerned parents said they had knowledge in relevant fields such as engineering, and expressed very specific concerns about the methodology of the safety study commissioned by LSBTA and conducted by School Bus Consultants. There was also a great deal of dismay that the report contained what the parents regarded as misstatements of the applicable law. The parents have been quickly conducting their own research, coming up with alternative buses that are narrower than the ones currently used by First Student. The alternative buses presented cost around either \$55,000 or \$62,000 each. The parents were ready and willing to pitch in and help with anything that will keep the bus routes operational.

Many parents and children expressed horror at the idea of children walking on the dangerous road. While Patrick D. Kneib, the School Bus Consultants' project manager said that they had never suggested that the children walk, at least two children addressed the board saying that their mother would make them walk. Other parents noted that the lack of a school bus will drastically reduce home prices along route 18.

There was also a great deal of dissatisfaction with the process of noticing the proposed school bus changes and the meetings, with many in attendance saying that they only happened to hear about the meeting, but would make sure to bring all their neighbors to any future meetings.

Board member and Orinda Vice Mayor Amy Worth summed up the actions required now: 1) thoroughly examine the actual bus corridors to fine tune the report as to the exact location of road deficiencies; 2) look into the possibility of operating narrower busses on these routes; and 3) determining the conditions under which the contractor, First Student, will agree to provide service for the contested routes.

Late in the evening, after many of the parents had left, the board voted unanimously to authorize another \$5,000 for School Bus Consultants to do further work on the study. Kneib assured the board that the additional money would not be used to correct any errors in the report but that that would be covered by the original amount of \$70,000 that the board had allocated for the report.

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