

Fairbanks Daily News-Miner

Ride the bus for free again this winter

By TIM MOWRY
Staff Writer

Thursday, November 03, 2005 - The free ride is coming to an end for borough residents.

The Fairbanks North Star Borough began offering free bus rides on Tuesday in its continuing effort to improve air quality in the borough, but the free rider program will likely end after this winter.

"It will be the last year unless we can come up with another funding source," said Glenn Miller, director of the borough transportation department.

This is the sixth year the borough is offering free bus rides from Nov. 1 to March 31 to cut down on vehicle emissions to improve air quality. All six years have been funded with federal grants.

"It's a program that's been extremely popular with the public," said Miller, citing statistics that show bus ridership nearly doubling during the free-rider program.

Warren Terrance, a 54-year-old Fairbanks construction worker, is one of many people who take advantage of the free rides. Normally, Terrance pays \$3 a day to ride the bus. At \$15 a week for five months, that translates to a savings of \$300 over the winter.

"It's real nice," said Terrance, standing outside the makeshift downtown bus station in the Sadler's parking lot on Cushman Street on Wednesday waiting for the 4:15 p.m. Yellow Line to arrive for a ride home to Jillian Square.

A regular bus rider, Terrance has never driven a car and he has no urge to start now, especially when he accompanies his wife to the gas station when she fills up their car at \$40 a clip.

The first day the free rides went into effect, Terrance noticed more riders.

"Since yesterday it's been crowded," he said.

Borough bus driver Staci Williams also noticed a lot of new faces on the bus starting Tuesday.

"It picks up the day (free rides) goes into effect," said Williams, who has been driving bus for 12 1/2 years. "I love it. I get more people to talk to."

The current three-year grant from the Environmental Protection Agency provided the borough with \$170,000 a year, which translates to 115,000 free rides a year, said Jim Conner, the borough's acting transportation administrator.

When the borough began the program in 1999 with a congestion, mitigation and air quality grant, it was aimed at improving air quality and increasing ridership on borough buses by getting residents to use the transit system instead of driving their cars.

Coincidentally, the borough has not exceeded the EPA's carbon monoxide levels since the free-rider program started in 1999, but Conner said that's not necessarily due to more people riding buses instead of driving cars.

"I'd say it's helped but I wouldn't make that statement," he said. "It's hard to say what impact it has had."

The borough has a fleet of nine buses that cover most of the Fairbanks residential area, from Chena Pump Road to downtown to Wal-Mart, as well as North Pole. Last year, borough buses logged almost 2 million miles. The borough is planning to purchase 10 new buses in the next year, Miller said.

The borough is also in the process of reworking its route schedule to accommodate changing traffic patterns and new construction on the west and east ends of town.

The new entrance to the University of Alaska Fairbanks on Thompson Drive off Geist Road, which features a roundabout, has resulted in a longer route on the west side of town.

"Changes at the university have forced us to consider our routes there," said Conner. "It takes more time now than we have scheduled."

The new construction on the Old Steese Highway and Johansen Expressway on the east side of town, meanwhile, has created a bigger demand for service in that area.

"People want more service there and we're trying to figure out ways to service that area," Miller said.

The borough has already held one public meeting at the university to discuss route changes. Another meeting is scheduled on Nov. 16 at 6 p.m. in the Chizmar Conference Room at the borough building, said Conner.

The borough is also planning to open a new bus station on Cushman Street next spring. Construction on the \$2 million "transit park," as borough officials are calling it, is slated to be completed in February, Miller said.

In the meantime, the borough has set up a temporary station across the street in the Sadler's parking lot using an ATCO unit. It's not ideal, Conner said, but it works.

"We don't like being where we are, but Sadler's has been wonderful about loaning us their parking lot," said Conner.

Borough officials have not noticed a jump in ridership as the result of rising fuel costs, Miller said.

Like the air quality issue, Miller said it's a matter of educating the public on the benefit and ease of riding the bus.

"If someone knows a bus is in their area and they can utilize bus, then maybe they'll use it," he said.

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