

City of Petersburg

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The City of Petersburg thanks its residents for their recent calls and emails regarding the unloading and pickup of elementary students at 514 W. Monroe Street.

Through recent written statements and voicemails made by the current District Superintendent and Elementary School Principal, the public has been led to believe that the City has made a hasty decision that has created an unsafe situation on Monroe Street. These statements are inaccurate and misleading. In fact, the bus issues and the City's consistent emphasis on safety stretches back 18 months to August of 2022.

Since August of 2022, the City has been consistent and clear that the buses need to pickup and drop-off elementary students on Monroe Street due to a multitude of factors. Central to this need were concerns raised by the bus drivers, who receive training for safety protocols for operating buses and safely unloading and picking up students.

Each bus driver who has approached the City on this topic has assessed that the buses being moved from Monroe Street and onto Madison Street poses the greatest risk to the safety of the children, which is the majority of the students who attend the elementary school. These safety factors include:

- Reduced visibility due to Madison Street's low sloping basin topography
- Insufficient paved street width on Madison to accommodate buses and 2-way traffic
- Unloading issues due to there being no handicap access on Madison
- Bus driver radios and cell phones become unreliable behind the school on Madison
- Weather related issues during periods of rain, ice, or snow
- Inability of emergency vehicles to traverse Madison when buses are present
- No escape once the buses are lined up on Madison
- Madison Street was not built for 13 buses to be staged twice a day

Significant time and resources were spent by the City reinforcing, widening, and installing proper drainage on Monroe Street in the summer of 2022. This work was completed, by August 2022, in part to address concerns that Monroe Street was contributing to water leaks inside the 514 W. Monroe Street building. New sidewalks were installed so that the street did not crown.

Monroe Street is flatter, wider, and located directly outside the main entrance and exit of the elementary school building at 514 W. Monroe Street, which is where it is safest for staging bus drop-off and pickup.

Despite all these factors being raised and addressed by the City's Mayor, Police Chief, City Council, and school bus drivers, and despite the City communicating that moving the buses to Madison Street would be contrary to City regulations and requirements, and would be unsafe for the buses and children riding them, the District's prior Superintendent insisted that drop-off and pickup for the buses be moved behind the school, onto Madison Street.

At the time of the relocation of the buses by the District, street signs were modified and stripes were painted onto Madison Street without any request of or approval from the City of Petersburg - the City that is legally responsible for its streets. Presumably, those changes to the street were made by agents or employees of the District.

Though this action was made in direct defiance of the law, the City did not want to issue tickets to the school bus drivers because: 1) the bus drivers were following orders from their employer, the District and 2) the City was concerned about the impact on the bus drivers' CDL licenses if they were ticketed for each violation related to picking up and dropping off on Madison Street. If the bus drivers lost their CDL licenses due to such tickets, the District would have no bus drivers.

Suddenly placed into this situation by the actions of the former Superintendent, the City attempted to do everything in its power to make the switch of the buses to Madison Street be as safe as possible for the time being on Madison Street, and it was communicated to the District that it had exactly 1 year (from August 2022 to August 2023) to try this new plan and see if it could be made to work safely since District Officials insisted that they were doing it regardless of City authority.

After that year, in August of 2023, the situation remained clear: not only did the Superintendent fail to listen to its bus drivers and address any of the safety issues that were previously communicated regarding Madison Street, but several new problems were discovered on Madison Street and communicated to the new Superintendent by bus drivers, the Mayor, and the Chief of Police.

When the current Superintendent took over duties for the 2023 school year, he was advised, in August 2023, that the buses must be moved back to Monroe Street due to the school's failure to address any of the street and safety issues. Despite this, the current Superintendent delayed any effort to secure relief from the City until he attended a City Council meeting in November of 2023.

At the City's December 5, 2023 meeting, there was an item on the Agenda for Madison Street. At that meeting, the current Superintendent, without submitting any materials to the City, sought a permit to retroactively allow the move of the buses to Madison Street. In the absence of any materials on the scope and duration of the request, the District's plan was completely unclear. Accordingly, the City Council, with the advice of legal counsel, did not approve the request for permit, and the City Council informed the Superintendent that the District had until January 8th, 2024, to return the buses to the safer pickup and drop-off location on Monroe Street.

Never did the City or any of its employees tell the District that it has to mix buses and cars on Monroe Street. In fact, the City agrees that this is not an ideal scenario and understands that the bus drivers agree as well. The current pickup and drop-off procedure is the result of delays on the part of the District officials, who have dedicated considerable time and school resources to a campaign that seeks to blame the City for the District's own continued negligence in addressing these issues.

The City is aware that the District is responsible for the education of its students and what transpires within its facilities. However, the City is responsible for its streets and sidewalks, including traffic and safety laws and related ordinances. Once the buses have complied with the City's ordinances related to streets, vehicles, sidewalks, and safety, the responsibility for drop-off and pickup protocol for students becomes that of the District.

Though the parents of the majority of the students depend on the buses for transportation to and from the elementary school, the current Superintendent and Petersburg Elementary Principal continue to emphasize complaints made by what appears to be a smaller group of parents who pickup their children after school with their personal vehicles. The City cannot and will not dictate to the District what procedures the District will use to get students from classrooms to buses, or the timing for doing so. Those matters are the responsibility of the District and its administrators.

The current Superintendent and Petersburg Elementary Principal disregarded the January 8, 2024 compliance date to move the buses back to the safety of Monroe Street. Not wanting to ticket school staff or its bus drivers for non-compliance, the City Council voted to extend the date of compliance to January 29th, 2024. When this was once again disregarded, the deadline was extended again to a firm and final compliance date of February 9th, 2024.

The City must enforce the relevant laws and its own ordinances or it risks creating further confusion and setting dangerous precedents.

Instead of giving credence to the concerns and feedback of their own bus drivers, who have the experience and direct knowledge of safety protocol, the Superintendent and Elementary Principal have attempted to deflect from the District's role in this issue and have opted to blame the City for their mismanagement.

As will continue to be the case, the safety of all the students on the city streets must be the primary concern for everyone. The City remains willing to assist in any reasonable plan from the District that includes the necessary requirement of unloading and loading school buses on Monroe Street.

The City of Petersburg

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