

Anchorage bus users could see fewer routes, shorter waits

One of two proposals from the Portland-based consultant would virtually eliminate service south of Tudor Road.

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Alaska Dispatch News

Anchorage transit authorities unveiled proposals Thursday to dramatically restructure the public bus system in favor of fewer routes but shorter waiting times, tailored to better serve the sections of the city where the most people live and work.

The proposals come after months of analysis and public meetings aimed at reimagining public transit in Anchorage. Earlier this year, People Mover, the city bus agency, commissioned a Portland-based consultant to write a blunt assessment of its network.

The report concluded that Anchorage's existing public bus system is paralyzed by long waits, light weekend service, circuitous routes and sprawling coverage that too often sees buses with just one or two passengers.

Two proposals, released Thursday on the transit agency's website as interactive maps, seek to alter that balance and invigorate a network that's slumped for years.

The more dramatic of the two proposals would almost entirely eliminate bus service south of Tudor Road. It adds much more frequent service between the universities, health centers, Midtown, East Anchorage and downtown.

A second, scaled-back proposal would retain some service to South Anchorage but still concentrate far more on bustling corridors in and around downtown, Midtown and East Anchorage.

Both scenarios would cut Route 102 to Chugiak-Eagle River, though that won't affect Eagle River Connect, a city-run van transit service between Eagle River and Muldoon, said city transit planner Bart Rudolph.

Yet buses would come far more frequently under the proposals to the routes that remain. Several routes would offer 15-minute waits, unheard of in today's system.

Right now, only Route 45 in Mountain View

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PEOPLE MOVER: Proposed changes mean riders would have to walk farther

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offers as little as a 20-minute wait in the middle of the day. All the other routes currently have at least a 30-minute wait. Most buses only come once an hour.

The proposed design changes mean that an Anchorage rider would have to walk farther to get to a bus stop.

But once there, the wait will be short, Rudolph said. He said the goal is to get as many people on a bus as possible while bus routes are operating, a business decision also aimed at delivering a more functional network.

The changes reflect a trade-off that anchored the discussions in public meetings.

More ridership, or more coverage? Without spending money for more bus drivers (the system has 96 now) and buses on the road (currently 43 vehicles, at peak hours), it isn't possible to have frequent service that covers the entire city, according to the report by the Portland-based consultant, Jarrett Walker and Associates.

Anchorage has "moderate" ridership compared to other mid-sized cities — higher than Boise, Idaho, but lower than Eugene, Oregon — but ridership has dwindled since peaking in 2008, even as the city has grown.

In public meetings and survey responses, residents were clear about wanting short waits

and service in busy places, as opposed to short walks and less pollution, according to the report. More than 750 people responded to an online survey, which was available in five different languages.

Overwhelmingly, those surveyed agreed the quality of Anchorage transit is too low.

A series of public meetings has been set on the proposed redesigns. The first will be held in the Muldoon Public Library on Nov. 15, followed by open houses and discussions in Eagle River, South Anchorage, Mountain View and downtown.

"We heard what you want; here's what it looks like," Rudolph said of the two redesign

concepts.

Now, he said, the question is, "Did we get it right?"

Jarrett Walker and Associates was paid about \$100,000 to evaluate the transit system, gather data and create the maps illustrating possible overhauls.

Rudolph said the transit agency is on track to make a final decision by the end of January.

Find interactive maps and more information online at the "Anchorage Talks Transit" page on the city website.

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