

People Mover may move 4.2 million riders

A RECORD?: Buses have been traveling 'standing room only.'

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Anchorage's People Mover system is anticipating a record number of riders when final numbers are tallied for 2008.

Public transportation operators project a total of 4.2 million bus riders by the end of the year — an all-time high since the city started tracking use in 1980.

The increase represents a 7 percent boost from last year.

"It's been jam-packed, sometimes standing room only," said Toby Smith, a regular rider of the popular Number 45 bus from Mountain View to the university

district, and also the executive director of the Alaska Center for the Environment.

Many attribute the increase to the soaring prices at the gas pumps over the summer. In mid-July, Anchorage drivers were paying \$4.45 a gallon for regular gas. People started driving less, car-pooling, and riding bicycles. They also increased their use of public transportation — which in Anchorage is primarily the bus.

Even though the current price of gas has fallen to about \$2.58, bus usage has not correspondingly dropped, said Brenda Bergsrud, associate planner with People Mover.

Bus use was last at its peak in 1982, when 4 million rides were recorded. (An-

chorage's population in 1982 was 204,000, compared with today's 285,000.)

Use of public transportation in the city has fluctuated since the late 1980s. It has been on a quick rise, however, since 2002.

The city doesn't have data on what percentage of the population is using buses.

Smith said he was pleased with the new numbers, but still, much needs to be done, especially with commuters from the Valley. The problem in planning for change, he said, isn't in getting people out of their cars and onto public transportation. The problem would be once Valley residents are in Anchorage, where there really isn't a fast way to get large numbers of people to multiple destinations across the city.