

# Anchorage gets on bus

By LARRY CAMPBELL  
Daily News reporter

Some Anchorage drivers have apparently rediscovered the city bus system.

Since the three-month free-ride program ended Jan. 31, bus ridership has stayed high and twice as many riders as usual bought monthly bus passes this month. A recent rider survey suggests that more people who've never ridden an Anchorage bus finally got on.

Tallies show an extra 3,000 to 4,000 daily bus riders now compared with in October, before the free program began.



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All of which has People Mover transit director Bob Kniefel pretty giddy.

"Am I excited? You bet I am," Kniefel said.

A \$450,000 federal Department of Transportation grant paid for free bus rides starting Nov. 1. The program ran in conjunction with a local promotion encouraging drivers to car or van pool and to plug in their vehicle heaters to make cold morning starts easier and cleaner. Both programs were aimed at cutting carbon monoxide emissions.

The free-ride program produced a lot more riders: up to 45 percent more on many weekdays and 60 percent more on weekends. The initial increase was no surprise, Kniefel said. The real proof of any success was in whether ridership would remain above average when bus fares were reinstated. That's what has happened in Lower 48 cities that tried the program.

During the first two weeks of February, when riders had to start paying again, ridership remained more than 20 percent higher than normal, figures showed. The fare is \$1 for adults and 50 cents for kids.

During the first few days of this month, People Mover sold nearly 2,200 monthly passes, the largest number ever. Last October, before the program began, People Mover sold about 1,000 passes.

"I think what's happened is that people have found that if they just got on, it was great," Kniefel said. "You just get them on that first time."

The city also recorded no violations of federal air-quality standards during the program. But city air standards officials said many factors affect air-pollution levels, including the city's automobile inspection and maintenance program; newer, more efficient engines; and changing driving habits.

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