

Region 14 aware of changes

Information contradicts statement from superintendent

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REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

WOODBURY — Region 14 administrators knew the district's bus company had changed several bus routes before the first day of school Wednesday, a district official confirmed Friday.

A public meeting has been scheduled for Tuesday for parents to talk with officials from the school system and the bus company about why it took hours to get some children home from school this week.

Business Manager Jay Hubelbank conceded on Friday that he had spoken to Ellen Stark, interim manager for Laidlaw Transit Inc., about changes to bus routes prior to Wednesday, when some students were delivered home more than two hours late. That contradicts statements Hubelbank and Superintendent Robert D. Cronin made to reporters and in writing to parents Wednesday that Stark changed bus assignments without telling anyone in Region 14. They contended the changes threw the transportation plan into chaos, but it now appears Stark was trying to improve the routes by avoiding having buses make 90-degree turns or dropping students off in unsafe locations.

It also appears the new routes are taking longer than the 45 See **BUSES**, Page **A8**

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minutes administrators promised when they reconfigured Mitchell and Bethlehem elementary schools. On Friday, some Mitchell school students didn't get home until after 5 p.m., and school dismissals at 3:35 p.m.

Cronin said all routes should be down to 45 minutes by next Friday, but it may mean elementary students will be getting home at 4:45 p.m., nearly 9 hours after they left their homes to board the bus in the morning.

"Our objective should be that all of the buses should be out by 4 p.m. from Mitchell at the very latest, and so we've got to continue working on that," Cronin said.

Stark declined Friday to discuss any conversations she had with Hubelbank, but she did say she informed him about changes to some routes before Wednesday.

Hubelbank acknowledged he spoke to Stark about some changes, but it was not clear Friday how their conversations may have impacted Wednesday's opening day.

New bus routes, which are being finalized by officials this weekend, will be posted by Tuesday on the district's Web site, www.ctreg14.org, he said.

Cronin said that because of the number of buses leaving from Bethlehem Elementary School, he feels 3:15 "is a reasonable time" for the last bus to depart.

"Twenty five minutes to board, I think, 19 buses is pretty good," Cronin said.

Pam Gagenbach, of Woodbury, said she saw buses still unloading at 10 minutes after school opens, when she dropped her six year-old son off Friday morning at Bethlehem Elementary. When she came back to pick him up after school, he was waiting with other students in the cafeteria at 2:45 p.m., five minutes before classes are supposed to be dismissed. She said buses need more time between dismissals to pick up and drop off students. "The problem is what we've been telling them all along — you need an hour and 45 minutes," Gagenbach said. "Unless the bus company has a time machine, they can't make it work."

Three buses — 3, 6 and 9 — have been identified as problematic by school officials. Hubelbank said the buses travel the farthest distance of any of the buses, to Grassy Hill Road and Hard Hill Road areas in Woodbury. While he was uncertain of how many children the three buses drop off, he did say they are consistently the last to reach Bethlehem Elementary.

In an e-mail to Cronin, Stephen Cunningham, who lives in the Grassy Hill area, said it took his daughter more time to return home than it did for him to meet a client in Manhattan on Wednesday.

"To lead us to believe that some 'fine-tuning' needs to take place is minimizing the problem," Cunningham wrote. "It took my daughter 2 hours and 20 minutes to get from BES to Grassy Hill Road in Woodbury on Wednesday and yesterday it was close to 1½ hours."

