



Anchorage

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Rail commute to Anchorage still a ways off

Rindi White | June 2, 2009

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Slideshow: Rail commute to Anchorage still a ways off

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Neal Fried

Erik Hill / Anchorage Daily News

WASILLA -- Commuters, brace yourselves. The vision of riding to work on a rail car, sipping a latte and catching up on work may still be a few years off.

Alaska Railroad officials said last week they may offer rail service deals this winter between Wasilla and Girdwood using a new self-propelled rail car built by the U.S. Forest Service and the Alaska Railroad for summer use in Chugach State Park.

But that service, which would also stop in Anchorage, will be aimed at ski hounds looking for an occasional trip south, not the daily workers toiling back and forth on the Glenn Highway.

Railroad officials said it's too early to talk about how often that train would run or what a trip would cost.

The self-propelled rail car has been hailed by railroad officials as the ideal machine for carrying commuter rail passengers.

Alaska Railroad strategic planning director Bruce Carr said the prospect of commuter rail is closer with its arrival.

But Carr said commuter rail won't happen this year for three basic reasons: There would be too many passengers, too few seats and, ultimately, not enough public transit options in Anchorage to get passengers to their jobs on time.

The new Chugach Explorer DMU, or diesel multiple-unit car holds 112 passengers.

A year ago, state economist Neal Fried estimated about 11,000 Valley residents commute daily into the city, not including military and federal workers.

That would mean the train would carry only 1 percent of the people commuting right now. Carr said that's too few to legitimately test demand for commuter rail.

He added that the public transit system in Anchorage isn't ready to carry commuters from the Ship Creek railroad depot to their jobs. Bus routes and scheduling details must all be planned out beforehand.

Money is also a factor. Brad Sworts, transportation planner at the Mat-Su Borough, said borough and railroad employees have looked into finding federal funds to underwrite a two- or three-month commuter rail test project.

Carr said federal funding is available for up to a three-year test project.

But he said the railroad isn't ready to apply for such funding yet because passenger cars and bus routes must be in place first.

Money comes into play in other ways, too. Former Mat-Su and Anchorage mayors Curt Menard and Mark Begich agreed last year to develop a regional transit authority that would oversee public transit issues between the two municipalities.

The authority would oversee commuter rail, the Mat-Su ferry and public bus and van service.

It would also oversee finances, raise money and seek grants to operate the transit services.

But the authority doesn't exist yet. A state bill creating it failed to pass this year.

Sworts said the borough will lobby for its passage during the 2010 legislative session. Even then, borough planning director Mark Mayo said there's a lot to be done before commuter rail cars will begin running.

"Commuter rail is something that is in the future, perhaps, but one of the tasks the RTA (transit authority) is going to have to do is improve the distribution systems on both ends. We're sort of trying to get a head start on that by expanding the vanpool system," Mayo said.

The borough recently got four new share-a-ride vans, two to carry commuters to work in Anchorage and two to carry workers between homes and jobs in the Valley.

Sworts said funding for 26 more multiple-passenger vans may be available through the federal economic stimulus funding package.

He said the borough also got \$900,000 in federal money to build a new park-and-ride parking lot near the intersection of Seward Meridian Parkway and the Parks Highway.

At least some of the infrastructure for commuter rail is already in place. A \$5.3 million South Palmer park-and-ride rail station that abuts the existing railroad tracks was built in 2004, and Wasilla has \$1.33 million in state and federal funds to build a similar train station near its city airport.

Even without a commuter train, Carr said the possible ski train between Wasilla, Anchorage, and Girdwood could provide useful information for future commuter travel.

"Our intention would be to find out what is the actual running time between Anchorage and Wasilla," Carr said.

"Let's go test it. And while we're testing it, let's put some people on the car and take them someplace that makes sense."

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