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Critics Question City's Plan to Extend School Bus Grant Program

By Eliza Shapiro

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Mayor Bill de Blasio's decision to extend a school bus grant program for another year is drawing criticism from budget watchdogs and members of the City Council.

As first reported by POLITICO New York earlier this month, the city will expand the \$42 million grant intended to subsidize experienced bus drivers whose benefits were cut by former mayor Michael Bloomberg. The grant will be extended with \$15 million in unused funds from the original program.

But critics say the program continues to be a problem for the city's collective bargaining agreements, and that an automatic extension without a new Council vote is unfair.

"This adds another level of question to what was already legally shaky ground," said Councilman Dan Garodnick of Manhattan, who voted against the proposal last year. Garodnick said the grant would be an unprecedented intrusion by the city into private collective bargaining agreements.

Garodnick said that although the city claims it can extend an existing grant without a Council vote, he believes the governing body should have the chance to re-examine the proposal.

"Does the City Council deserve to have another crack at this? I believe it would not have been a foregone conclusion that it would have passed [this year]," he said.

Although other Council members, including Jumaane Williams of Brooklyn, questioned the proposal during Council hearings last year, Garodnick was one of five councilmembers to vote against it.

Spokespeople for Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito did not respond to multiple requests for comment. Mark-Viverito supported the grant program last year.

Councilman Daneek Miller of Queens, who introduced the grant proposal last summer, said in a recent interview he does not consider the proposal controversial.

Carol Kellermann, president of the watchdog group Citizens Budget Commission, said the program essentially reverses the important savings achieved under the previous administration.

"This is school bus transportation provided by the city. The whole point was not to do that," she said.



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The de Blasio administration, Kellermann said, is "undoing the savings that were achieved by re-bidding the contracts."

Kellermann also came out against the grant program last year.

A spokesperson for city Comptroller Scott Stringer declined to comment on the fiscal implications of the grant renewal because Stringer does not have purview over the benefits in question.

Representatives for some local bus companies say the grant program disproportionately benefits one firm, MV/Reliant, whose Texas-based owner donated to de Blasio's campaign to unseat state Senate Republicans last year. Rival bus companies say the grant program harms them by rewarding a company they claim has tried to circumvent the union by under-paying its employees and complicating their internal collective bargaining deals.

A Times Union report also found that MV/Reliant is the bus company that has benefited most from the grant program, taking in \$15 million to subsidize wages and benefits for its drivers.

"This is not a grant, it's a taxpayer-funded bailout for one bad apple that bid poverty wages on the backs of working people," said Carolyn Daly, a spokeswoman for several unionized bus companies.

City Hall officials have dismissed the claims, arguing the grant program helps all experienced drivers whose benefits have been cut.

"Nobody wants to see hardworking men and women who look after our kids and get them safely to school each day reduced to poverty wages," Wiley Norvell, a spokesman for de Blasio, said in a statement.

Norvell said the city is hoping the state Legislature will reach an agreement guaranteeing permanent bonuses for school bus drivers this coming session. That would eliminate the need for the grant program, he said.

A public hearing on the grant will be held Oct. 20 before the city's Department of Small Business Services.