

# Busing

*More in-depth viewpoint:* For a more condensed summary please watch the video “The Busing Issue”.

I am going to discuss the ending of courtesy busing for middle and high schoolers. Before I do, let me begin with some agreed upon facts: 1. The district has decided to cut these routes because of the bus driver shortage; 2. they are looking for cost savings; 3. they hope to get buses running on a routine schedule; and, 4. these changes do not impact, elementary students, nor routes with dangerous or insufficient routes/crossings. I would also like to add, and I will explain below, that the bus situation is part of bigger issues not being addressed in this commentary, namely- the lack of respect being given to the employees of Pasco County Schools (yes includes fair wages and pay), but it has a lot to do with the lack of strategic planning, open communication with all stakeholders and reactionary decision making; unfortunately these issues will not be fully developed in this article.

I would like to first address item #4. I am the only candidate that has worked in multiple schools within this district’s public school system which would be impacted by these changes. I feel many meet the criteria of not providing safe and/or sufficient crossings, but each has been notified that cuts to busing will be made. Let me begin with the Dade City schools, Pasco Middle and Pasco High. Yes, there are areas which have access to sidewalks and crossing paths, especially in the neighborhood directly surrounding both schools- specifically along the SR52 entrance to PHS that runs from Smith Rd. to Meridian Ave. But less than 6000 ft from PHS, sits St. Joe Road, which extends into Darby/St. Joe. There are no bike lanes.... no sidewalks... in some places no shoulder for students to traverse. More importantly, lighting is very limited. Remember how dark these roadways are early in the morning when we are in school in the 2nd quarter. Limited visibility, larger tractor trailers and ultimately young, inexperienced drivers will be navigating this limited space. On the opposite side of PMS you have US98 and Business 98, towards Moore Mickens. This area falls within the 2-mile courtesy zone and once again sidewalks, bike lanes, roadway shoulders are missing and larger vehicles and speeds increase . In most cases, these areas are predominately home to large populations of lower income, Black and Hispanic households who are not actively petitioning the school board and many have been disenfranchised either as students themselves or through the decisions being made on multiple fronts. Families in this area work multiple jobs to support their families, and do not have the flexibility in their schedules to drive students to school and in some cases have no access to transportation at all. One last note about this area, it is also the area in which, tragically, Jennifer Odom disappeared after getting off at her bus stop. Nearly 30 years later, significant improvements to lighting, sidewalks, etc. have still not been made. And, note that the \$300,000.00+ homesites are being built outside of these 2-mile zones in both areas of east Pasco, which insures that the students from higher socio-economic families will continue to have busing access, in many cases when other options are readily available, while poorer families lose much needed services. .

Just a few miles north, you have the area of Lacochee. Again, this cut does not directly impact elementary schools, but Lacochee has been brought up several times (and will be part of another post in the coming days). I mention it because some candidates running for school board have suggested closing that school all together. This would cause these families to travel much

further to a new school and prior to physically closing the site, some could suggest that busing at this school be cancelled all-together. And Lacoochee is only one of the schools being targeted. Please pay attention, if they are willing to close the school, chipping away at services, like busing, make that an easier decision.

On the opposite side of the county you have schools like Gulf High, Gulf Middle, Anclote High, Paul R Smith, Seven Springs Middle and JW Mitchell High which have their own, unique problems. AHS and JWMHS are situated near major state roads (Anclote Blvd and Alt 19 and Little Rd. and SR54 respectively). I challenge anyone to take a few hours out of their weekend and walk 2 miles in most directions from either school and see if you feel safe walking that route. And yes, in some directions you will find yourself in very affluent neighborhoods, where carpools and stay at home parents can shuttle children to school safely, but parts of Seven Springs (where I grew up) and Holiday Lake Estates are suspect at best. For example, there are 11 REGISTERED predators and offenders living within 1 mile of PRSMS. (See link- <https://offender.fdle.state.fl.us/offender/sops/neighborhoodSearch.jsf>) At GHS, 15 (<https://offender.fdle.state.fl.us/offender/sops/neighborhoodSearch.jsf>)! So, this debate goes beyond roadways, lights, adequate sidewalks... it is truly a safety issue which has not been fully flushed out. We also know that students will take the easiest, and not necessarily the safest routes to get where they are going. I was at GHS when one of our students was struck in a school trying to cross the street outside of the crosswalk. We know that students' reasoning and decision-making centers of the brain are not fully developed and they will make impulsive decisions. Students will walk through yards, open fields and most dangerously, across roadways while not using crosswalks or designated areas. The county has suggested that more crossing guards will be utilized, but this is an added cost on already tight budget.

In the middle of the district, students must deal with the constant construction along SR54 and the threat of crossing a 6-lane highway. Any student who lives south of 54 between Sunlake and Blue Pond knows how cars speed through this stretch. Image you are a child trying to navigate this on a bike, or walking? And the worse part is, these areas are still be developed and no new school sites are being cleared. So, the traffic, heavy machinery mentioned earlier is exponentially greater here. Furthermore, with a younger population moving into this area, the risk of inexperienced driving accidents also increase. As I will discuss below, partnerships with the County Commissioners and other groups need to be formed to find solutions. We have already waited too long.

Is there a simple solution, yes and no! Yes, don't end the courtesy busing is the easiest solution. Hiring bus drivers isn't as simple as saying it out loud. Cuts will need to be made somewhere. And unfortunately, I do not believe the county did enough to look internally. So, this is why it's not a simple solution. I've heard of some states utilizing the National Guard to man bus routes. While others have encouraged the superintendent and district leadership to assume roles as bus drivers, substitutes, etc. (ideas will be expanded on in future posts) Our current district is finding quick and simple solutions for these problems, not ones that impact them directly. To persuade you, other candidates will try to mislead you with projected cuts, especially at the top levels. Many of these positions are grant-funded or paid through non-salary funds. Simply cutting these positions, or changing what books are being shelved in their libraries, will not create more budget to hire new teachers, bus drivers, etc. These are distractions that will not solve the issues facing this district. Please look into it! The funding accounts at the district level are not always interchangeable. Monies for capital expenses (new building) cannot be shifted to salaries. It is not as easy as personal banking and transferring money from savings to checking. We must find

real solutions that fix the problem, not kick the can down the road with a stopgap measure. Simply cutting busing will jeopardize attendance, further disenfranchise our most vulnerable and allow greater fracturing of our public-school system. Let us not forget, that many in our community would benefit from the privatization of schools. I am looking for solutions to save public education for all students.

I also believe that the district did even less to find external solutions. When one considers all the growth happening in the area, the one resource that has gone unchanged is the willingness of this area's community to step up in times of need. Having run 7 back to school drives, 2 fundraising efforts to aid hurricane victims and arguably rebuilding a theatre program with little to no budget, the resources are here. There are so many after school programs, church groups, civic associations, etc. that could have been tapped to help offset the shortfalls for transportation; in future post I will argue that these partnerships have far reaching applications. Can it be fixed tomorrow, not completely! However, we need to start forming these partnerships now. Some areas, GHS' feeder pattern, possible the schools along SR 54, US 19 and Little Road have access to an underrealized resource in the city busing system. With the money saved not getting busing, could students not be provided with ridership cards. Yes, safety needs to be considered, but is it any less safe than walking through the neighborhoods mentioned above? And these families have paid their taxes as well, and they are losing their services. Something needs to be done to offset their losses. Dance groups, youth groups, other athletic and civic groups have vans which are used to transport students and adults outside of school, why could we not form partnerships to use them. Many who attend the school board meetings, claim we are not doing enough to include faith in our schools (I believe their needs to be a true separation and that is a different argument), but nothing prevents them from creating afterschool activities for which the parents sign up, that would allow this shuttle service to be instituted. At the elementary level, think about all of the preschools and daycare vans that transport students. What I am suggesting is expanding this model to the secondary level. Alternatives would be provided to get families who wished not to be part of the religious programming to be linked to other options; the issue isn't having the resources, its finding creative solutions to use what resources we have to make this situation work. Many local, car dealerships, especially the biggest ones, have courtesy shuttles. Think of the incentives that could be provided to utilize them? This doesn't even take into the consideration, and I do not know the legality of it, but sponsorships that could be used to pay for busing. Many of our schools use ad sales to fund athletic teams, look at any high school field, and count the posters that line the fences. I'm not suggesting NASCAR type logos, but even sports teams are getting into the sponsorship arena. Why couldn't schools to help in times of funding concerns. Each of the townships in Pasco have active Chambers of Commerce and service clubs. Many of them sign up for roadside cleanups. Why couldn't we incentivize ways for these groups to help monitor the routes to schools, coordinate pick up and drop off times? Again, these are just ideas, some have unforeseen consequences, but I have not heard them even being discussed.

Which gets me back to the main point that all stakeholders to the table to find solutions. Some of these will only need to be temporary fixes. Again, my point here is that we can, and should have, explore(d) other options. There is a community member/resource who will read this and say, "what about...", and it will revolutionize this debate. It cannot go unsaid, that decisions were made in hastily managed and low attended meetings (another of my upcoming posts) that impact too many families, especially those of lower economic status and less civically-involvement families. The stakeholders impacted the most were not involved. We can and must do better.

As a board member, I will meet with the people I represent. I will fight to return their voice to the board. Please visit my website. Look at the video links and reach out if you have any questions. Most importantly, get out and vote in the August 23rd Primary.