

Districts look into selling school bus ads

By: DAVID LEVINSKY

Legislation permitting New Jersey school districts to sell advertising on the outside of school buses was signed into law Thursday, and some districts in Burlington County are exploring the possibility of using their vehicles as revenue boosters.

Under the law signed by Gov. Chris Christie, districts can sell advertising space on any buses they own or lease. School boards would set their own rates and be permitted to approve any ad, except for those pitching tobacco and alcohol products or promoting politics.

The law requires that half of any revenue generated from the ads be used to defray fuel costs for busing students. The other half may be used for school programs and services of the district's choosing.

Seven states have similar laws permitting school bus advertising, including Colorado, Florida and Texas.

Assemblyman Scott Rudder, R-8th of Medford, who co-sponsored the measure and pushed for its passage in the Legislature, said it would provide districts with a new revenue source at a time of financial difficulties because of reduced state aid and other revenue losses.

"School boards are facing enormous pressure to maintain standards and services with significantly less financial resources," Rudder said in a statement. "This legislation is a creative solution that will provide school districts with an opportunity to derive revenues from a new source and help to offset the impact of reduced state aid. It has the potential to be a great revenue raiser that will benefit students as well as help lessen the burden on property taxpayers."

Even before the bill was passed, some districts in the county were already discussing bus advertising and taking steps to devise policies or plans for such a program.

"We're in the process of developing an advertising policy, and we're pursuing proposals as we speak for marketing and advertising firms interested in working with us," Bryan McGair, Medford assistant superintendent for finance and support services, said Friday. "We're hoping to begin generating revenue very quickly, maybe even for next year's budget."

Emily Capella, superintendent of the Lenape Regional High School District, said her district planned to review the new law and the district's advertising policy. The district already sells advertising space at high school football stadiums and on a Lenape District Television truck.

"I'm pretty sure we'll take a look at (bus advertisements) and we'll probably recommend extending our current policy to it," Capella said. "Any way to add revenues we'll look at, so long as it doesn't compromise our mission."

James Sarruda, superintendent of the Northern Burlington County Regional School District, said the school board's finance committee began discussing the concept last month along with other revenue-generating ideas.

While he said all public schools badly need more revenues, Sarruda cautioned that developing a bus advertising program would be difficult.

"You have to decide things like what to charge, who would produce the ads, and how long they would be on the buses," he said. "It would be a significant challenge, but if we can generate revenue this way, then I'm all in."

Pemberton Township Superintendent Mike Gorman said his administration planned to present the concept to the township Board of Education for discussion. Like Sarruda, he said there would be several issues to consider before any advertising could be sold.

"It's a point of conversation, not an endorsement," Gorman said Friday. "We're not going to be leaping into this right away."

Les Altenberg, president of ALT Advertising in Evesham, predicted some businesses would be interested.

"It's a moving billboard and one that's very localized," Altenberg said. "It's hard to judge, but it's likely that as a new medium there would be at least a few people who would be pioneers and try it out. It makes sense, and if it catches on you'll see a lot of people doing it."