

Dawyl Webb - And 5

My concern in the latest endeavor to privatize the state's school bus system is that we will be taking a step back in time prior to 1952. Up until this time each school district contracted with private carriers. Many local districts consisted of only one community school and each district paid for this private service. Some districts could afford to pay for such services while others could not. This caused an inconsistency around the state with the students' ability to attend school. The legislature wanted to assure affordable, reliable and consistent transportation to all children by having the state provide school bus services.

The districts already have the authority to do contracts on their own according to section 59.67.460 of the South Carolina Code of Laws states that "Any County Board of Education may, at any time, contract for any part or all of its transportation services with private individuals or contractors for the furnishing of such services. In any such instance the County Board of

Education shall execute the contracts.”

The law goes on to state, “The County Board shall be responsible for the payment of all sums due under contracts so entered into and shall receive aid from the state for pupils thus transported only on the basis of the average per-pupil operating cost of state-owned equipment for the current year as determined by the State Board of Education.”

Under current law, it is the prerogative of the districts’ boards to enter into such contracts. It would seem that it should be the decision of a local board as to whether privatization of its bus system would be more financially efficient. So far, only three school districts have ventured into daily student transportation services being provided by private contractors and two have reported that it costs them more money after privatizing than it did when the state provided the services. The decision to privatize the bus system in these districts has cost the

districts' taxpayers more money, thus causing tax increases.

The independent studies of the current state bus system have shown that South Carolina has a very efficient system in its maintenance of buses, training of drivers, bus safety record, and daily delivery of students. The main concern with the current system is not operation or maintenance of the buses, but the age of the buses that we have.

In 2005, the General Assembly passed a law that required the state to purchase new buses on a regular interval to replace older buses. So far it has not delivered on its own law. I realize that we have been in a recession and money has been short, but the General Assembly could enter into a lease/purchase arrangement with any one of the bus manufacturers. This type of arrangement would provide newer buses and lower maintenance costs in the immediate future and would allow the General Assembly to come up with enough money each year to

provide new buses and still benefit from business with bus manufacturers to lower costs. Study after study has shown that this private bus provider venture is more costly to the state and, ultimately, more costly to local district taxpayers than keeping the system as it currently runs.