

Gray Line shuts down Vancouver bus tour operations

By Bruce Constantineau, Vancouver Sun

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VANCOUVER - Historic B.C. tour bus operator Gray Line West has shut its Vancouver operations, putting 79 employees out of work.

Owner Armstrong Group Ltd. - which also operates the popular Rocky Mountaineer tourist train - cited intense competition in the Vancouver market as one of the reasons for the shutdown.

"It wasn't just competition from other tour bus operations - like Vancouver Trolley Company and Big Bus," Armstrong Group spokesman Ian Robertson said in an interview. "There are just so many other options available for tourists in the city, like attractions and other activities."

Armstrong Group bought Gray Line West from Greyhound Canada Transportation Corp. in May 2005. Gray Line operations in Victoria and Banff, which employ about 150 people, are not affected by the Vancouver closure.

Gray Line offered sightseeing and charter services throughout Metro Vancouver - including Vancouver-to-Victoria trips, city sightseeing tours, and service to Whistler.

Gray Line was considered an icon in the Vancouver tourism industry, operating as a top performer for decades. CKNW radio personality Bill Hughes broadcast his popular daily Roving Mike show from Gray Line buses, interviewing tourists from all over the world.

Teamsters Local 31 representative Dave Cooper, whose union represents the laid-off workers, called the closure "sad and disappointing."

"There's a lot of history there, and we have guys with up to 38 years of service," he said. "Ask anybody in the tourism industry and Gray Line was looked upon as the flagship."

Cooper noted competition in the Vancouver sightseeing business has grown significantly in the past 20 years, with the number of operators increasing from about 10 to more than 80.

"Name recognition will go so far, but it has become a very, very competitive market," he said.

Workers affected by the closure include drivers, cleaners, mechanics, call centre employees and sales staff.

Robertson said it would have taken millions of dollars to replace the aging Vancouver fleet of 33 motor coaches, something that wouldn't have made business sense.

"We have worked hard at this for almost three years," he said. "It just got to the point where we did not see where this operation would be financially viable, so we made the difficult decision to close it down."

bconstantineau@png.canwest.com