

Ride People Mover, it's free

Winter bus program aims to ease city's air pollution

By **LARRY CAMPBELL**

Daily News reporter

Starting this week, a ride on the city bus is free. That's right — just get on, sit down, go where you want to go.

A \$450,000 federal Department of Transportation grant is being used to pay for the free service for the next three months. The grant is part of a combined effort by the city Department of Health and Human Services and the state Department of Environmental Conservation to fight Anchorage wintertime air pollution, which the city has struggled with for years.

People Mover director Bob Kniefel

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said public transit officials have been chasing the grant for a couple of years. The Anchorage Assembly approved accepting the grant last week, and the free service began Monday.

Free buses weren't news to the estimated 11,000 residents who ride the bus on a regular basis. The free service has been advertised for weeks on the buses themselves and in fliers at

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the bus transit center downtown.

"I ride the bus two or three times a day, so this is pretty cool," said regular rider Jerry Tiulana. "Saves me a lot of money."

Rides usually cost \$1 for adults, 50 cents for children and 25 cents for senior citizens and people with disabilities. Monthly passes are \$30 for adults, \$15 for kids.

"This is a good idea," said another rider, Sharon Wiggins. "I'll be riding more, at least for the next three months."

The grant is aimed specifically at subsidizing existing routes, meaning it couldn't be used to reinstate the Hillside routes that People Mover ended recently because of budget cuts, Kniefel said.

Transit officials are expecting a 20 percent to 40 percent increase in ridership during the free fare period, Kniefel said. And studies in other cities have suggested that, of those new riders, 20 percent to 40 percent of them may stay with the bus system when fees are reinstated, he said.

The free fares last through Jan. 31.

The effort is meant to help Anchorage comply with federal air quality standards. The past two years have been good; city air quality officials said An-

chorage carbon monoxide levels didn't exceed the federal limit of 9 parts per million at all in 1997 and only on one day in 1998. So far, the level's been broken only one day this year.

That's far below 1983, for example, when the city's CO levels exceeded the federal limit 52 times. Improved vehicle emissions technology in cars built after 1982 helped. The 1985 motor vehicle inspection and maintenance program helped more.

Now, local air quality efforts are being concentrated in neighborhoods. Coinciding with free bus service, city and state health officials have mounted a media campaign this month urging drivers to use some type of engine heaters on their cars.

A study conducted by the city last year showed that drivers allow an average of 12 minutes for their cars and trucks to warm up on cold mornings. That start-up and warm-up time was causing an estimated 25 percent of all CO emissions.

"We really want people to plug in," said Anne Schlapia of the city's Air Quality Section.

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BUS-RIDING TIPS

If you've never set foot on the People Mover before, how do you ride this bus?

*** GET A MAP:** A route map can help you figure out how close one of the system's 17 routes comes to you. Then you know what schedule to check. Take some time to study the arrival and departure times. Match landmarks in the time table to the map. They're available at the bus transit center, downtown at Sixth Avenue between G and H streets, and at the Dimond Center transit station, or on any bus.

*** CALL:** If you can't figure out the map or the schedules, call 343-6543. An automated answer system should give you what you need, even a live human being if the recorded messages aren't helping.

*** OTHER OPTIONS:** If there isn't a convenient bus, there are options. People Mover's Share-A-Ride program offers a car pool coordination service and a van pool. Car pooling through the program has matched up more than 1,000 riders in about 500 pools. The van pool involves a group of people getting together with one trained as the driver. People Mover provides the van, the riders pay for the trip. Last year the program served more than 150 people riding 11 vans.

If these methods still don't meet your needs, call anyway. Riders with special needs may qualify for the AnchorRIDES door-to-door service.

*** ON THE NET:** If you've got Internet access, go to www.peoplesmover.org. You'll find route maps, a schedule calculator, descriptions of People Mover services and ability to sign up for the Share-A-Ride program on-line.