

To evacuate Anchorage, we'd need more buses, places to go

When I read last week that the city government was planning to evacuate Anchorage on People Mover buses if the Y2K bug hits in a big way, I was skeptical.

"They'll never get people to ride the People Mover," I told my colleagues. "If they could, we'd have a much bigger and better bus system."

You'd need a much bigger bus system to do the job. The city has 50 passenger buses that can carry 39 passengers each. Even if a lot of us stood, this would be one of the slowest evacuations in history. Say you wanted to take everyone to Wasilla. At the fleet's capacity of 2,000 people per trip, it'd take 150 trips. Figure three hours per round trip, what with loading, unloading and handing out transfers. That's 450 hours, about 19 days. So if you started evacuating on New Year's Eve, many



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of your evacuees would still be in Anchorage on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. And when all of the moving was done, everybody would be in Wasilla. I'd rather take my chances here.

Fortunately, the city has people who can do the math.

"I don't think there was ever any thought we were going to move 250,000 people, or whatever, with 50 buses," said Bob Kniefel, the city's transit director.

Instead, the city's buses will be on standby. If the Y2K bug shuts off the heat in, say, the Pioneers' Home, the buses will be available to take them somewhere warm.

"That's the kind of thing we're talking about," Kniefel said.

Being ready to do that is no big deal, Kniefel said. There are enough transit workers on at that time of night to handle any small cross-town evacuations that might be necessary. Like every other government employee involved in Y2K planning, Kniefel says that it's only reasonable to be prepared.

"We all have these concerns about what's going to happen that night," he said. "There

are going to be some bubbles out there."

Let's hope that's all there is. As Kniefel pointed out, an evacuation plan has other problems besides not enough buses.

"I mean, where are we going to take them?" he said. "Palmer?"

It's a good question. This is Alaska. It will be winter. There are some places you just wouldn't want to go.

"They're going to have to shoot their way into my house," one of my colleagues said, "if they're going to try to load me onto a bus for Glennallen on January 1."

The fact is, if we were going to evacuate Anchorage, some people would have to go to Glennallen. And every place else in Alaska, including places with no plumbing, no pizza and no Costco. At last count, there were as many people living in Anchorage as in the rest of Alaska. And what else is close? The Yukon? Good luck. If anything, it's colder there than it is here.

So there would be some long trips involved, to some pretty iffy places. Talk about hardship. I'm thinking the only way the trip to Tok would be tolerable is if you filled your bus

with very good friends. And you stopped to loot a liquor store on the way out of town.

In fact, another colleague said, about the only advantage of using the People Movers is that they have bike racks on the front. That way, when you get to Tok, you can take your bike off the bus and just keep going.

South, I presume. If you go north from Tok, you'll end up in Fairbanks. In January. Heat or no heat, you'd be warmer here.

The truth is no different than it was in the 1950s, when a big part of the civil defense plan for dealing with nuclear war was to evacuate the cities. There's no way to do that and no place to go. If things go gunnysack New Year's Eve, we'll just have to make do. Throw on an extra pair of Carhartts, slap duct tape over the worst air leaks and fire up the Coleman stove. Don't worry. It'll be a new millennium, but we'll be the same old Alaskans.

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