

Local contractor 'small-town' firm

Transit union spokesman pans rival

By Allan Farley

Local public transit users could be riding in 20-year-old buses if the Independent Bus and Transportation Inc. of Maple Ridge wins a contract to provide mass transit between Ridge-Meadows and Vancouver.

So says Independent Canadian Transit Union chief job steward Peter Green, who claims that B.C. Transit will allot older buses to Independent Bus and Transportation if the ICTU doesn't win the contract.

"They'll be 15 or 20 years old at least," Green said. "And I can guarantee (Independent president Don Graham) won't get wheelchair lift buses, because his drivers are not trained to operate them."

Every new bus that is purchased by B.C. Transit has to be wheelchair equipped, Green explained.

Both the ICTU and Independent Bus and Transportation are competing for the contract from B.C. Transit to provide bus service between Ridge-Meadows and Vancouver.

Vancouver Regional Transit Commission planner Helen Cook said last week that Green is exaggerating about the age of the buses destined for Ridge-Meadows.

"They might be five or 10 years old," she said. "It's not likely that they'll be old clunkers. We're planning on retiring all of our 20-year-old buses. We don't have any plans for which buses go out there, regardless of who is providing the service."

Green did confirm that there would not be any wheelchair-access bus service in Ridge-Meadows by this September.

One avenue that the ICTU could take to influence the B.C. Transit decision is by threatening not to proceed with driver training for the 20 new buses that have been ordered.

Green explained that there is a clause in the contract between the ICTU and B.C. Transit which states that any technological changes in the workplace have to be negotiated within the agreement, since there is a higher risk with new technology. Members of the ICTU might therefore reject driving the new articulated buses, which are on order from Winnipeg. The buses are accordion-like in the middle, enabling them to carry 45 more passengers than conventional buses.

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*- ICTU spokesman
Peter Green*

"Give us the work in Ridge-Meadows, and we'll drive the (articulated) buses," Green said.

He said that Ridge-Meadows transit system currently operates under the provincial Small Services Act, which means that B.C. Transit sustains a larger portion of the operating costs than other GVRD municipalities to keep fares down (90 cents instead of \$1.25; \$2.50 in peak hours and multi-zones). But fares will go up to those levels regardless of who operates the bus service when the expanded local system begins, and the municipality will pay \$2.9 million in taxes for the service either way.

Green said that if Maple Ridge wants to be part of the GVRD, they have to expect the same treatment as the rest of the district.

"Maple Ridge has joined the big time. They're part of the GVRD.

They're part of the big city. They can't continue to be treated under the Small Services Act. If they use a local contractor, they'll be treated as a small town."

Green is also upset with claims Graham made regarding cost and operating efficiency, and contributions to the local economy. He said Graham's statements are "blatant generalizations that politicians make."

Green said that it is very unlikely that Independent can operate less expensively than the ICTU.

"B.C. Transit is a non-profit organization, and 100 per cent of all revenue is put back into B.C. Transit service," he said. "No private contractor will operate without a profit."

He said that all large maintenance costs to the buses are paid for by B.C. Transit, and that engine parts have to come from back east. "He won't be buying much in the way of parts locally."

As far as saving money by hiring locals, Green said that although an ICTU driver will make \$3 more per hour than what Graham is proposing, it might amount to \$20 per day per driver. He said that 100 of the 1,700 ICTU drivers already live in the Ridge-Meadow/Mission area, and are hoping to secure the contract so that they may work closer to home, out of the Port Coquitlam garage. Thirty of these drivers could be working in PoCo by September, he added.

"Their quality of life hinges on this decision," Green said. "These people spend \$3 million in the community, they pay their taxes. There are political implications in Ridge-Meadows. Remember, those drivers are voters, and so are their wives."

Green said that the ICTU will likely be awarded the contract as "B.C. Transit will make a recommendation to the commission (in favor of the ICTU).