

Press Clippings 12/03/19

---Daily Herald---12/03/2019

Elgin Gives promotes nonprofits for Giving Tuesday

Submitted by: Elgin Gives

Giving Tuesday is an international movement, setting aside the Tuesday after Thanksgiving to helping nonprofits.

On this day, people choose to pause their holiday spending and invest in the organizations around them that are working to make their communities a better place to live.

Elgin has proved to be a leader in this movement, so mark your calendars for Dec. 3 and join in making an impact in the city and for the neighborhoods.

Participating Elgin-area nonprofit organizations include: Administer Justice; Alignment Collaborative for Education; Anderson Animal Shelter; Association for Individual Development; Bethlehem Lutheran Child Development Center; Boys & Girls Club of Elgin; CASA Kane County; Centro de Informacion; Chamber Music on the Fox; Children's Theatre of Elgin; Coalition for a Safe & Healthy Elgin; Community Crisis Center; Downtown Neighborhood Association; Easterseals DuPage & Fox Valley; Ecker Center for Mental Health; Elgin Academy; Elgin Area Men's Shed; Elgin Bike Hub; Elgin Cheer; Elgin Community Network; Elgin History Museum; Elgin Junior Woman's Club; Elgin Master Chorale; Elgin Math & Science Academy/Charter School; Elgin Parks & Recreation Foundation; Elgin Partnership for Early Learning; Elgin Public Museum; Elgin River Rats; Elgin Symphony Orchestra; Elgin Theatre Company; Elgin Youth Symphony Orchestra; Family Service Association of Greater Elgin; Food for Greater Elgin; Girl Scouts of Northern Illinois; Fox Valley Hands of Hope; Friends of Lords Park Zoo; Friends of the Bluff Spring Fen; Friends of the Fox River; Go With the Flow; Grand Victoria Foundation; Greater Elgin Family Care Center; House of Restoration Inc.; Independent Players; The Ivy Academy for Early Learning; **Larsen Middle School PTO**; The Literacy Connection; Marklund; Open Door Health Center; Operation Horses and Heroes, Inc.; Pads of Elgin; Renz Addiction Counseling Center; Salvation Army; Senior Services Associates; Side Street Studio Arts; Summit School, Inc.; Taylor Family YMCA; Training Institute of Elgin; True Patriots Care; Tyler Creek Watershed Coalition; VNA Healthcare; Well Child Center; Youth Leadership Academy; and YWCA Elgin.

To learn more, visit www.elgingives.org.

---WGLT News ---12/03/2019

Can Unit 5 Solve Its Busing Problems?

By: Eric Stock



First Student buses line up outside Kingsley Junior High School in Normal.

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Unit 5 has come to a crossroads with its bus service. The [school district next summer could fire the private company](#) it has used for eight years and find another transportation provider. Or it could take over busing itself.

Records suggest outsourcing Unit 5 busing to solve a driver shortage and halt cost increases has done neither.

Can McLean County's largest school district run an efficient, cost-effective bus system without frequent headaches?

Deb Meyer is the head of AFSCME local 2608, the union for Unit 5 bus drivers. She has been driving kids to and from school for the last 12 years. She fondly remembered when the district ran its own bus system.

"It was more fun, it was easier, it was laid back," Meyer recalled. "It was a family atmosphere."

Meyer said she knew the name of every kid who got on her bus. Now that drivers are taking on more routes and more kids, she says those days are gone.

"So I stop at a particular stop. I know there's three kids there. I pretty much know their names," Meyer said. "Then I get to that stop with 12 children. Well I may know half of those by name."

Meyer said when Unit 5 hired First Student things were OK for a while, then in 2016 the school district and the company cut the number of routes and buses. She said that caused chaos.

“That was really a total failure,” Meyer declared. “That wasn’t (Unit 5’s) fault. I don’t want to sound judgmental, but quite a few things had to be in place for that to fail. They were and it did.”

Meyer said drivers knew this would cause big problems, but it seemed no one listened. For weeks, Unit 5 buses were overcrowded and often late. Meyer recalls making return trips to pick up kids because her bus was full.

“We were doing the best we could,” she said. “We can’t transport kids standing up in the bus. That’s so unsafe. We can’t transport them when overcrowded. Just unacceptable.”

Some drivers were piling kids in three to a seat. Meyer says that's against the law. Some drivers did it anyway, feeling they had no choice. Images of overcrowded buses and kids standing in the aisles popped up on social media.

Meyer says many drivers felt underpaid and unappreciated. Driver pay starts at \$17 an hour with First Student. Previous driver benefits of health insurance, paid holidays and rounding up on time sheets offered by Unit 5 disappeared under First Student. Some drivers made problems worse by calling in sick.

[First Student](#) calls itself North America's leader in student transportation and operates all over the country. Representatives for the Cincinnati, Ohio-based company declined interviews for this story.

The 2016 route restructuring coincided with a change in the time the school day began. It was supposed to save over \$1 million on drivers and buses to make up for state funding shortages and give high school students a later start.

However, Unit 5's transportation costs continued to rise with First Student. The district is spending \$11.2 million on transportation this year; all but \$2 million of that goes to First Student.



Unit 5 finance director Marty Hickman said the district's rising transportation costs coincided with the district's enrollment growth.

Unit 5's finance director Marty Hickman suggested the district's cost would have gone up even without First Student.

“In many ways that’s hard to judge because back when he first contracted with First Student we were still experiencing growth in student population,” Hickman said. “Naturally with that student growth population we would have – whether it was in house or with First Student we would have had increases in transportation costs either way.”

Bringing the drivers back under the Unit 5 umbrella is an option. School Board President Barry Hitchins said there's some benefit.

“Do I think bringing transportation back in house will solve all of our problems?” Hitchins asked. “I don’t know the answer is yes or no, but I do know it would give us more potential control to solve those problems.”

But Hitchins said it wouldn't address the biggest issue.



Unit 5 school board president Barry Hitchins and vice president Amy Roser say finding drivers is the biggest transportation problem the district has.

“There’s no guarantee that Unit 5 would be able to recruit and train drivers any better than First Student or any other vendor could,” Hitchins said.

The district has hired a consultant that's helping find transportation companies to bid for the Unit 5 contract. Board vice chair Amy Roser said the district wants to find other school districts that have solved the puzzle of running an efficient, cost-effective busing system in the face of similar challenges.

“I don’t think we are going to find a district of our size with a donut hole in the middle of District 87, but can we find something that is comparable in size, the number of students to help us solve some of these problems to get ahead of things,” Roser said.

On Time 99%

One place Unit 5 might look is Chicago's western suburbs to Unit 46, one of the largest school bus systems in the country.



Jeff Prowell manages transportation for the U-46 busing system in Elgin, which touts a 99% on-time arrival rate.

The Elgin district has 325 drivers transporting 27,000 students daily. They drive 4.5 million miles a year. That's the equivalent of a round trip to the moon every month.

Jeffrey Prowell manages the district transportation system. He has run bus operations for big school districts for 30 years.

Prowell said the district touts a 99% on-time arrival rate, on-time being 10 minutes before the start of school.

"Any student that's late to school because of transportation, that's unacceptable," Prowell said. "For people to say, 'Transportation is doing the best they can,' 'Oh, transportation always has problems,' 'All transportation doesn't have enough drivers,' none of those excuses work here."

First Student reports its buses in Unit 5 have been on time less than 97% so far this school year. It considers on-time as within 5 minutes of the start or end of school.

Each district has its own challenges. U-46 has fewer than half the square miles of Unit 5. But very few Elgin students can walk to school because of high traffic, interstates, and other barriers. The district also has several high school academies which bus students from all over the 91-square-mile district instead of from a compact part of it.

The district pays its drivers a starting salary of about \$18.50 an hour. Prowell conceded that's low.

"When we go back to the (bargaining) table in a couple of months, we are going to have to increase that just to stay competitive," Prowell said.

Still, Prowell said there are advantages to keep busing in house.

"My experience with contractors is that whatever the minimum standards are, that's what they are going to seek to achieve," Prowell said.

Prowell said you can't let dollars and cents drive the conversation on an essential function.

“I look at it more as we are providing a service to students so they can access their education,” Prowell said. “We make decisions on what’s best for the student, what’s best for the district, what’s best for the campus, not necessarily what’s the best financial decision.”

That bus service comes with a cost, right? It depends. Elgin schools spend about twice what Unit 5 does on transportation (\$24 million annually), but its student population is nearly three times the size. Said another way, Unit 5 spends about \$200 per student more on transportation each year than Elgin.

Drivers Needed



John Burkey, executive director of the Large Unit District Association, said school districts across Illinois are struggling to find bus drivers.

John Burkey is executive director of the [Large Unit District Association](#). It provides technical support and advocacy for Unit 5 and more than 50 of the largest pre-K-through 12 districts in Illinois.

Burkey said many school districts deliver more than just the basics, and they pay more for it.

“Many of our districts will drop off kids at babysitters certain days a week, will run activity buses an hour after school is out for kids that are in afterschool activities,” Burkey said. “I think these are all very good services, but they add to the complexity of what districts do.”

Burkey said many school districts nationwide struggle to find bus drivers. Better pay would help. But Burkey said districts would need to find the cash by either cutting classroom funding or going to taxpayers.

“I know that’s a careful balance with taxpayers who are very rightly concerned about high property taxes and any added costs have to be scrutinized, but in the final analysis we have to have effective, safe transportation for our kids,” Burkey said.

Burkey said most larger school districts in Illinois do outsource busing. The thought is "leave it to the transportation experts."

"In many districts I know that the management does become a huge challenge, primarily because we are educators," Burkey said. "The people leading districts are educators and running a transportation department and overseeing that is a very different type of management skill."

But districts that run their own buses still need transportation experts. Michael Reinders is president of the [Illinois Association for Pupil Transportation](#), an agency that offers training for drivers and sometimes serves as a clearinghouse for problem solving.



President of the Illinois Association for Pupil Transportation Mike Reinders said busing challenges can be greater in smaller school districts because there are typically fewer hours available.

Reinders also runs the bus system for the Winnebago school district just west of Rockford. He's a district employee but doesn't feel like it sometimes.

"The district here doesn't manage it here on a day-to-day basis, my department does," Reinders said. "As long as everything works fine, the district doesn't even know we exist most of the time."

"I jokingly say we are the ugly stepchildren. The only time they talk about us is when something goes wrong."

Reinders said hiring drivers is an even greater challenge in a smaller district where hours are sparse. There are no 30-hour work weeks driving buses for a district of 1,400 students.

"Most of my drivers are only three-hour employees and that's split up by six hours in the middle," Reinders said. "It works well for retired, self-employed or stay-at-home parents, but other than that if you need benefits and stuff, I can't provide that."

Still, Reinders said he understands why his district prefers to run its own buses.

Reinders said it helps that Unit 5 owns buses. The district has lease-to-own arrangements with vehicles it has been adding to the fleet. He said it would cost even more to pay another provider for them.

Deciding what to do with its bus contract isn't the only big decision the Unit 5 school board has to make soon. The district is also looking for a new superintendent, as Mark Daniel [announced in September he's leaving](#) at the end of the school year.

While Daniel won't be around next school year, he suggested it's time the district think outside the box for solutions.

“How can we perhaps think a little differently in regard to how we are delivering our transportation service; i.e., do we need vans instead of buses?” Daniel asked. “How do we find drivers and vans? They don’t require a (commercial driver’s license). So, let’s lay these things on the table.”

At a news conference announcing his departure, Daniel offered a quip to make clear this was a problem he inherited from his Unit 5 predecessor, Gary Niehaus.

“Well, you know he didn’t tell me quite about the transportation issues,” Daniel said. “But anyway, transportation is always a struggle and it’s going to continue to be a struggle.”

Niehaus was superintendent when the district hired First Student. He said the biggest problem even back then was finding drivers.

“We thought they would be able to be in a bigger company and being in the surrounding area, we thought they would be able to bring drivers in to Bloomington-Normal and help us with the driver shortage,” Niehaus said. “In my time there, it never really get that much better by just switching over to a larger company.”

Not only did Niehaus figure First Student could find more drivers, he says he also thought it wouldn't cost more to go outside. Neither turned out to be true. Transportation costs rose 23% in First Student's first year. Would Niehaus have done it differently with what he knows now?

“(That’s) 20-20 hindsight,” Niehaus said. “I still needed a national company, I still needed a bigger operation and I still needed a different partner that what we had going at the time.”

Niehaus said the district could have given more consideration to hiring Illinois Central, the company that runs District 87 buses. He says Illinois Central had helped Unit 5 with some busing and some routing.

“They were a big help to us and having them be in town with the Bloomington system might be something I would also look at now,” Niehaus said.

Illinois Central did bid for that contract. Illinois Central's parent company, [North America Central School Bus](#), declined to be interviewed for this story.

Niehaus said he sees no advantage for the district to take over busing again. But buses aren't his problem anymore. Since leaving Unit 5, Niehaus has served as

superintendent of the Grosse Pointe school district outside Detroit. It runs a neighborhood school system. In other words, no buses.

“It’s one of the main reasons I took the job,” Niehaus said with a laugh.

Unit 5 Growth Spurt

The origin of the busing challenge is more than just a driver shortage. It’s suburban sprawl. Unit 5’s biggest growth spurt came in the 1980s and 90s.

Retired superintendent Alan Chapman recalls when homes were sprouting up like weeds along the outskirts of Bloomington-Normal, stretching community boundaries and stressing the bus system with each new subdivision.

“The growth in enrollment also meant a growth in the number of schools we served,” Chapman said. “Those things all went together to make it a continually increasingly complex problem to manage.”

Those increased Unit 5’s footprint and meant longer bus rides. Chapman said redistricting to balance the socioeconomic makeup of the student body in each school also lengthened bus routes in the service of equal opportunity.

“I think over the years we’ve definitely put a priority on attempting to have our schools balanced in any number of ways that make them more similar than more different,” Chapman said.

It was during Chapman’s time as superintendent Unit 5 began staggering school start times for the elementary, junior high and high schools to enable some buses to make multiple routes each shift, a practice the district has accelerated in recent years.

Chapman said busing was a challenge in his time, but it was manageable and the district never seriously considered hiring someone else to do it.

The school district is now deciding whether it wants First Student back and hiring a new superintendent at the same time. School board president Barry Hitchins said he sees those as separate issues. He said it’s unlikely Unit 5 can find someone with expertise in transportation and all the other roles a superintendent has to fill.

“If the decision were made to – and this is a huge *if* – to bring transportation back in house, the board acknowledges we can’t assign that to any of our current administrators because they don’t have the bandwidth to take on transportation,” Hitchins said.

Hitchins said the district would have to hire an administrator specifically for transportation, as other school districts do.

Former superintendent Niehaus said if you want someone who can solve the busing problem, hire a problem solver.

“I think a good leader is a good leader and good leaders are going to try to find remedies for problems that exist just like everyone would want them to do,” Niehaus said.

As the busing boss in Elgin's U-46 school district Jeff Prowell said, one way or the other, the buck always stops at the school district's offices.

“I wouldn’t look at it as offloading the problem because the problem still exists, but now you have contractual layers and all these things you agreed on that you have to go through in order to try and eliminate the problem,” Prowell said. “Here, my boss calls me and we eliminate the problem.”

As the Unit 5 board deliberates, union drivers like Deb Meyer wait. Meyer said she hopes her union can agree on a contract with First Student soon and that whoever runs the buses next year will honor that deal. Meyer won't say whether she wants First Student back, saying the devil you know is better than the devil you don't.

“I don’t think it’s going to be a gut punch, I really don’t,” Meyer said. “It will be familiar.”

Whatever the district decides, parents in Unit 5 hope they can fix the all too familiar transportation problems.

Unit 5's first contract with First Student allowed the district to levy fines against First Student for late buses, but First Student could also charge the district for over-scheduling, such as for sporting events during the regular afternoon bus routes.

Unit 5 financial director Marty Hickman said the two sides later scrapped those provisions, figuring they were basically a wash and had become too time consuming to track.

SPORTS

---Daily Herald---12/03/2019

Scouting Fox girls gymnastics

By: Chris Walker



Gianna Murkowski is hoping to help the U-46 team improve on its top score of 121.65 last year.



Geneva's Olivia Takesue is one of the top returning gymnasts in the Fox area.



Olivia Bartolotta is part of a Batavia team that has its biggest turnout since 1999.

2019-2020 Fox Valley Girls Gymnastics at a glance

Top teams: Batavia, Geneva, Prairie Ridge co-op

Top returning athletes: Olivia Bartolotta (Batavia, sr., all-around), Sydney Hallsten (Prairie Ridge, so., all-around), Maddie Kramer (St. Charles co-op, sr., all-around), Gianna Murkowski (U-46 co-op, sr., all-around), Taylor Novotny (Batavia, sr., all-around), Ashley Olea (St. Charles co-op, sr., all-around), Olivia Takesue (Geneva, jr., all-around), Kathryn Wendt (Geneva, jr., all-around), Grace Willis (Prairie Ridge, so., all-around)

Season skinny: Last year was the first time since 2007 that the area wasn't represented with a team at state. That says a lot about the quality of gymnasts that the area has been home to for a long time.

Batavia's doing handsprings and giants like it's 1999 as Bulldogs coach Taryn Boyce has the biggest Bulldogs team in 20 years.

"It's been a long time since our numbers were that high," Boyce said. "I think 1999."

The Bulldogs may not be "Delirious" but they appear destined for success. Seniors Olivia Bartolotta and Taylor Novotny return while sophomore Natalie Hayden is also one to keep an eye out for this winter. Senior Rachel Kauchak also has returned after a two-year absence. The Bulldogs also have 9 freshmen.

"I wouldn't be surprised if JV and varsity go head-to-head," Boyce said. "I'm lucky to have such a large group of girls with great attitudes and strong work ethic."

The Bulldogs reached 134.05 last season and are primed to surpass that with a mix of the young and ambitious with the so-called old and experienced.

Geneva didn't lose a ton from last year's team, which nearly reached a 137. All-arounder Gracie De Vita's graduation hurts, but juniors Olivia Takesue and Kathryn Wendy, both sectional all-around qualifiers, are back along with sophomore Kate Nitschke who also advanced on bars and beam. Caitlin Cook is also among the returnees, and is the Vikings' lone senior, while coach Kim Hostman is also high on freshman Maura Anderson. Hostman said Cook should be strong on three events while Anderson likely will contribute on all four.

"This group has a strong potential to do well," Hostman said. "We're working a lot of skills that hopefully will be ready mid-season."

The Vikings have good numbers overall with a roster of 19.

Prairie Ridge co-op's streak of nine straight state appearances, including three consecutive state titles (2015-2017) was snapped last February, but with key returnees and talented newcomers, it should be among the state's elite.

"If everyone stays healthy, this is the most talented team I have ever had," Prairie Ridge co-op coach Lee Battaglia said. "If all goes well, I will have four all-arounders and one specialist on each event."

Sophomores Sydney Hallsten and Grace Willis and freshmen Gabby Riley and Paige Magel will be the team's top all-arounders. Senior Katie McEnery, sophomore Morgan Quinn (who suffered a knee injury at sectionals last year) and freshmen Audrey Burke and Sophia Kreik also will contribute.

"This is my largest team I have ever had," Battaglia explained. "I will be competing everybody throughout the course of the season. My top all-arounders will not compete on all the events until the end of the year, this way giving everyone a chance to compete."

St. Charles co-op fell just short of reaching a 130 last season, but should surpass that and do more thanks to being healthy, hardworking and talented. Coach Natalie Przybylski said junior Sydney Kamin and seniors Maddie Kramer and Ashley Olea are gymnasts to really watch. Kramer and Olea were sectional qualifiers in the all-around. Kamin returns from an ankle fracture.

"She will be a huge contributor to our team all around score," Przybylski said.

Kramer has upgraded her routines while Olea will provide amazing consistency. Many of the other returnees have upgraded their routines but the squad remains young with 10 underclassmen on the 14-gymnast roster. Jennifer Nickel, Gabby Potempa, Nicole Forde and Katie Vandever are among the returnees while some new talent may also enter the lineup.

U-46 co-op has been blessed with 23 gymnastics this season.

"We have much stronger numbers this year," coach Mary Kate Dieter said. "Bars have been a weakness in the past, but we have more depth to our talent in this event than last year."

Dieter and assistant coach Danielle Collins will lean on the leadership of seniors Jenna Hasenstein, Stephanie Amaya, Frannie Kuzyk and Gianna Murkowski.

"They have all been in the program a long time and bring a strong sense of leadership to our increasing numbers," Dieter said.

South Elgin freshman Zoe Lee, Bartlett sophomore Mady Aycock, Elgin junior Ceciley Garcia and Streamwood's Murkowski have looked strong in preparation for the season, and offer diversity in that each attends a different school and is in a different class year. You won't find that anywhere else in the state. Hit a high of 121.65 last winter.

Johnson, Larkin pull away from Fenton in third quarter

By: Allen Oshinski



Paul Valade/pvalade@dailyherald.comLarkin's Baylei Johnson (32) takes a shot during Monday's girls basketball game against Fenton in Elgin.



Paul Valade/pvalade@dailyherald.comFenton's Maja Gakovic (21) has her shot blocked by Larkin's Jamilyn DeLeon (5) during Monday's girls basketball game in Elgin.



Paul Valade/pvalade@dailyherald.comLarkin's Kathy Garcia, right, is pressured by Fenton's Alexa Herrera during Monday's girls basketball game in Elgin.



Paul Valade/pvalade@dailyherald.com Larkin's Brianna Young (13) takes a shot past Fenton's Joni Lucas (15) during Monday's girls basketball game in Elgin.



Paul Valade/pvalade@dailyherald.com Fenton's Sophia Haska (44) takes a shot under pressure from Larkin's Brianna Young (13) during Monday's girls basketball game in Elgin.

Fenton threw lots of bodies at Larkin, but none of them could match up with Baylei Johnson.

Larkin's 6-foot-1 freshman scored 31 points in a breakout performance as the Royals downed the Bison 82-58 in the Royals' home opener in Elgin.

Johnson also pulled down 21 rebounds, blocked 3 shots and dished out a couple of assists in their Upstate Eight Conference opener.

Larkin blitzed the visitors at the start of both halves. The Royals raced out to a 13-3 lead. After a 4-point play cut the lead to 36-31 at halftime, Larkin opened the second half on a 13-0 run to go up 49-31. They increased the lead to 66-39 by early fourth quarter.

The Bison sent waves of players into the game, often substituting five at a time. All 17 Bison saw action and 12 of them scored. They moved the ball quickly and fired up 3-point attempts. They made them in bunches, allowing them to get back in the game relatively quickly.

"We're finding out that the move to the Upstate Eight Conference from where we were (Metro Suburban Conference), it's a big-girl conference here," said Fenton coach Dave Mello. "They had a lot of size. We knew about (seniors Brianna Young and Aaliyah Dixon) and then (Johnson) had a field day down there.

"We talked at halftime about, hey, even if they go up 15 we're still fine. We just get on a little bit of a run, but when they took it up to the mid-20s, then it got a little out of control."



Paul Valade/pvalade@dailyherald.com Larkin's Ashley Miller (22) and Fenton's Hailey Miller (2) get wrapped up chasing down a loose ball during Monday's girls basketball game in Elgin.

Ashley Miller added 15 points, 12 rebounds and 5 assists. Dixon chipped in 11 points for Larkin (2-4, 0-1).

Nikolina Maric scored 13 and Maja Gakovic added 10. Elizabeth Aguirre scored 9 points, all on 3-pointers for the Bison (3-2, 0-2).

But it was a coming-out party for Johnson.

"I had a pretty rough start to the season, so I felt I needed to help my team out a little more," she said. "It feels great to get the win before the home fans."

The lopsided win was an ideal way for the Royals to make a statement in their first game in front of a home crowd.

"We told the girls that we want to set the tone early in conference," said Larkin coach Steve Knapp. "It's the conference opener, a home game. Like I've said before, I think we have the potential to win 20 games. Now we came out in the (Burlington Central) tournament and looked a little inexperienced. But this is a good start at home."