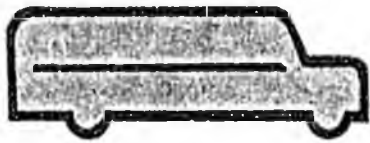


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375

ALASKA MOTOR COACHES, Inc.



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Telephone (907) 895-4550

February 11, 1988

TO: Senator Jack Coghill
Senator Bettye Fahrenkamp
Representative Dick Shultz
Representative Bette Cato

FROM: Loretta Nistler
Alaska Motor Coaches, Inc.

RE: HB 305, HB 397, SB 375

My purpose is to relay some thoughts as you consider legislation which will affect school transportation in the State of Alaska.

School transportation regulations, as they were amended last year, likely do need some refining. But I do not believe that they need to be rewritten to accommodate every person who disagrees with them as they stand.

→ This is a terrible bill (Kin)
HB 305: I do not believe the State should mandate a wage for school bus drivers unless, heaven forbid, government mandates a wage for every worker in private industry. (Mandated wages for the construction industry under Title 36 are already costing the public far more than is reasonable!) We don't need that in the school transportation industry. The argument that a minimum wage of \$9.62 per hour (2½ times the Alaska minimum) would result in less turnover of drivers will not stand up unless and until school bus driving becomes a FULL-TIME JOB. Here in Delta, Alaska Motor Coaches is already paying drivers \$13.50 an hour. Many school bus drivers in the state already make wages above the proposed minimum. Some school bus drivers drive for less than two hours a day. (Here, we pay a minimum of \$30 a day to people who have shorter routes.) Now, I realize that, in the larger school districts, there are drivers who do more than one route, serve more than one school and do activity trips during the day. They come close to having a full-time job. This is not the case in the rural areas -- the law, as you design it, will apply to all of us, not just Anchorage and Fairbanks.

I fully concur with the school bus driver age change in HB 305. (In fact, most insurance companies prefer 25, rather than 21, and we've insisted on 25 years of age for quite a few years.)

I strongly disagree with the proposed requirement for two years of licensed driving in Alaska before a person can apply for a school bus permit. As much as we like to believe that everything's different and tougher in Alaska, we must admit that a lot of the smaller states have driving conditions similar to, or worse than, those in Alaska! The required driver training should take care of any such experience a driver might be lacking.

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HB 397 and SB 375: Both of these bills are obviously designed to take the pressure off the requirement for licensed drivers. Apparently, as the regs now stand, they are causing a hardship for people who transport "school age children" for non-school activities, such as Girl Scouts, Youth Hockey, etc.

I believe SB 375 does more to correct this situation than would HB 397. I do not feel the length of the vehicle is relevant. I've driven conventional school buses for nearly 25 years; I've driven the mini-type school buses on occasion, and I've driven 14-passenger vans a fair amount. I can tell you from experience that, while a van may be shorter than a regular school bus, it sometimes takes a lot of skill to keep one on the road! No, length should not be the only deciding factor as to whether or not the driver should have a school bus permit.

I would be interested to know which "person or motor vehicle" might be exempted under regulations as yet unknown?

While I can fully sympathize with those who have intercity motor coaches and want to take charter and activity trips for various schools, I have some real concerns about "exempting" these people from licensing. Is there some way they can be trained, tested, examined and permitted without having to use a Yellow School Bus with stop arm and flashing lights for the driving portion of the test? One particular coach driver with whom I'm acquainted, out of the Moose Creek area near Fairbanks, claims he is being discriminated against because he can't get a school bus permit with his coach and because training is not available except through driver trainers in the employ of school bus contractors -- his competitors for activity trips.

I would sincerely hope that the objections of some coach operators won't result in a "watering down" of the licensing requirements to transport our school children! Please don't exempt coaches simply because these people are unhappy about the current regs!

To become a licensed school bus driver now, after the training, physical examination and testing, drivers are checked for any possible background record of sexual abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, etc. Their driving records are also subject to scrutiny by the Division of Motor Vehicles and the contractors' insurance companies.

An exemption for coach drivers for intercity activity trips would simply put you in the position of saying that a driver must be trained, tested and screened to transport kids to and from school, but ANYBODY can drive a coach-load of kids from Fairbanks to Anchorage! There are presently no State licensing requirement for intercity coach drivers.

The primary reason many of us have worked toward more stringent requirements for school bus driver licensing is SAFETY.

We fully intended that all people who are transporting our school children should be licensed drivers...including those who take them to Anchorage or Valdez or Fairbanks or Soldotna or Tok for activities. School districts that own their own vans don't like it -- they like to use the excuse, perhaps not in so many words, that it's somehow "beneath" a teacher or coach to have to be trained to drive kids around in the school van. Locally, they've gotten

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around the present "9+ passengers or less" stipulation by removing a seat from their 12 or 14-passenger vans so they can't carry more than 10 people, a maximum of nine passengers plus the driver. These vans have recently made trips to Valdez and Anchorage, driven by coaches who are not licensed as school bus drivers, carrying school students to sports activities.

Most of us in the school transportation industry have no problem with a teacher or activity sponsor transporting students to field trips within the local area, in school vans, without a school bus driver's permit.

We do object to unlicensed teachers or sponsors or coaches transporting students on the longer extra-curricular activity trips. We object, not because we have licensed drivers and inspected vehicles to transport those children, but because the teachers/sponsors/coaches usually have other things on their minds while they're going to or from a school activity. They are respected professionals, certainly, and most of them are fine teachers and coaches. But they sometimes tend to think of "driving" as an incidental activity. They're concerned about winning a game or placing well in a match; on the way home, they're more likely to be concerned about why they didn't win or place, or planning for the next victory. The professional school bus driver is concerned first about safety and getting the students there and back safely.

May I suggest that perhaps the "key" to who must be licensed to drive a school bus or van, would be the distance to be traveled. Could we use INTERCITY and INTRACITY as the determining factors?

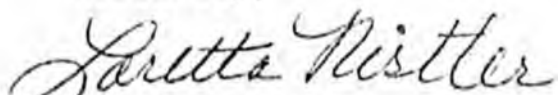
Could SB 375 be amended in this manner:(a) ... a person may not drive a school bus transporting school children to or from school to enable them to participate in class or any INTERCITY school activity...?

This would permit unlicensed teachers/sponsors/coaches to transport students on field trips and activities in school vans within the local community, INTRACITY, but would require licensed school bus drivers to transport them on longer, more hazardous INTERCITY activity trips. I'm certain it will need more refinement but, rather than using the size of the vehicle (as in HB 397) it would limit the distance students could be transported by an unlicensed driver.

You may also need to come up with a special license of some sort to suit the coach people whose buses don't meet the specifications for a "school bus".

Thank you for your consideration and taking time to read this material. And thank you for your interest and concern for the safety of Alaska's school children!

Cordially,


Loretta Nistler

cc: Romaine Kareen, DOE
Other Legislators and
interested individuals

A M E N D M E N T

Offered in the SENATE

TO: SB 375

Page 1, line 13, after "transporting":

Delete "school-age"

Insert "school [SCHOOL-AGE]"

Page 1, line 17, after "commissioner.":

Insert "In this subsection, "classroom studies" means curriculum studies that take place in a school building."

