Small bus companies fighting to stay alive

By Sheila McBrayne
Leamington Southpoint Sun, June 1 2011

Small and medium school bus companies are in a fight to keep their multi-generational family-run businesses alive after changes the provincial government has proposed in the procurement system for student transportation.

Small family-run community-focused bus companies, like Leamington’s C.A.Bailey Limited, have been transporting students to and from school since the first school buses rolled out in the late 1940s.

In a statement by Independent School Bus Operators Association (ISBOA), president Sean Payne explained the background for the current situation. “We have a long history of providing safe and secure transportation for the children of Ontario, many with operations going back over 60 years. ISBOA is concerned about the current direction the province is taking in regards to school bus transportation… The Ontario Ministry of Education completed a costing study from 2006 to 2008. They have since referred to the costing study as their ‘benchmark’."

This study summarized school bus operators’ current costs but failed to address many existing shortfalls in the industry, such as driver wages, fuel fluctuations and equipment costs. In spite of these shortfalls there were still many cases of operators that were working for less than this cost benchmark. The Ministry, however, abruptly abandoned this approach and decided to open up the school bus industry to competition. They have referred to this as a Request For Proposal (RFP) strategy for providing school busing to Ontario’s students.

This strategy is of such concern to independent operators that ISBOA formed to provide an organized opposition in November 2008. This association is made up of over 100 family-owned school bus businesses, primarily small and medium sized, that operate across this province.

The ISBOA is warning school officials and parents alike that Queen’s Park is jeopardizing safe, sustainable school bus operations, though their own pilot projects have proven their plan is flawed. The results of recent pilot projects have proven that the RFP process being mandated by the Ministry of Education will force school boards to contract with the lowest bidder, at the expense of quality and safety.

There are three multi-national companies in Ontario - Stock Transportation, First Student, and Student Transportation of Canada (also operate as Leuschen Bros. Limited, Parkview Transit, Elgie Bus Lines, Elliott Coach Lines, Ayr Coach Lines, Simcoe Coach Lines, Liftlock Coach Lines).

“We believe that taxpayers are already receiving value for the dollars spent on transportation… We’ve shown them our books and they have used our numbers to create the so-called benchmarks,” said ISBOA Executive Director Karen Cameron.

C.A. Bailey Ltd. owners (sisters) Sharon Arthurs-Pepper and Sandra Symons held a regional meeting of independent bus company owners from Windsor-Essex, Chatham-Kent and Lambton counties at C.A. Bailey offices on Sealiff Drive, Leamington, on Tuesday, May 24.

“Many family-owned bus operators operate their school buses with their family names embossed on the sides of the school buses. These operators care about the families and the students they transport. They live in the areas they service. They talk with these families at the grocery store, the arena, and the coffee shop. They sponsor their child’s hockey/soccer team or help out with charitable causes.

Many of the bus operators you know were born into this way of life and have embraced it. In a couple of words “WE CARE”, more than any company policy, procedural flowchart or statistics that an RFP can explain. Despite this, the RFP is quickly eliminating these school bus operators from the landscape of
Ontario. C.A. Bailey Limited is concerned about how this process will impact our community when the pilot project is implemented here in Windsor-Essex County for September 2012,” said Arthurs-Pepper in a statement.

Lesa McDougall of Cook School Bus Lines knows firsthand how devastating this change in policy will be. Her family-owned business, which has operated in the Mount Forest area since 1964, was recently wiped out as a result of a pilot project in Wellington-Dufferin School District.

“In less than a year, we went from being a viable business and valued employer to being wiped out. Overnight, the McGuinty government changed the rules that school bus operators have been working under for years. We mortgaged our home to invest in this business and our community, and now it is gone.

(Continued on Page 2)

C.A. Bailey Ltd. hosts regional rally for independent bus operators

(Continued from Front)

Cooks went from 20 routes to one and was out of business.

Also at the regional meeting was Ruth Anne Staples of Kenilworth and operator of Epoch’s garage who ran 10 routes and were stripped down to one. They also went out of business. This bus company had operated since 1946.

Locally, Arthurs-Pepper and C.A. Bailey reps met with MPP Pat Hoy on May 17, but had not heard back from his office since the meeting.

Show your support and write letters telling these political leaders that you do not agree with the process and you support your family operated bus company.
• Premier Dalton McGuinty: dmcguinty.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org
• Minister of Education Leon Dombrowsky: ldombrowsky.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org
• MPP Chatham-Kent Essex Pat Hoy: phoy.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org

The ISBOA has a website www.isboa.ca that includes an online petition and Facebook campaign as well.

Contact your school board trustee (Greater Essex County District School Board, Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board, Conseil scolaire de district des écoles catholiques de Sud-Ouest) and be sure to let them know how you feel about this situation as well. In the last two years since the pilot projects began, 15 independent school bus companies have gone out of business.