

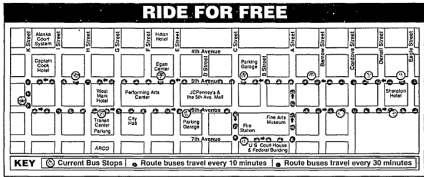
Downtown's shoppers get free bus ride

By ALYSON PYTTE

Daily News business reporter

People Mover buses will be shuttling tourists and shoppers around the Anchorage downtown for free this summer, and merchants are hoping the test run will lead to a permanent free-fare zone.

The program is called the Downtown Anchorage Short Hop — DASH — and it will start June 3. The buses that make 300 or so passes through downtown will have a special logo displayed and eight free seats for people who are taking short trips within



KEVIN POWELL / Anchorage Daily News

the zone boundaries.

The Downtown Anchorage Association, a group of downtown businesses, will help launch the program next month with bro-

chures and a promotional bus ride. "We just hope that it gets people moving around

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downtown more," said Frankie Whitman, executive director of the association.

Parking hassles downtown have driven many shoppers to the outlying malls, and downtown businesses are hoping the free bus rides will help them recapture some of those lost riches.

Forest J. Paulson, the general manager of the Sheraton Anchorage Hotel, said he was sold on the idea when visiting Denver, which has a similar system. "What I saw were tourists and people in town able to circulate around and build up the economy," he said. "Those people were going to those stores and they were spending money."

In Anchorage, tourists will most likely use the buses in summer months to get from their hotels to downtown shops and restau-

rants.

If the free-fare zone continues in the winter, downtown employees will probably fill the seats. "In the wintertime, when the conditions get nasty — the winds are whipping and the sidewalks are covered with snow and ice — it would be really easy for them to make a quick walk over to a bus stop and take a bus down to the Fifth Avenue mall," said Allen Kemplen, special projects coordinator for the Transit Department.

Whitman said the downtown association had been pushing for the free bus service for years. But when the Transit Department made its first proposal last year, many merchants complained about the paperwork. Downtown businesses would have had to distribute discount coupons.

So the Transit Department looked into

free-fare zones in other areas, including similar-sized cities such as Dayton, Ohio. They found the city could have the free-fare zones without any extra cost, because ridership is increased outside the zones.

Other cities have had problems, however, particular with teen-agers and indigents riding for free outside the zone, Kemplen said. He said the three-month trial period would indicate whether serious abuses are likely in Anchorage.

It will also give the Transit Department an idea of whether enough people will ride the buses to make the free-fare zone worthwhile.

If there are problems, Kemplen said, the department may discontinue the program at the end of the summer or begin security spot checks to discourage stowaways.