

November/December 2020

Busline

Cover Feature

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Clinton, NY, Operator

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Hit By COVID-19 Slowdown, **Hale Transportation** *Is Fighting Back*

By Rick Mullen, *Busline Magazine* Associate Editor

In 2006, **Stephen Hale** realized his childhood dream of going into the transportation business when he founded **Hale's Bus Garage**, in **Clinton, NY**. The company is now commonly known as **Hale Transportation**.

"In 2008, Stephen Hale entered into an agreement with an Albany, NY-based motorcoach company that placed coaches at our current Clinton facility and began to run a retail program," **Hale Transportation General Manager Philip Bond Jr.** said, during a recent interview with *Busline Magazine*. "Stephen provided dispatching services, office space and the cleaning of the coaches. That arrangement grew from two coaches to as many as 10, and lasted until 2014 when the Albany-based company decided it no longer wanted a second location. The company pulled its equipment and ended the agreement."



Stephen Hale

As a result, Stephen Hale purchased a used motorcoach and began booking trips. There was an interest in what is now Hale Transportation as another motorcoach company went out of business and left a void in the area market, Bond explained.

"As of 2020, we now have more than 24 motorcoaches, plus shuttle and minibuses," Bond said.

As **president and owner**, Stephen Hale is involved in every aspect of the business, but primarily focuses on office, cleaning, on-call services and customer-related matters. He began in the transportation industry in 1999 by cleaning school buses. He later became a bus driver, while working toward a landscaping degree.

"Stephen is very hands-on. He's involved mostly with the office end of the business," Bond said. "He deals with customers and handles all the major contracts."

As general manager, Bond's responsibilities include overseeing the company's garage operation.

"We currently have two technicians in the garage. I order most

of the parts and deal with the major suppliers. I oversee the parts inventory as well," Bond said. "I share those responsibilities with my head mechanic. I also take care of the licensing of the coaches and oversee the inspection program that New York state conducts twice a year. I also dispatch and work with a few customers here and there, booking trips and so on, but the other stuff keeps me busy."

Located in upstate New York, Clinton is about an hour's drive, via Interstate 90, east of Syracuse, NY, and in the neighborhood of a two-hour trip west of the state capital of Albany. In addition, the company's facility is

about five hours northwest of the New York City metro area.

"We recently completed a \$2.5 million renovation, increasing the size of our facility from 5,000 to 25,000 square feet, and includes an automatic wash bay, new driver offices and an expanded parking lot," Bond said.

Hale Transportation's primary focus is group charter transportation. The company also provides shuttle services for various groups.

"Our biggest business segment is athletic and academic transportation for area colleges. We have formed great relationships with those institutions. Our drivers and staff are always geared to meet their needs," Bond said. "Contracts are important to us. Even when we are sold out, if one of our customers call at the last



Philip Bond Jr.

"I think if everybody in the industry refused to go into the 'gutter' on pricing, we all could make a little more money."

— Philip Bond Jr., general manager

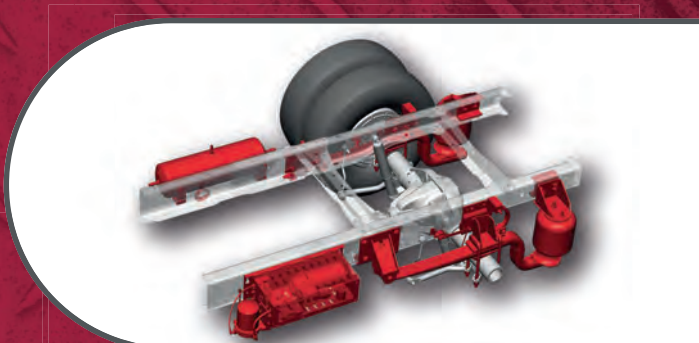
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minute and asks for a coach, we come through for them.”

Bond said athletic transportation can get “tricky” at times. Weather and other factors can cause trips to be cancelled or rescheduled. Sometimes people simply forget to schedule a coach. Such issues may result in a customer calling Hale Transportation at the last minute, needing a coach.

In the case that there are two trips that need to be covered at the same time — one of which is an athletic trip handled by the contract team — Hale Transportation will handle the athletic trip and reach out to one of its partners in the area to handle the other trip, Bond said.

“Once a customer signs a contract, we take that seriously. The client is expecting us to be there and provide what we promised in the contract,” Bond said. “Let’s say there is a wedding on a particular day that is not handled by our contract team, and, at the same time, there is a contracted athletic trip scheduled. We will reach out to another coach company to cover the wedding. Meanwhile, we will handle the athletic trip.

“That is what we usually do when we are sold out and someone calls and says, ‘Oh my gosh, we forgot to book this trip with you.’ We don’t want to leave it up to a competitor to handle a major contract.”

Hale Transportation counts several colleges and universities as important customers, including SUNY (State University of New York) Polytechnic Institute, located in Marcy, NY, just north of



A major renovation project recently expanded the company's facility from 5,000 to 25,000 square feet.

Utica. The school also has a campus in Albany.

“New York Polytechnic Institute is on the cutting edge of the microchip world, and is going to build a factory on campus,” Bond said. “The school has been a customer of ours since the beginning.”

According to sunypoly.edu, the Institute founded and manages the Computer Chip Commercialization Center (Quad-C).

Other college and university customers include SUNY Morrisville State College, Cazenovia College, Colgate University and Hamilton College.

SUNY Morrisville State College is located about 30 minutes south of Clinton in Morrisville.

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"The college is phenomenal to deal with, and we've been with them from the beginning, as well," Bond said. "Hamilton College, meanwhile, is located about five minutes from our facility. Cazenovia College is a small private school (located about 40 minutes southwest of Clinton) and Colgate University is about 20 minutes from us in Hamilton, NY. Recently, the Hamilton College contract has become available, and we are going to be working with the college when things get back to some sort of normal."

"While Colgate University and Hamilton College are very major contracts that can keep our fleet pretty busy, we are always looking to expand our services."

Although the area's colleges and universities have been a major portion of Hale Transportation's business in recent years, other charter trip offerings are also popular.

"We transport groups to Manhattan in New York City to shop, go to a show, or anything else group members would like to do," Bond said. "They spend about nine hours there."

Other "hot" destinations for charters include Boston and Washington, D.C. In the springtime, university and college teams also charter trips to southern locations, including Myrtle Beach, SC, and Florida, where their baseball teams practice, Bond said.

"We also transport senior groups. Most of the time those are local trips. We have a pretty good following with local school districts, as well, because of our safety profiles," Bond said.

Indeed, last year, Hale Transportation scored 96 percent on the New York State biannual safety inspection.

"In New York state, scoring 96 percent is a significant achievement because the state's standards are pretty rigid," Bond said. "Many times schools want to see our safety profile in deciding to go with us or with a competitor that may be charging less."

Hale Transportation refuses to get into pricing wars with competitors, Bond said. Transportation companies that consistently low-ball prices to gain business have traditionally been a thorn in the side of companies offering high-quality services. Many transportation officials, Bond included, think companies that cut prices to rock bottom are a drag on the whole industry's bottom line.

"I think if everybody in the in-

dustry refused to go into the 'gutter' on pricing, we all could make a little more money," Bond said. "We are just not going to go there, because we would have to cut expenses somewhere, whether it be drivers' pay, or not maintaining our coaches to the high bar that we have set. It is foolishness to me to operate that way."

In its charter service fleet, Hale Transportation has purchased coaches from ABC Companies, including two new Van Hool CX45 motorcoaches, delivered in 2017. The company also just purchased a 2020 Van Hool CX45.

"We have had a strong relationship with ABC Companies since the beginning," Bond said. "ABC's support has been very good all around, from parts to sales to technical support — the company is very responsive."

"If we call ABC with a problem at 5 o'clock in the afternoon, we



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will get a call back within an hour from the company's leadership and a tech support person. They also have an on-the-road rep who will come to our facility. I have visited ABC's phenomenal locations in New Jersey and Florida."

The main thrust of Hale Transportation's charter business is serving the Northeast. Some key destinations for charter trips include Boston, Washington, D.C., and Montreal, QC, Bond said.

"Occasionally, we go down to Florida and South Carolina, but, our main charter business is in the Northeast, especially since the university business has really grown," Bond said. "However, if somebody calls and says, 'I want to go to Wisconsin' or 'I want to go to Colorado,' we will charter a trip to those locations. That doesn't happen as much anymore since our focus is athletic and academic transportation."

Hale Transportation also offers shuttle service to Turning Stone Resort Casino, located about 15 miles northwest of Clinton.

"We provide a shuttle that runs between Syracuse and Turning Stone, located in Vernon, NY," Bond said. "At one point, we operated employee shuttles on the campus of the casino, which was

a 24/7 operation. We also run a shuttle for a company between Fonda, NY, and Utica."

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

According to a report released by the American Bus Association (ABA) in late April, nearly the entire motorcoach industry had shut down in every corner of the country.

"Most charter and tour companies have closed their doors, commuter operations have mostly stopped running, and scheduled service operations are operating at approximately 15 percent of capacity. The industry is seeing a fallout between 80-90 percent of cancelled trips and very few future bookings," the ABA said. "Some of the worst losses have been seen in the charter business, which depends on tours, meetings and conferences, where bookings are almost non-existent, even though this is usually the busiest time of year. In addition, for many charter companies the period of March through June is when they earn as much as 60 percent of their revenue for the year and that work has been completely elimi-



A Hale Transportation employee is shown working on one of the company's motorcoaches in the renovated facility in Clinton, NY.

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nated. Even more impacted are shuttle and other services like school field trips, marching bands, and sports teams. Those services are down by about 95 percent.”

“Like many other companies, we have been hit hard by the pandemic,” Bond said. “Many weeks and weekends were sold out for the entire calendar year — they have all been cancelled. Unfortunately, we have had to furlough some employees.

“Nonetheless, we are hanging in there. Fortunately, Stephen (Hale) set us up pretty well. We had some reserves and savings. We also applied for payroll protection programs, and we received some funds. We also took advantage of the FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) Economic Injury Development Loan, which has been a stopgap for us. Our lenders have been very good to us, as well, allowing extensions for a few months. Wherever we can, we are reaching out for work and doing different things.”

One positive development is landing a contract for the state of New York to operate two wrapped motorcoaches that will tour the area for six weeks, acting as rolling billboards for the state.

“The coaches will be touring some cities in our area,” Bond said. “That will bring in some revenue. We are just going back to basics.”

One casualty of the pandemic was Hale Transportation’s location in Oneonta, NY.



Hale Transportation's renovated facility includes an automatic wash bay and plenty of space for vehicle maintenance.



“We decided to end our lease at our Oneonta location. We are hoping to return to the area in the future,” Bond said. “The lease was coming up for renewal at the end of July. Since there wasn’t any business out of Oneonta, we decided it was time to shut it down. For the time being, all of our coaches are running out of Clinton.”

Hale Transportation has taken measures to help ensure the safety and health of its employees and riders.

“We urge that all of passengers wear masks. We have put hand sanitizer stations near the entry doors of the coaches. We also have



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hand sanitizer wipes located throughout the buses,” Bond said.

Hale Transportation encourages social distancing.

“We have an Atlantic City run every weekend to a casino, which limits the passenger count to 30 people to try to enforce social distancing,” Bond said. “When coaches return from trips, we go through them with a disinfectant spray gun. We also have microbial filters in all of the buses. So far, we haven’t had any complaints or problems.”

Hale Transportation uses several sources to learn and keep abreast of best practices in dealing with the pandemic.

“We check the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) website,” Bond said. “We also look at what competitors are posting on social media and their websites. And, there are people within the Bus Association of New York State who can help. I’m pretty close to a lot the people in that organization. I ask them such questions as, ‘What are you guys doing? What do you think is working? How are you getting through this? What about social distancing? Are you limited on capacity?’

“Many times they will have some good answers for us. We also talk with our bus manufacturers. They put out bulletins and provide guidelines, etc. We compile the information we have gathered, and then pull out what we think we are going to do to ensure people are safe. We do what we can.”

With a few exceptions, passengers have cooperated with the pro-

ocols and procedures Hale Transportation has put in place to help keep them safe and healthy.

“You are always going to have somebody who says, ‘I’m not wearing a mask.’ However, for the most part, people are trying to make the best of the situation. They don’t want to get sick,” Bond said. “Colleges and universities have their own protocols. We share with them what we have done. Most of the time they will come back and say that is ‘perfect.’ Some of them

go a little above what we have done as far as allowing a certain number of riders on a bus. Everybody has been good to work with and there hasn’t been a lot of issues.”

In discussing what the winter season might bring, Bond said that hopefully the colleges and universities will continue their winter sports, and other seasonal programs, carrying over into the spring.

“Of course, we have had a lot of hopes dashed through this pandemic,” Bond said. “It began in March when we heard, as we locked down, this would all last two weeks and soon we would be up and running like normal. We are still waiting for those two weeks to end.

“Then we were looking at the fall season. In September, we really geared up and got ready to go, but that plan was shut down. So, there have been a lot of letdowns.”

Bond expects the service to Manhattan will dry up during the winter season because many people are not wanting to travel

“Like many other companies, we have been hit hard by the pandemic... We are just going back to basics.”

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there, especially since COVID-19 cases are spiking again in the New York City area. In addition, trips to Salem, MA, which typically is a popular destination in October, have been nixed due to the coronavirus.

"I think there is some light at the end of the tunnel," Bond said. "Once we get through the election and put the nightmare of 2020 behind us and move into 2021, I'm hoping things will get back to somewhat normal."

HIGHLY TRAINED AND ROAD-TESTED DRIVERS

Hale Transportation has about 65 full- and part-time employees, including drivers. In addition to Stephen Hale, Bond and drivers, there are two part-time compliance managers, a part-time receptionist, two full-time technicians, one full-time cleaner and two part-time cleaners.

"Drivers are required to have experience before we hire them," Bond said. "Once hired, we continually road test and evaluate them. We also have frequent meetings and in-service days when we go through all the mechanical and operating functions of the various vehicles in the fleet. We expect our drivers to become familiar with all the intricacies of those complex vehicles."

"We conduct training with small groups of three or four drivers at a time. We also take them out twice a year for a road test. We depend on feedback from customers. We always ask passengers after they return from a trip, 'How did the trip go? Is there anything that the driver could have done better? Is there something

we need to follow up on?' It is important to get that feedback from riders," Bond said.

Just having driving experience isn't enough. Drivers who are successful at Hale Transportation have the right personalities to engage passengers in the way the company demands.

"We can teach driving skills, but we can't teach personality. If driver candidates come to us and their people skills are not all there, we are going to pass," Bond said. "A person could be the best driver in the world, but, if he/she doesn't like people, it is just not going to work out for him/her here at Hale Transportation."

Not all successful drivers have the same personalities. Some drivers match up better with certain types of groups.

"For example, some older drivers do better with senior groups," Bond said. "Once we get a driver matched with a particular coach or team, we take pains to make sure that person remains in that position."

"When potential customers reach out to us, I will speak with them on the phone to gain some understanding of the personality of the group in order to match them with a driver. That is important, because the driver makes the trip. A driver who is difficult to work with, not willing to go somewhere or do something the group needs to do can ruin a trip."

"Drivers have a lot of responsibilities. I have been there. I understand what they are going through, and that is why I try to take care of them."

For drivers who make the cut, Hale Transportation emphasizes communication and teamwork.



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"A driver who is engaged and feels he/she is part of a team is usually much happier than someone who is treated like a number," Bond said. "We try to foster a family-type atmosphere. We have an open door policy that allows drivers to voice any concerns they might have."

"Most of our recruiting comes from drivers leaving other companies to come here. They then spread the word to their former colleagues that Hale Transportation is a good place to work. Also, keeping a highly maintained fleet goes a long way in attracting quality drivers."

Upstate New York winters can be harsh and snowy. Operating a 45-foot motorcoach in such conditions takes a great deal of skill. Hale Transportation's drivers are up to the task.

"The winters can get interesting as we get quite a bit of snow in this area," Bond said.

"Sometimes our drivers are expected to navigate coaches on rural country roads, which can be hilly, narrow and winding. They are expected to be able to drive through wooded areas."

"Weddings have really taken off in various venues scattered throughout the region. Many of those sites are deep in wooded areas. Drivers have to be extra careful navigating their 45-foot vehicles through the woods."

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Bond discussed some of the underpinnings of Hale Transportation's success since it opened in 2006. Prudent and wise business decisions helped launch the company on an upward trajectory.

"We were able to grow quickly because there was a vacuum in the market when another company pulled out," Bond said. "You also have to be competitive with pricing and find good equipment, which we have done. Stephen (Hale) is very adamant, as well, that every coach have Wi-Fi, and other key amenities, such as 110-volt outlets, etc."

Looking ahead, Bond said Hale Transportation will continue to focus on building its reputation for offering the stellar customer service that it has nurtured over

the years. The same goes for continuing its efforts to put highly maintained coaches on the road. Having to close down some destinations because of COVID-19, seeking new business is also a priority.

There are also some uncertainties moving ahead to prepare for, again because of the impact of the pandemic.

"With more colleges going virtual, is that going to change the industry as far as transportation goes? We need to be aware

"We were able to grow quickly because there was a vacuum in the market when another company pulled out. You also have to be competitive with pricing and find good equipment, which we have done."

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of that, and other possible changes,” Bond said. “I wish I could see the future and know what it is going to bring. Nonetheless, we are going to do our best to be prepared for whatever might come.”

A GOOD CAREER

Despite the monumental upheaval in the motorcoach transportation market at this time caused by COVID-19, Bond thinks the industry is a good career choice.

“A person, for example, can become a motorcoach driver and go anywhere in the U.S. and Canada,” Bond said.

Indeed, Bond launched his career path as a bus driver more than 26 years ago, a job he held for 12 years. He left the transportation industry for a time, but, in 2009, came back, driving for an Albany-based company.

“Shortly thereafter, I became general manager of that company,” Bond said.

He remained at that company until 2014, when he was recruited by Stephen Hale to be general manager of Hale Transportation.

“I like the challenge of working in this industry, because it is always changing,” Bond said. “I get really hands on with the coaches when they have electrical and other issues. My head mechanic and I work well together. We will troubleshoot a problem a bus is having. I love that kind of stuff, where I am out in the garage trying to figure out where a wire is broken. We’ve gotten really good at that stuff because our earlier coaches had

a lot of problems. It is cool to get involved and understand what technicians are going through.”

Bond stays involved with all of the company’s employees, from the maintenance technicians to the cleaner who works nights.

“I will come in at night and ask him what he needs — what will make his life better,” Bond said. “It is a good career. I am happy where I ended up and what I’m doing. I have always enjoyed working with people. When I was a driver, it was amazing all the places I saw and all of the people I met. As my role changed and I moved into the office, it was fulfilling to work with the technicians and solve problems.”

Working for a company such as Hale Transportation, also gives employees a chance to give back to their communities in various ways.

“Stephen, for example, is very community minded,” Bond said. “He donates bus transportation for funeral shuttles, local festivals, works with the schools to help with playoff transportation, among other activities. He is also a volunteer fireman.”



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