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Schools chief says bus service not only solution

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Some residents say they want school officials to restore bus service to all students in order to help protect children on their way to and from Oak Ridge schools.

But full bus service isn't the only solution, Oak Ridge School Superintendent Tom Bailey said this week.

"The reality is there are going to be children walking whether you have bus service or not," Bailey told Oak Ridge City Council members at their Monday meeting.

The school superintendent was responding to a question from City Councilwoman Jane Miller.

Following a discussion on the potential use of crossing guards near schools, Miller had asked: "Do we need the crossing guards if we have the buses?"

Bailey told Miller there is not a single solution that will ensure children are safe on their way to and from school. In addition to those children who choose to walk to school, some will ride their bicycles, he said.

He talked about the difficulty of hiring and keeping bus drivers, and he also reminded Council members that school buses have to be replaced every 15 years.

The lack of bus service near schools has become a front-burner issue throughout the city since 12-year-old Ashley Paine, a seventh-grader at Robertsville Middle School, was run over on Nov. 9 by a bus near the intersection of the Oak Ridge Turnpike and Illinois Avenue.

The pre-teen died two days later.

Her mother, Laurie Paine, told The Oak Ridger on Monday that Ashley would have ridden the bus if she could have. But, to save money last year, the Oak Ridge Board of Education cut bus service to students like Ashley who live within a mile of the city's schools.

This month, bus service was restored to elementary students within the one-mile radius. Also some students near Robertsville Middle School, including those in the Paines' neighborhood, again have the option of riding the bus to school.

Some residents attending this week's meeting held at fault the community-at-large, including the media, for not paying more attention to parents' concerns when some bus service was eliminated last year.

"It's a collective failure," Oak Ridge resident Andy Marathe said. "We're all guilty of neglect."

But Marathe also blasted the city's school board for "playing God" when deciding which students could and could not ride school buses "on the pretext of saving money."

Although she said the accident should not have happened, Laurie Paine said she did not want to point fingers, and Oak Ridge Mayor Tom Beehan said Council is "looking forward now."

Laurie Paine and Donnie Paine, Ashley's father, addressed Council at the Monday meeting during a discussion on

pedestrian safety that included a report from Oak Ridge City Manager Jim O'Connor.

Among other things, the report says local officials are considering measures to make the city's streets safer, including red-light and speed-monitoring cameras.

Oak Ridge School Board members did not attend Monday's Council meeting, even though Council passed a "School Board Appreciation Week" proclamation during the meeting.

In an interview afterward, the Paines said they want Council to help them push the city's school board and police department to take more action to keep children safe.

Hundreds of children are still at risk, Donnie Paine said.

There are immediate solutions to help keep students safe, like hiring crossing guards, restoring bus service and increasing the police presence at places where school children are likely to cross streets, Ashley's family said.

And they have asked the community to help out.

"It's too late to do anything about Ashley now," said Lisa Langston-Smith, Ashley's aunt. "But it's not too late to do something about other children.

"Please do what you can to ensure that you are not the next person to stand next to a hospital bed."

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