

Wilkes-Barre Times Leader Hazleton Transit Wants To Hit Brakes On Consolidation With Lcta

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Officials want more time to gauge impact on southern city.

Hazleton wants to put on hold plans to consolidate its public transit system with the Luzerne County Transportation Authority. City officials said they need more time to consider how the move would impact the city.

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation offered all transit systems in the state the opportunity to participate in consolidation studies two years ago. Hazleton City Council voted in February 2010 to participate in a study, with the result being a plan for the LCTA to consolidate with Hazleton Public Transit, as well as with the Luzerne/Wyoming Counties Transportation Department.

Hazleton City Council approved the plan in November, and the county commissioners the LCTA board followed suit in December.

Tonight, council is expected to rescind that approval. Hazleton has questions PennDOT hasn't addressed, City Administrator Mary Ellen Lieb said.

"I think we've been dealing with this for a good three months now and we don't feel there's been any progress that's been made," Lieb said. "We don't feel that any of the concerns that the mayor has or that (the city) transit (authority) has have been addressed."

In particular, Lieb said the city is concerned that PennDOT transit grant funding previously allocated to Hazleton would be paid to LCTA, and that transit in Hazleton would not be adequately funded by LCTA.

The city is also concerned that only one of two the Hazleton residents appointed in March to LCTA's board will have voting rights, she added.

Steve Hahn, who was named Hazleton's transit director last month, said he, Hazleton's council and the recently seated Luzerne County Council need to review the impact of consolidation before moving forward, and he attended Tuesday's county council meeting to further that process.

"I think the city of Hazleton needs to look at whether that partnership would really be in the best interest of southern Luzerne County," Hahn said. "They're really two different operations."

LCTA employs its drivers and all are union employees, whereas Hazleton owns its buses but contracts its drivers and most maintenance through three bus companies based in Hazleton. Each of those companies is under a three-year contract with about two and a half years remaining, Hahn said.

Hahn said a merger is unlikely to lead to layoffs since there are few redundancies between LCTA and Hazleton's bus routes, but said it's uncertain how LCTA would deal with those companies and their employees when the contract expires.

There could also be logistical problems with consolidation, Hahn said.

"One would think that if you were concentrating and operating from the southern part of the county, it would make no sense to have a bus travel to Wilkes-Barre to refuel for instance," Hahn said, adding. "It wouldn't make much sense for a bus from Hazleton to travel to Wilkes-Barre to get repaired by a union mechanic for a union rate."

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