

# City expanding grant program to restore benefits for school bus drivers



A school bus. (maerzbow)



By **ELIZA SHAPIRO** 5:39 a.m. | Sep. 9, 2015

Mayor Bill de Blasio will expand a grant program created last year to subsidize experienced school bus drivers and provide them with the benefits former mayor Michael Bloomberg eliminated during his administration, leading to a month-long school bus strike.

The \$42 million grant program was created to restore those benefits; 1,200 bus drivers and matrons benefited from the program last year, according to the administration. The city has the authority to expand the program by a year without City Council approval.

The city will use \$15 million in unused funds from the program, and additional city money if necessary, over the next year, according to notice that will be published in the City Record on Wednesday.

The administration is also hoping the state Legislature will pass a law this session guaranteeing benefits for school bus drivers, though de Blasio has so far failed to get traction in Albany on this issue.

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A public hearing on the extension is planned for Oct. 20 before the city's Department of Small Business Services, according to the notice in the City Record.

The grant program has caused controversy in the Council and among budget experts, who argued last year that the city was setting a bad precedent by essentially involving itself in what should have been a private collective bargaining agreement.

Still, only one council member — Dan Garodnick of Manhattan — ultimately voted against the program, calling it a "questionable proposal".

Daneek Miller, chair of the Council's Committee on Civil Service and Labor, said he did not expect significant opposition from the Council this year.

"This is a common-sense measure that protects workers," Miller said. "I don't see this as controversial."

Miller said that since the Council already approved the grant proposal and the extension will use funds from the existing program, he does not believe the governing body needs to vote on the program again.

"In lieu of being able to solve this through state legislation, this is the next best thing,"

he said.

De Blasio administration officials said they are still considering other, still unidentified options for making the benefits permanent.

"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," de Blasio spokesman Wiley Norvell said in a statement Tuesday. "We had every expectation of seeing State action last year to help ensure we keep our safest, most experienced drivers and matrons on the job, and pay them fairly for their work. Right now, we believe this is the next best option as we press for a long-term solution."

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