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Bus operator challenges bus idling rules

By Nancy Remsen
Free Press Staff Writer

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MONTPELIER -- John Sharrow, general manager for Mountain Transit Inc., which is based in Milton, tried unsuccessfully Wednesday to convince lawmakers of the problems posed by new restrictions on idling of buses.

Sharrow offered his concerns to the Legislative Committee on Administrative Rules, which is charged with reviewing rules to make sure they carry out the intent of the laws the Legislature passed.

Spurred by a group of students from Browns River Middle School in Jericho, the Legislature passed a law in 2007 banning school buses from idling on school grounds with exceptions to be set out in rules.

The students had argued that idling buses were unhealthy and damaging to the environment, and suggested modern engines no longer needed to warm up for long periods.

"I don't think anybody did their homework about warming up a bus in the morning," Sharrow argued. He maintained Wednesday that buses need a warm-up period longer than five minutes to defrost windows and heat up the cabin on chilly days.

The rules say a bus may not park with its engine running on school grounds for more than five minutes in a 60-minute period -- with three exceptions:

When the engine is required to operate special equipment for disabled persons.

When it is required to operate safety equipment other than lighting, such as windshield defrosters, and the operation of that equipment is necessary to address specific safety, traffic, health or emergency concerns.

When the vehicle is being serviced and operation of the engine is essential to the service being performed.

Sharrow argued that under the rule some bus services would have to move their vehicles off school grounds to warm them properly. Five minutes wouldn't be long enough to warm up fluids in the transmission or clear windshields of frost.

He noted, too, that buses aren't insulated and cool quickly. "How does the driver dress? As I see this law, there is no consideration being given to the driver."

Sharrow added he was having a difficult time recruiting bus drivers. How would he find people willing to endure cold cabins?

Ed Miller, representing the Vermont Truck and Bus Association, said bus drivers also see many students board buses who are dressed inappropriately for cold weather. "The inside of the bus has to be heated to allow for the health and safety of the passengers and the drivers," he said.

Cathy Hilgendorf, point person from the Department of Education on the rule, countered that the Department of Health had objected to including health concerns as a potential exception to the idling restriction. Health officials don't see as much risk to cold temperatures as they do to the fouled air produced by bus exhaust.

She also noted that considerable testimony had disputed the need to run buses for long periods to warm up the engines.

Lawmakers on the review panel weren't convinced by Sharrow's worries about cabin temperature.

"I think we should accept that this is Vermont and it is cold and children should dress appropriately," said Sen. Ed Flanagan, D-Chittenden.

Rep. Virginia Milkey, D-Brattleboro, suggested, "There are people who love making afghans and lap robes and they could have some of these on the buses."

Milkey also wondered why bus drivers couldn't wear warm boots and coats. "I don't understand why a bus driver can't dress to keep warm."

Rep. Jim Hutchinson, D-Randolph, suggested that if the bus cabin were warm enough that windows were clear of frost, then it would be comfortable.

Not everyone on the review panel voted for the idling ban last year. Rep. Linda Myers, R-Essex, said she had opposed it, but now that it was enacted, she said the rules reflected the law's intent.

The panel voted unanimously to approve the rules, which become effective May 1.

Contact Nancy Remsen at 229-1298 or nremsen@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com