



One of 32 new low-floor buses is displayed by People Mover on Thursday afternoon at the Downtown Transit Center as a 2-year-old bus in service turns the corner.

# City bus fleet fully accessible

New vehicles benefit the disabled

By ELIZABETH MANNING  
Daily News reporter

No dignitaries were present at Thursday's dedication of a fleet of new city buses. The scissors were missing too.

Instead, a handicapped ramp cut the red ribbon tied across a bus door. It opened slowly like a hinge and snapped the ribbon as it lowered to the curb.

Everyone clapped. But no one seemed more pleased than Darryl Nelson, an avid bus rider with cerebral palsy. For Nelson and other disabled riders, the city's purchase of 32 new buses means every bus in Anchorage is now equipped for the handicapped.

"This gives us the ability to get out and get around by ourselves," Nelson said.

The buses have ramps for people who use walkers or



## People Mover

### Facts

- Number of buses in fleet: 50
- Number of buses running at peak hours: 42
- This year's purchase: 32 buses
- Cost: \$8.6 million
- Last major purchase: 18 buses in 1995
- Cost: \$4.7 million
- What happens to the old buses: Four will go to Fairbanks; the rest will be auctioned off in Anchorage
- Average number of people who use People Mover daily: 6,000
- Average number of daily rides: 11,000
- Standard rate: \$1 one-way, 10 cents extra for transfer
- Ridership increase: About 2 percent a year for the last several years

Please see Page B-2, BUSES

Source: People Mover

RON ENGSTROM / Anchorage Daily News

# BUSES: Improving stops is next on list

Continued from Page B-1

wheelchairs. They also kneel, which is bus-speak for tipping one side closer to the curb to make it easier for people to board.

To kneel a bus, the driver pushes a button that releases air from one side of an air bag beneath the bus. A compressor immediately refills the bag.

The new buses also have bike racks that will remain in place year-round. In the front seating section, two spots can lock in wheelchairs to prevent them from rolling around.

The new fleet replaces 32 older buses at a cost of \$8.6 million. The federal government paid for 91 percent of the purchase, while the state pitched in the remainder.

Every bus in Anchorage is now less than 5 years old. The city bought the remaining 18 buses in its fleet in 1995 for \$4.7 million. About 6,000 people ride the bus daily.

Anchorage also provides a service, called AnchorRIDES for the disabled and elderly, but people who use that service must typically call to

plan a ride. City officials hope more disabled and elderly people will ride on People Mover buses.

Nelson said he would rather take People Mover because it allows him to be spontaneous. But before disabled people can get full use of the bus system, the city will need to improve access around the bus stops, he said.

Nelson hopes more businesses will someday cooperate with the city to allow bus stops in front of their stores.

Bob Kniefel, People Mover's director, acknowledges the problem. Anchorage has about 1,400 bus stops, he said. The city improves about 50 to 70 bus stops a year.

Nelson said he knows it will take time. He and his mother, who also uses a wheelchair because she has rheumatoid arthritis, are just happy about the new buses.

"We've been behind all the other states, and now we're ahead of them," Bonnie Nelson said. Nelson is president of nonprofit Alpine Alternatives, an advocacy group for the handicapped that plans to offer People Mover tours to

disabled people.

Fewer than 10 percent of cities have bus fleets that are entirely accessible to the disabled, Kniefel said. The new buses also emit cleaner exhaust and burn less fuel than the older buses.

Other riders Thursday appreciated the new buses, which like the fleet's 3-year-old buses have automated voice systems and visual displays announcing each stop.

"It's comfortable," said Oleana Stepanoff, who was riding from Mountain View to downtown. "And this tells you where you're stopping. At least you know where to get off."

Several riders said they have cars but prefer to take the bus. Even if the bus doesn't come as often as they would hope, people said they enjoy the view. And the drivers are friendly, some people said.

"I ride at least once a day," said Pete Ritchie, a retired mechanic. "I own a car. But this is cheaper, and I see a lot of friends on the bus."

□ Reporter Elizabeth Manning can be reached at [emanning@adn.com](mailto:emanning@adn.com).