

Budget and buses

Assembly keeps People Mover mostly as is, and that's good

Mayor Dan Sullivan said Wednesday he hasn't ruled out vetoing parts of the 2011 city operating budget passed in an 11-0 Assembly vote Tuesday night.

We hope the mayor, who got most all of what he wanted in and out of the budget, cuts sparingly.

In particular, we hope he sees the wisdom of maintaining most of the People Mover bus service, with no increase in fares and no additional cuts in early and late runs on most routes. One route, the 45G, will go.

Public transportation, a key part of commerce and the working world that's taken for granted in other cities, has often been a contentious issue here.

User fees don't cover all the costs — that's the case with most public transit systems. But Anchorage gains in other ways, not least by the ability of poorer residents to get to work, school, shopping and medical appointments. That helps individuals and the city's economy.



BOB HALLINEN / Daily News archive 2010

Add the reduction in wear and tear on roads, less traffic, less pollution and the plain efficiency of moving more people with less fuel consumption, and what you have is an investment in a healthier, more prosperous city.

And this is a hold-the-line investment. The Assembly didn't add any service, nor did it restore routes cut

earlier this year. The Assembly simply kept fares at current levels, prevented more cuts and, in cooperation with the mayor, maintained special services for senior and disabled residents.

City transit director Jody Karez said that to meet the mayor's budget guidelines, her staff looked for the most painless ways to cut costs — for example, recently purchased new buses allow a smaller inventory of spare parts. When that wasn't enough, she looked for service

cuts that would have the least impact. She did her job.

But she also said those cut routes weren't bare of riders — a count found about 10-12 riders on those routes, sometimes more. And she said most of those riders could catch buses running from a half-hour to an hour earlier or later.

In some cases, riders could take the changes in stride. But in others, as Assemblyman Patrick Flynn pointed out, those changes can make the difference between being able to get to work on time or not, or making the workday longer and family obligations tougher to meet. That's why he sponsored the amendments to keep those buses running. Both business owners and their employees who depend on the bus stand to gain.

The People Mover amendments approved Tuesday went beyond the mayor's agreement, but at \$250,000 they're modest in cost and that cost is covered by the new tobacco tax. That fits the bill of "pay as you go," without raising property taxes to do so.

Anchorage has long been built and maintained for private vehicles. When voters refuse to pass any other bonds, road bonds are still a safe bet for passage. Public transportation has often been treated as a poor relation.

But the People Mover makes sense, especially given its increased ridership in recent years. As Anchorage continues to grow, the need for public transportation and its benefits will grow with it. You can't build a smart, well-used public transportation system by continually cutting it.

What the Assembly has done here is maintain most of what we have for bus riders — and done it within the bounds of the mayor's determination to tax well below the legal cap. No need to quarrel.

What the Assembly has done here is simply maintain most of what we have for bus riders.

BOTTOM LINE: Mayor should allow People Mover amendments to stand.