

Breaking trail

People Mover plows way for riders

The People Mover is driving hard to make Anchorage a better winter city, one that doesn't look surprised at the sight of snow.

Building on the success of a program to keep snow plowed at 201 city bus stops this past winter, the People Mover has a plan to plow miles of sidewalks and trails that lead to those stops, so that people who ride the buses can walk to the stops without slogging through snow or sliding over berms.

Public transportation director Bob Kniefel says the city and state are working out an agreement that will provide \$700,000 in federal money to buy and maintain snowblow-

ing equipment needed for trail and walk work. Mr. Kniefel says the money will last at least two years and might stretch over three if we have winters like the one just ending.

The trail work would complement a city-let contract for \$25,000 that keeps 201 stops plowed on the busiest routes and on routes with the highest number of wheelchair users and other disabled bus riders. That contract began this past winter and kept stops clear on long stretches of Northern Lights Boulevard, Muldoon and Tudor roads, Bragaw Street, Lake Otis Parkway and other heavily traveled routes.

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Mr. Kniefel says the only complaints he heard were from people who wished stops in other parts of town were plowed as well.

He says the city will apply lessons learned from the first year to rework the contract for this year. For example, not only will stops be plowed, but new terms likely will call for better snow disposal, so that stops aren't bermed in.

There's \$25,000 in the People Mover budget to keep the stop-plowing program going until the end of the year, so the first months of next winter are covered. As Mr. Kniefel says, the combination of walk-clearing by city crews along the plowed bus-stop routes will make a nice package. Snow removal at bus stops and walks is as basic a service to bus riders and pedestrians as clear roads are to those driving their own vehicles. Once the agreement with the state is settled, the Anchorage Assembly should give the package swift approval.

But it's a package that covers only about 14 percent of the city's bus stops. Youngsters from the McLaughlin Youth Center take care of the 45 sheltered bus stops in town. Volunteers in the Adopt-A-Stop program also have picked up a small but important part of the system, doing yeoman's work to clear snow from stops that otherwise would be either neglected or bermed to uselessness. Two of the city's hospitals, Providence Alaska Medical Center and Alaska Regional, have taken responsibility for the stops used by patients and their families and visitors.

About 40 individuals and businesses cleared 60 to 70 bus stops this past winter. George Moore, manager of Cream Puff Auto's Muldoon dealership, turned a housekeeping problem into a service when he adopted the stop in front of his car lot at Muldoon and Boundary. He said the stop tended to fill up with fast-food wrappers and other trash. People Mover provided a trash barrel and bags, and Mr. Moore saw to it the barrel was emptied and the stop kept clean.

"It snowballed from there," he said. He regularly plows the stop and also clears a one-block stretch of sidewalk in front of the car lot. So the work benefits both his business and the people who catch the bus in front of it. Mr. Moore, a member of the Muldoon Community Council, plans to keep the stop adopted "as long as I'm working at Cream Puff."

Mr. Kniefel and many bus riders, including parents with young children, old people and the disabled count on that kind of volunteer work from their neighbors to make up for what the city, state or federal money doesn't cover.

Unless this April proves particularly cruel, bus riders shouldn't have to do much more slogging or walking on the edge of traffic until October. Meanwhile, some volunteers and the People Mover seem to understand that a winter city isn't judged only by its top-end amenities, but also by how it treats its poorer citizens in the cold. Crossing winter on foot is a little tougher than crossing winter in a sport-utility vehicle.

Anyone who has relied on the bus for winter transportation in Anchorage knows the People Mover and a few good volunteers are on the right track. Those who have never relied on the bus need only use a little imagination, or just recognize that the young mother with youngsters in tow at a snowbound stop is a neighbor. This isn't frivolous spending. Come December, those cleared, snow-bordered walks will look good in the glow of the City of Lights.