

Internal cameras approved for buses

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Westerly school buses will be fitted with internal cameras next school year.

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By **EMILY DUPUIS** / Sun Staff Writer | **8 comments**

WESTERLY - Westerly's entire school bus fleet will be equipped by summer's end with cameras to capture both video and audio of students and drivers.

The school district's safety strategy includes spending nearly \$43,180 to either outfit or upgrade existing recording equipment on district-owned school buses.

The funding, approved unanimously this week by the School Committee, will allow units to be installed on 14, 71-passenger buses and four smaller special education buses. Eight other buses that have outdated cameras will also be upgraded.

Each unit includes up to three digital cameras with embedded microphones and a hard drive, to be secured under a seat, said Peter Denomme, the district's transportation coordinator.

All of the department's buses will feature surveillance equipment, following this installation. Eighteen additional buses purchased in 2009 and 2010 are already equipped with cameras.

District officials will be able to review the video and audio when needed.

"If there's an issue, we're going to know about it. If there's a problem we'll see it," Denomme said.

"It just gives them another tool to help them in the discipline of the children," he added of school officials.

Purchased from Seon Design, a Canadian firm, the cameras will be mounted this summer - one at the front of the bus, one in the middle and one above the driver pointed down the stairwell, he said.

The units contain an "event button," which the driver can hit to highlight and save a recorded incident.

GPS coordinates also will enable officials to view a map of the bus' travel as they watch the video. This will allow district officials to verify that drivers are following proper routes, Denomme said.

Denomme began work in February to acquire a surveillance system to bus safety. A request for proposals drew four responses ranging from low bidder Seon to a high of \$55,000. Seon's price includes the equipment, software, installation and a three-year warranty, he said.

This initiative is separate from the Smart-Bus Live cameras that have been installed on two Westerly school buses to capture images of drivers that illegally pass stopped school buses.

While that system includes both exterior cameras and three interior cameras, they do not provide audio and it takes several weeks to receive video from the private surveillance firm's Providence office, Denomme said.

School board members agreed in February to enter a contract with Smart-Bus Live at no cost to the district. The company makes its money from traffic ticket fines and supplies shares to the town and state.

On Wednesday, school board member D. Jay Goodman pointed to the new cameras as "yet another cost of running your own bus system." He said the cost was not included in a school department analysis of the district's transportation costs completed roughly a year ago.

Board member Jack Carson said the cameras will help protect the district from potential lawsuits over actions taken or not taken.

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