



MARC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News

Roughly 12,000 passengers use a People Mover bus daily.

Testing the system



BARON DEAN / Anchorage Daily News

Rosemary Shinohara spoke to Goll while waiting for Bus 7 to take her downtown, where Shinohara caught another bus to take her to work near Northway Mall. Shinohara, a Daily News reporter, rode the bus for a week to get a better understanding of the system.

If you have time, People Mover is a great bargain

By ROSEMARY SHINOHARA
Anchorage Daily News

In the middle of the city bus, a bulky young man in a bright orange T-shirt tells the guy next to him that he just sold a bunch of sea otter coats for \$15,000 apiece. He makes them, he says, and sells furs in other cities. Maybe he's riding the People Mover because he's from out of town.

His companion, a fellow with a long, dark pony tail, tells fur man he blew 0.09 in the Chilkoot Charlie's parking lot. "I only swerved because I dropped a cigarette," he says, lamenting his lost driver's license.

It's an 8:03 a.m. trip on People Mover Bus Route 7 from Dimond, Jewel Lake and Spenard into town, and people who can't drive, or don't want to, or can't afford a private ve-

hicle, are thrown together for a few minutes or for an hour or two, depending on where they're going.

The city's bus riders are young women with babies and groceries, an old guy in a wheelchair with an American flag attached, Filipinos, Alaska Natives, kids, workingmen, people who talk to themselves and people who rope half the bus into their conversations.

I'm among them, at least for a while.

I live in Sand Lake and work in East Anchorage, near the Northway Mall. During the day, I go places to interview people and see things. Sometimes it's a dog park, or a neighborhood with a dispute, or a meeting at City Hall. I cover trans-

PEOPLE MOVER: Reporter tests system for week

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portation and urban planning. I've heard a lot of arguments about the People Mover bus system. Does it work for people? Could it be better? What would that cost? Is it worth it? I wondered whether it would work for me.

The idea was for me to leave my car in the driveway for a week and ride buses, walk and sometimes beg rides to get around during the day. I found it was possible, barely. The logistics meant planning out days with the kind of devotion a person would bring to a week-long backpacking trip. I drew an extra three hours or so for transportation into my work schedule. The \$1 route book, available on any bus, quickly became torn and disheveled, but I taped it up and carried it everywhere.

One day I wasted an afternoon trying to find out only to learn that the people I wanted to talk to weren't coming. I ended up so tired that I couldn't read a schedule straight. But still, on nearly every trip, there were remarks.

A TRIAL RUN

On a wintry Tuesday in mid-March, I did a one-day trial run. Destinations: a gym, the office, bus government downtown and back to the office and home.

A few minutes after 7 a.m., I got up and headed to the bus stop along Jewell Lake neighborhoods. When it accelerated I was amazed like a plane taking off. Bus 7 zips down 88th Avenue by Dimond High and past big apartment buildings, then runs down Jewell Lake Road to Raspberry Road, through another set of neighborhood streets and back out to the main road. Some of the runs take a few different routes along Strawberry Road and Northwest Street. All the Route 7 buses travel the length of Spennard Road and cruise up the hill by Westchester Lagoon into the center.

Bus 7 does not go directly to the World Gym on Northern Lights Boulevard but that's the heck! Going to the gym is another exercise anyway. So I got off in front of the Buckaroo Club in Spennard, intending to walk a few blocks, but almost immediately slipped and bruised my knees on ice.

Then came a solitary 30-minute ice-cream stop. I had an obstructed view of the city and Northern Lights toward the health club at C Street, with cars and trucks rushing by a couple of feet away. The sidewalk was not at best muddy but the way often the only cleared spot at the edge nearest the cars. In front of Wells Fargo Bank at C Street and Northern Lights, the walkway widened and was free of trucks, buses.

Time from house to the gym, about 38 minutes. But the 19- to 20-minute walk would be a good warm-up if sidewalks were safe. By car: 13-15 minutes.

On the March day I kept putting off the idea of riding the bus for a week straight. It just wasn't convenient. On a sunny, gusty Monday in May, the real bus trial began. By then I had figured out the closest bus stop on Dimond near my house, and I had learned and practiced an airport transfer during weekdays. I was over to Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport.

Over a week's time, I saw one person who wanted to go to airport but wasn't on the right run, and another who missed his preferred bus, and was headed to the airport even though he hadn't planned to go.

A lot of people work at or near the airport, and they've only had sporadic bus service until now. I started up again a year ago. July, Bus officials want to keep it going and give it a chance to be a permanent service.

Mostly, I was able to catch a Bus 7 run straight downtown. At the Transit Center, I transferred to bus H and Street I transferred to an East Anchorage route on the Daily News office near Northwest Mall.

Northway is rich bus territory with at least three different routes to and from downtown. One tours Mountain View in Russian Jack, another travels to downtown Fairview and a third comes in from the Muldoon Mall and heads directly downtown. It makes sense. In downtown Fairview, for example, fewer people own cars than elsewhere in town, and more depend on the bus. So they get more buses.

MONDAY

8:58 a.m. — I stroll out of my house. The 9:12 a.m. bus arrives about five minutes after the scheduled time. It's not considered late unless it's more



Sacha McDowell applies makeup while heading to her restaurant job on the 7-A bus Saturday morning in South Anchorage.

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than five minutes. Riders hunker down in their seats. There's one exception. Three people boarding at different stops greet a woman with long, straight blondish hair. "Where have you been all this time, Wendy?" asks one. Just listening to the camaraderie feels good.

Time from house to work: one hour; 25 minutes I could save a few minutes, leaving the house earlier.

By car: 20-25 minutes, depending on traffic and stop lights.

In the afternoon, wanting to find out about some new developments in downtown, I catch a ride from a housing agency executive.

My husband calls my cell phone as I'm boarding. He has arrived home and can't find our car. He calls twice. I just can't find him.

I want to hang into the search. I feel powerless.

6:05 p.m. — The dog shows up at the front door, barking to be let in. I am now 10 minutes from home, at Jewell Lake and International. But without paying much attention, I've caught one of the airport runs, and it will be nearly another half-hour before my stop. Two women and a baby get off at the domestic terminal.

6:23 p.m. — The automated woman's voice that announces major stops says "approaching Dimond and Archer. Looking. I just wasn't getting off."

Time from work to home: One hour, 30 minutes.

TUESDAY
4:41 p.m. — On Bus 8 from Muldoon to the Northway Mall to downtown, a man in gray Armys sweats sits in the front row talking to himself about how well his El Camino works.

The man next to him looks at him occasionally but doesn't speak. A guy on crutches prepares to get off. The bus makes the entire trip in less than 15 minutes. The driver has lowered the front end, as drivers do when they need a smaller stop or go down.

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lack. She's OK though. Linda is the only person I've met whose daily bus ride is as crazy long as mine, though I know others are out there.

Nearly half of all riders get where they're going on one bus, without transferring, according to a 2002 People Mover on-board survey. A fourth of the riders transfer once, and another fourth transfer two or three times to reach their destinations. These folks are hard-core users.

Linda works at the Anchorage Senior Center, south of 15th Avenue. She lives near Dimond. She takes Bus 7 to the city center and transfers once. She spends about three hours on bus lines. She and her husband, Felix, don't have a workable car. And she never learned to drive. She's been riding buses all her life.

Compared to Dallas, where she grew up, it's "a joke," Linda says. The bus just isn't run right enough.

On some routes, a bus comes just once an hour, but on busier routes, buses are every 30 to 40 minutes, at least during rush hours.

Linda's husband, who I talk to on the phone, says that where he lives in Switzerland, buses or streetcars came every two or three minutes.

The People Mover's five-year plan calls for buses to run every 30 minutes on weekdays, with carefully timed transfers and more direct routes.

Changes are being made slowly as money permits. For example, it's possible now to ride from Muldoon to Dimond Center. All routes from Northway Mall to downtown get to the transit center after the 7:45 p.m. Bus 7 has already left for the Dimond area, and home. Evening Bus 7 service is hourly, the next one is at 8:45 p.m. To top it off, all nighttime buses on Route 7 take the longer route to the airport. At best, it would take two hours and 10 minutes to get from work, across the street to the transit center, and home to my home near Dimond High.

I caught a ride with a friend.

FRIDAY
8:51 a.m. — Boarding Bus 12, the bus to the Center for the Gifted, a rider from downtown is heading to the Veteran's Medical Center to register for bus office. He's in a halfway house for a felony drug conviction but has a good work record at a restaurant, he says. Back before the drug problems, in the early 1990s, he was a People Mover bus driver.

Williams said he came home from work and found a note from another job he has had. It was him out trying to keep the time schedule up, regardless of where it was.

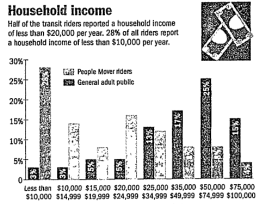
12:40 a.m. — I leave the Daily News at 11:45 and arrive at my sunny one. I'm aiming for a Dimond 7 that leaves the bus stop at 12:15. I'm frantically searching Bus 8 from Northway Mall. I think it leaves at 1:57.

12:40 a.m. — Still sitting at the bus stop. What's up? A Bus 5 comes by. The transfer riders too much through Runway Jack and Mountain View. I'd never make it to 12:15. I'm looking for a transfer. — Three buses are at the corner of Northway and Penland Parkway — two 46s going



Who rides the bus?

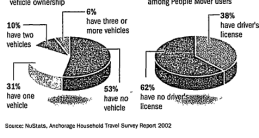
A 2002 Husqva survey provides a profile of typical Anchorage bus riders



Source: Municipality of Anchorage People Mover Riders Restructure Study

Vehicle ownership, driver's licenses holders

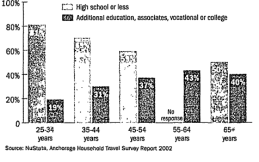
More than half (53%) of transit users' households do not own a vehicle. Only 38% of transit users have driver licenses.



Source: Husqva, Anchorage Household Travel Survey Report 2002

Education, by age

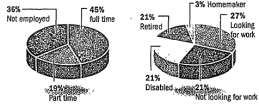
Of the 127 persons reporting more than half (67%) reported attaining no more than a high school education. Older adult riders are more highly educated than younger ages. Education attainment was measured for persons aged 25 and older.



Source: Husqva, Anchorage Household Travel Survey Report 2002

Employment

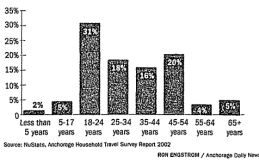
More than half (54%) of People Mover users are employed. The majority were employed full time. Out of those that did not have a job, nearly one-fourth were looking for work. One in five (21%) were disabled. Few were retired or homemakers.



Source: Husqva, Anchorage Household Travel Survey Report 2002

Age, gender

75 percent of transit users are within the ages of 18 and 34 with a stronger concentration (11%) between 18 and 2 years of age. Male users tend to be 19-24 or 45-54 years of age. The majority of female transit users are 18-24 years of age. Ten percent more women (59%) than men (45%) are transit users.



Source: Husqva, Anchorage Household Travel Survey Report 2002

ing opposite direction, and a Bus 12, which goes downtown via Fairview. No Bus 8. 12:14 p.m. — I discover I'm looking at the Saturday schedule for Bus 8, and there's no hope. 12:15 p.m. — I take the transferring Bus 45. It's five minutes late, and now I'm worried I'm going to miss the 1:15 Bus 7 to get home. What a nightmare. The Bus 45 driver tells me how to make it: Don't ride all the way to the transit center. Get off on C Street and transfer. Bus 7 there after it leaves the center. I made it with only 30 seconds to spare. Door to door: two hours, 12 minutes. Some half-day off.

PEOPLE MOVER: *The bus system is a bargain, but it's not for everybody*

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more a month.

The People Mover counts 12,000 boarders a day, with many of them being repeats. The routes are accessible to about two-thirds of the households in the Anchorage Bowl, plus some in Eagle River, says a transportation planner. Buses take people to hospitals, recreation centers, shopping and work. Some kids ride to or from school.

But the bus system would not work for me.

It's set up with downtown as the hub for nearly all the routes. So you almost always have to go to the city center to get anywhere else. That's supposed to change over time, with other hubs, like Muldoon and Dimond, getting more service and better-timed transfers.

In the meantime, there's no way to get from the Dimond-Sand Lake area to Bragaw and DeBarr in less than an hour on the bus, which kills it.

If I were to start over with a

new house, I'd find a place closer to my job. Then I'd be able to ride a bus when I don't need to go places during the day. In fact, when I first moved to southwest Anchorage, my office was in the same part of town. Later, the job moved and I didn't.

Transportation planners are figuring out this summer what role the bus system will play here over the next two decades. For a greater percentage of people to ride the bus, we need to live more densely in condos or

apartment buildings. Anchorage's comprehensive plan recommends just that — that corridors of transit-friendly neighborhoods be created, to maintain a strong bus system.

But there's still the money question. Fares just don't yield enough cash to pay operating costs. Bus systems need subsidies. Cities Outside dedicate money from all kinds of taxes — on payroll, gasoline, motor vehicles, property and sales of goods — to transit. People Mover fund-

ing comes from the city's general fund, from fares and from grants. You have to wonder if Anchorage wants a faster, better bus system badly enough to

pay for it.

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