

# BUS WOES WON'T TAKE A BACK SEAT

Region 14 official apologizes; problems nearly resolved

BY CHRIS GARDNER  
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

WOODBURY — All problems with bus transportation in Region 14 should be resolved by Friday, or early next week at the latest, the district's superintendent said Tuesday.

Robert D. Cronin apologized to angry parents of elementary schoolers about the transportation delays that plagued the district last week and Tuesday, saying that eliminating all snafus in the morning and afternoon bus runs are his top priority.

Parents also received an apology from Vincent Cappiello, district manager for Laidlaw Transit Inc., the district's bus company, who admitted his personnel did not notify Region 14 of some changes it made to bus routes before the start of school. Administrators said they were aware that some routes had been modified, but not all.

The miscommunication created havoc on the first day of school last Wednesday, when students left Bethlehem and Mitchell elementary schools two hours late to go home. Some students were on the bus for more than an hour even though school administrators promised when they reconfigured the elementary schools last year that bus rides would not exceed 45 minutes.

Cronin said the situation has gotten better since last week. On Tuesday, all buses left Bethlehem Elementary School within 17 minutes of dismissal, he said. They left Mitchell within 16 minutes after the students were dismissed.

"We did a much better job today," he said, adding that drivers are timing their routes and reporting back to the bus depot. See **BUSES, Page A10**  
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Pam Gengenbach of Woodbury was among the upset parents who spoke during a meeting with Region 14 school officials Tuesday at Nonnewaug High School. She said students had been let out of class earlier than planned so they would be ready for the

buses.

## **BUSES: Parents angry about long rides**

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the moment they drop off their last student.

Despite the improvements, a few bus routes still exceed 45 minutes, but Cronin resolved to fix that by Friday.

Some parents accused Cronin and Business Manager Jay Hubelbank of soft-pedaling the problems. Deanna Boucher of Woodbury said her 6-year-old son was picked up Tuesday morning at 7:17 a.m., and didn't arrive at Bethlehem Elementary School until 8:10 a.m., a ride of 53 minutes.

"You promised a 45-minute bus ride," she yelled into the microphone, as several parents clapped. "My son is on the bus for over 45 minutes. That is unacceptable to me."

She said she has called every morning since the first day of school to complain, but has not heard back from anyone.

Dick Hayward of Woodbury, who has a grandson at Bethlehem Elementary School, said the problems show the transportation plan was the direct result of a "poorly planned, casual ... process that you are responsible for visiting on the community."

Administrators implemented a new bus routing system after the Board of Education voted last year to reconfigure the two schools, making Bethlehem Elementary a school for kindergarten through second-graders, and putting all thirdthrough fifth- graders at Mitchell.

Now the system has three tiers of routes; buses bring high and middle schoolers home first, then drive to Bethlehem to pick up the three youngest grades. After those runs are completed buses go to Mitchell to take the third, fourth and fifth- graders home.

In some cases, buses are taking too long on the middle and high school run, which is delaying pick up at the elementary schools. Erica Barber of Woodbury, a critic of the reconfiguration plan, said there simply is not enough time to shuttle the buses back and forth between towns to drop off every student, and still meet the administrators' 45minute ride mandate.

Scott Kozak of Bethlehem was on a Transportation Committee comprised of volunteers and school personnel that met only once. He questioned why the group was dissolved, and was told by Hubelbank that the members' purpose was to ride the buses to make sure the routes did not exceed 45 minutes, and when that job was completed there was no reason to meet.

Hubelbank said bus routes are in a constant state of flux as people move in or out of the district, and changes are made to improve safety or efficiency.

He said that is why Laidlaw's interim bus manager for Region 14, Ellen Smith, modified some routes less

than 10 days before school started. The miscommunication caused two different sets of routes to be published in newspapers that circulate in Woodbury and Bethlehem.

Barber said her neighbor noticed the discrepancy. So did others, but the district did nothing to inform parents of the changes before last Wednesday.

Parent Pam Gengenbach accused administrators of dismissing students at 2:40 p.m. Tuesday, 10 minutes before the scheduled dismissal time, so children would be ready to board the buses when they arrive.

Cronin denied the charge, but Gengenbach pressed, saying she was at the school Tuesday to pick up her child, and saw it happen.

"I'll look into that tomorrow," Cronin said. Only about a half-dozen parents got a chance to speak before the meeting was adjourned so the school board could meet. It was the first time the board had been in session since the first day of school, and Cronin said that aside from the transportation woes, the first day of school went smoothly.

"Overall I would give the day itself four stars," he said.

School board Chairwoman Debbie Corsico said the board is aware of the problems, and is confident they are being remedied.

"Mr. Hubelbank and Dr. Cronin are working tirelessly to stick to that 45-minute time limit," she said.



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**Vincent Capiello, district manager for Laidlaw Transit Inc., apologized for the bus route problems during Tuesday night's meeting. At right is Robert D. Cronin, superintendent of Region 14 schools.**

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**Deanna Boucher of Woodbury wanted to know why her 6year-old son spent more than 45 minutes on a bus.**

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