

D161 bus costs up 20% due to labor shortage, higher fuel rates

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Flossmoor School District 161 will pay 20% more for bus transportation in the 2022-23 academic year, after the board approved a contract with Kickert School Bus Lines at its May 9 meeting.

In its contract renewal, the district agreed to pay \$152,000 more, for a total of about \$909,700. That cost includes 15 buses picking up and dropping off children over 30 routes.

Additional bus runs for extracurriculars and field trips are charged separately, and that line item also is increasing by 20%, according to Fran LaBella, the district's associate superintendent of business operations.

"On one hand, we can understand the increase, but of course it's frustrating," LaBella said.

At its meeting on Monday, April 25, the board heard from two representatives of Cook-Illinois Corp., Kickert's parent company, who explained the reason for the substantial fee increase.

Director of Operations Jeff Barnes and Vice President Tom O'Sullivan told the board that most of their company's operating costs have risen in the past two years, including fuel, new vehicles and starting pay for bus drivers.

In its contract proposal, Cook-Illinois states that it raised driver starting pay rates twice — 23% for the 2021-22 academic year and another 5.3% for the upcoming year — in a bid to attract more qualified applicants.

Despite marketing by the bus company and the district itself, there continues to be a lack of applicants, an employment hole that is plaguing schools around the country.

In the last hiring season, O'Sullivan said applications were down 30% compared to previous years.

The company also has increased starting pay rates for bus para-professionals by 8%. These staff members assist children with special needs, help drivers with bus discipline, and more.

During the presentation, District 161 board secretary Christina Vilestra asked O'Sullivan and Barnes whether the company extended offers to persuade former employees who left during the pandemic to return to their jobs.

"We did. We're a union shop, so we told employees they could come back at their same rate and seniority," but the move did not entice people back, O'Sullivan said. "Our hope is that next year things will settle down a bit."

Other factors contributing to the 20% cost increase, according to O'Sullivan, include:

- An average 30% increase in the company's lines of liability insurance. Purchasing new buses at a 10% increase in cost. Increased costs of fuel. Kickert's buses running on diesel, gasoline and propane.
- According to LaBella, school transportation costs are up sharply for most districts. At a recent professional conference, she spoke with many district staff facing the same increases, with some staring down hikes up to 50% for next year.
- A 20% increase seems to be the average in the marketplace right now, LaBella said, and there aren't many options for bus transportation in the area.

Cook-Illinois Corporation owns 19 bus company subsidiaries in the suburban Chicago area, including operations out of Frankfort, Crestwood, Orland Park, Lynwood, Lockport, Chicago Ridge and Lemont.

In addition to market conditions and few competitors, recent experience dissuaded District 161 staff from bidding out the transportation contract, LaBella said.

"What we've been finding out is that when we bid out, we get even higher percentage increases," LaBella said. "Even our current providers come in at higher numbers, so we end up hurting ourselves in the long run."

New parent bus app

Starting with the upcoming academic year, Kickert is replacing its old parent app, Bus Bulletin, with a new app called Ride 360.

According to O'Sullivan, the app is operated by Tyler Technologies, and integrates with the routing software used by Kickert while coordinating with GPS units inside every bus.

Parents will now be able to track in nearly real-time the location of their child's bus along its pickup and drop-off routes.

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