

Friday, December 07, 2007

## Bus drivers vote for union

By [GAIL SCHONTZLER](#) Chronicle Staff Writer

Bus drivers for the Bozeman School District and Streamline public bus system voted overwhelmingly Thursday in favor of joining a labor union.



SEAN SPERRY/CHRONICLE Students board school buses parked at Chief Joseph Middle School, Thursday afternoon.

The election, supervised by the National Labor Relations Board, resulted in a 35-15 vote in favor of unionization, according to both sides.

"I'm very pleased, of course, with the outcome, and I look forward to trying to negotiate with the company on making some improvements," said Dan Sundquist, an organizer from Denver with the Amalgamated Transit Union, which represents 190,000 workers nationwide.

Asked why the vote was lopsided, Sundquist said, "Put yourself in their shoes. They're working a full-time job ... and didn't get paid vacation, paid holidays, didn't accrue sick time or vacation time, and the standard of wages needs some improvement. Medical and dental (insurance) are paid entirely by the employees, not the employer. That's why they voted the way they did."

The drivers are employed by First Student Inc. (formerly Laidlaw), the nation's largest school bus company. It has contracts to supply bus services to both the Bozeman School District and the new Streamline community bus system.

The secret-ballot election took place at the Bozeman School District's bus barn on North 27th Avenue, behind Costco.

Michael Jourdan, interim branch manager for First Student, who came to Bozeman a week ago from Alaska, said he doesn't know people here well yet, but supposed that wages and benefits were probably the major reasons for the employees' vote.

Jourdan said he was disappointed by the outcome, adding that First Student strives to be a "preferred employer."

"If employees want a union, that's fine," Jourdan said. "We'll work with the union."

If either side wants to dispute the election, they have one week to do so before the NLRB certifies the result, he said. If it is certified, the Amalgamated Transit Union would become the drivers' official representative.

Then both sides would begin bargaining over a labor contract.

"That will be the next step," Jourdan said. "It's hard to say how long it would take."

Bozeman bus drivers' pay now starts at \$9.75 an hour, with a \$250 bonus offered to new drivers with the first pay check.

Sundquist said one woman who has driven buses for 38 years is just now making \$12 an hour. Employees were concerned about high turnover and a chronic driver shortage, he said, in addition to wages and benefits.

School bus drivers traditionally work a part-time schedule. However, with the start of the Streamline public bus system, some drivers are working for both the city and the schools and have full-time schedules.