

Budget sends wrong signals about buses

By JEDEDIAH R. SMITH, CRISSY DITMORE and DAVID LEVY

Responsible homeowners maintain their property, mow the lawn, fix things that are broken and shovel the snow. Responsible car owners check and change the oil in the car. As a municipality, we maintain our sidewalks and streets and schools. You take care of the things you have. For most of us, this is a value instilled in us by our parents or grandparents. We also need to consider our responsibilities and take care of another city asset: our transit system.

Mayor Dan Sullivan has proposed a municipal budget that actually increases funding to People Mover. The problem is, that increase isn't enough to even maintain the current level of service and the People Mover is being forced to consider cutting some early morning and late evening routes.

Coupling a transit fare increase with service cuts to routes sends the wrong message. It sends a message to riders and Anchorage residents that the mayor and the Assembly do not value public transportation enough to continue giving Anchorage residents a viable option for getting to work. It sends a message that this is a community asset that we no longer value and thus will allow to continue to languish.

Last year, most of the service from Eagle River was eliminated. That translated to nearly 35,000 passenger rides per year.



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Not surprisingly, Eagle River voters overwhelmingly rejected last spring's municipal bond proposition that would have allowed the People Mover to capture more federal revenue for more buses.

Currently, the best buses run every half hour. Many buses only run once an hour. A week ago, buses were running late, as might be expected after a heavy snowfall.

At the corner of Minnesota and Northern Lights that evening, two people waited in the falling snow for the No. 36 bus. They had been there for 45 minutes. The bus was already more than a half hour late. As one of them reached for a phone to call a cab, the bus pulled up to the corner. With a look that signaled both relief and incredulity, one of the young men at the stop, a baker at the nearby grocery store, said, "I could have worked for another hour."

Clearly there was a real problem: Anchorage doesn't have a robust system that is able to catch up and avoid such de-

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lays. Forty-five minutes, in the middle of a winter snowstorm, is too long to be waiting for the bus in this city. It is a health and safety issue but it is also an economic issue. How much productivity was lost that day? And how much might have been avoided if we had a reliable bus system that ran without delays? We've let our system fall into such neglect that it barely meets the needs of the people who need it most.

This year, it is a route here, a route there. These cuts have the cumulative impact that translates to a service that is barely useful. Anchorage doesn't need to look like Portland. We don't need a gold-plated transit system. But we need to have options. Restricting mobility in Anchorage to those with automobiles is essentially the restriction of freedom.

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