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Battle on for buses

By Roxanne Hooper
Staff Reporter

With word that Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows will be getting 11 new buses this fall, a local bus company and its union is waging battle against the Independent Canadian Transit Union to provide that service.

Both sides claim the other will be more expensive and a waste of taxpayers' dollars. The B.C. Transit board of directors is left to make a decision before service begins in September, linking the north shore communities with other sectors of the Lower Mainland.

Independent Bus and Transportation Inc., with 35 employees, currently provides limited service to Maple Ridge residents Monday through Saturday, 7 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. - as contracted by the municipality and B.C. Transit.

The existing buses are leased from B.C. Transit, but Independent Bus owner Don Graham hires his own drivers, maintenance crew and administrative staff to operate the service from a depot at 22933 Lougheed Hwy.

The company has been providing bus service, as outlined and financed by Maple Ridge and B.C. Transit, for the past 15 years. Graham now wants to expand and provide whatever other services will be necessary under the new plans.

The ICTU objects to the idea of contracting the transit service to a private operator like Graham.

ICTU vice-president Bill Gabriel said Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows residents would get a better bang for their buck if the existing Greater Vancouver system is expanded.

In advertisements outlining its position, ICTU said, "If B.C. Transit operates and maintains the new Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows bus service, the land, facilities, staff and management are already paid for and in place, operating at the Port Coquitlam Transit Centre.

"No capital costs need to be incurred, so where is the fiscal sense in having a private sub-contractor provide your new bus service?"

Graham refutes these statements. Some expansion of his Maple Ridge premises will be necessary, but he is confident Independent Bus can run the service for the same amount as ICTU, maybe less.

At the same time, Graham said transit tax dollars are returning to the local community through employees' salaries that will most likely be spent in Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows.

Maple Ridge Chamber of Commerce issued a statement Monday supporting Graham and the Independent Bus company.

"When a local business shows that it has the expertise to take on a new challenge and to expand its operation within the boundaries of this municipality, we believe it is our duty and responsibility to support them," said Michael Potter, the chamber transportation chairman.

The only municipality that operates its own transportation services within the Vancouver area is West Vancouver. It is run on a similar sub-contracting basis. It is not operated by a private contractor but rather the municipality itself.

This system links up with the Vancouver Regional Transit Service and allows passenger transfers as is proposed for Maple Ridge.

Other smaller communities outside of the Lower Mainland and Victoria work on a three-party agreement with private operators contracted by the municipalities and B.C. Transit to provide service. This is the system used in Maple Ridge today.