

# Bus driver controversy cools in first face-to-face meeting

**M. McKinnon**

It appears a simmering controversy regarding the new school bus contract is being sorted out.

A dozen Atikokanites, including two veteran drivers, reps from the North Star and St. Pat's school councils, Rainbow Centre, and two candidates in the upcoming municipal election (Brian Stimson and Jeff Lehman), met with First Student location manager Della Spencer here Thursday night.

It was the first time any of the drivers from Iron Range Bus had actually met with anyone from First Student. The new firm has held a job fair here and has been advertising for drivers since winning the contract through the Rainy River District Transportation Services Consortium last spring, but never heard from any of the veteran Atikokan drivers.

First Student is offering \$20 an hour plus a \$2,000 signing bonus (spread over the 2018-19 school year) for a minimum of three hours a day. The bonus is on top of a provincial bonus of \$1,000 that bus drivers who work the full school year qualify for.

One driver at the meeting noted she was making a higher hourly rate now and didn't want to take a cut in pay. Spencer pointed out that her Iron Range hourly rate included vacation pay - four to eight percent, depending on seniority - while First Student pays vacation separately from the hourly rate. (With the vacation pay factored in, the rates were almost identical.)

First Student will recognize the seniority of all drivers coming over from Iron Range, she said.

Several people mentioned hearing stories about bus driver strikes and disputes with First Student in southern Ontario and Thunder Bay. Spencer said that First Student operates in over one

thousand school districts right across North America and treats each one as its own local market.

"We want the experienced drivers with us. They are the ones who know the community, know the students, the roads, and the conditions," she said, adding that the company is willing to negotiate with the experienced drivers. She met privately with the two drivers after the meeting.

The drivers were also concerned about First Student setting up downtown without a garage (Spencer said the company is working on securing a garage here) and the lack of an in-town manager (First Student is reviewing how it will operate its dispatch system here).

For the first week of school, First Student brought in several drivers from Thunder Bay to meet its route commitments. The company is willing to train drivers here as necessary, said Spencer.