

RIDERS FLOCK TO BUSES TO OFFSET HIGH FUEL PRICES



Jake Paris waits for his bus at the downtown People Mover station. In May, system-wide ridership was up by more than 1,000 a day from last May. Photos by MARIC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News

On a record roll

People Mover shuffles resources to deal with rising demand

By TERRY CARR
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Consider the bad side first: At a time when fuel prices are soaring, People Mover in Anchorage, with its 55 diesel-swilling buses, is taking it in the gut.

The fuel truck pulls up to the city's two giant tanks every seven days and unloads about 10,000 gallons a stop.

The price of that in the final weeks of June was running about \$4.50 a gallon, up from \$2.95 a gallon at the beginning of the year, according to Jody Karcz, municipal public transportation director.

"The price of fuel is going through the roof," she said. "You really kind of hate to see the gas truck pull up."

To keep the diesel flowing, People Mover had to get a \$600,000 budget revision in the first quarter to help cope with the growing costs.

But the price of gas is making for more than just pain in the People Mover picture: More people are riding the bus. Look at ridership figures and talk to people at bus stops and transfer centers, and it becomes clear that more Anchorage residents are parking their vehicles at home and leaving the driving to the municipality.

And they say the reason is simple: the bus is cheaper.

"Buses are getting fuller and fuller, no doubt about it," said Phil Enlow, a barber who was waiting for a bus at the Muldoon transfer center at Muldoon and DeBarr roads. "I had to start riding this winter, and I plan to keep on. It's cheaper than a car."

Municipal transportation data bear out what he's seeing. Average weekday People Mover ridership in May reached 14,500, according to numbers compiled by public transportation planners. That's up more than 1,000 a day from the same month a year ago.

"I'm just real pleased about the ridership that we're seeing," Karcz said. "And what we're seeing in June is that we actually had a couple of 16,000 days. ... That's a lot. This might be the record year of ridership in the history of People Mover. We're anticipating over 4 million passengers this year."

PARKING THE CAR

The ridership record, should it fall, will do so largely because of gas prices, she said.

"Fuel is taking such a chunk out of people's pockets that when you have an alternative that works, it's kind of silly not to ride the bus and save that money for other things."

Doris Higgins, making her way through the downtown transit center one recent morning with five of her children scattered around her, counts her Mountain View family among those driving up bus ridership numbers.

"Gas prices were killing us," she said as she coaxed one youngster down off the stairs.

Higgins said she and her kids make their way all over town on the bus, and her husband has also taken to riding public transportation.

"We were having to pay for gas, then we have all the other costs. And we've found out that it's cheaper to take the bus."

On a bench outside the downtown center, Mike Corter sat with an armload of paperwork that he's picked up while searching for a job. He parked his van, walked away from it and is riding the bus — even for the job search.

"It's a lot cheaper," he said. "Gas is just too high to be driving around."

DAY PASSES

To deal with the changes in ridership patterns, People Mover is planning changes. Those steps will involve trimming trips on routes that are in little demand and adding stops and buses on routes where demand is high, Karcz said.

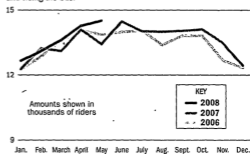
The changes will mean a slight increase in expenses, including diesel costs, but it's money that already has been built into the People Mover budget, she said.



With gas prices high, Doris Higgins has found that getting around town with her five children is more affordable on a city bus.

Average weekday ridership

People Mover ridership is setting records in the face of high fuel prices. To a degree, people appear to be parking their cars and riding the bus.



Source: Municipality of Anchorage

KEVIN POWELL / Anchorage Daily News

Karcz said routes to Eagle River and one in South Anchorage that runs past both South High and Service High will be cut later this month. Scratching the school routes "is not something we like to do, but we just haven't been able to get the ridership out of there," she said.

Meanwhile, the resources dropped from those routes will help to boost two of the system's busiest: Route 15 on 18th Avenue/DeBarr Road and Route 9 that operates on Arctic Boulevard linking downtown and the Dimond Center mall. Service on always-busy Route 45, which links downtown and Mountain View, also will be enhanced.

The changes won't mean much to tourists Monte and Ann Bartek. They'll be back in Arkansas. But the underlying price of gas pushed the pair's decision to pass on renting a car while in Anchorage and ride the bus.

As they waited outside the downtown center for their bus ride to the aviation museum at Lake Hood, the two said they routinely paid \$8 for two People Mover day passes during their stay in Anchorage.

"We've been everywhere in town," Monte said. "I don't know what we would have paid for a rental car and for gas, but we're getting around a lot cheaper."

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