

Anchorage's new bus route connecting Downtown to Dimond will bring back service to Loussac Library and the Old Seward Highway - Route 85 comes online Sept. 20 and travels from downtown to the Dimond Transit Center, winding through parts of West Anchorage and along the Old Seward Highway, with a stop at Loussac Library.

Anchorage is getting a new bus route with direct service to the Loussac Library — its first new route since a drastic shift in Anchorage's bus system four years ago that cut some routes and increased service frequency to other areas.

People Mover's new Route 85 is scheduled to come online Sept. 20 and will run from City Hall in downtown to the Dimond Transit Center, traveling along parts of the Old Seward Highway and West Anchorage, along 36th Avenue, Wisconsin Street and Northern Lights Boulevard, with a stop at the Loussac Library.

In 2017, People Mover's redesign refocused the city's declining transit service, and in 2019 its annual ridership grew for the first time in a decade, said Bart Rudolph, city transit planner and public transportation communications manager.

But the redesign also left the Loussac Library and parts of Old Seward Highway without direct bus service. The nearest stop to the Loussac is currently a quarter-mile away, a distance that can be difficult to navigate for riders with mobility issues.

"That was really hard for folks. The library is such a central location, especially for a lot of people that ride the bus," said Chelsea Ward-Waller, a member of the city's Public Transit Advisory Board.

The new route is a combination of two routes the city cut: Route 60 on Old Seward and Route 36 in West Anchorage, Rudolph said.

Route 85 takes “the best of both” to form the new route, he said.

“It’s intended to really allow people in West Anchorage and Old Seward to access the transit system if they need it — and the library — but this isn’t going to be one of our highest ridership routes,” Rudolph said.

For Assembly member Felix Rivera, who represents Midtown, a neighborhood that much of Route 85 will service, the implementation of the new route is a victory that has been a long time in the making.

Rivera said that the people who advocated for the new route were those who wanted direct service to the city’s main library and people who worked on or near Old Seward Highway.

“When the route was cut, basically, workers had to find another way. They either had to walk to the next nearest bus stop — which could have been a mile or more to get the next nearest bus route — or they had to start shelling out more money in other modes of transportation,” Rivera said.

Following the transit redesign, the city held a year-long planning effort, which developed the Transit on the Move 2020 Plan, Rudolph said. It gathered ideas from the public for new routes, and then community members voted for one. Route 85 received the most votes.

After that, “the community really went to the Assembly meetings, and kind of rallied with one voice for this one route,” Rudolph said.

The 2017 transit system redesign was just the first step in an effort to improve the city’s system, Rudolph said, and 2019’s increased ridership numbers show it worked: The overall average weekday ridership increased 5.4% from 2018, meaning that on average, about 600 more trips were taken every weekday.

The city’s 2020 transit plan contains other possible routes for the future. But in 2020, the pandemic slashed the city’s ridership by 42%.

“So far, in 2021, ridership continues to hover around the same spot, down 44% from 2019,” Rudolph said.

Rudolph attributed People Mover’s ridership loss to multiple factors, including emergency orders, rider limits, social distancing and teleworking.

Route 85 was originally slated to begin running in August of 2020, but the coronavirus pandemic and complications with development at the city’s downtown transit center delayed its implementation by a year, he said.

The department projects the annual operating cost for Route 85 will be between \$2.5 and \$3

million, according to Rudolph. For the next three years, a federal grant covers 90% of the cost, and the city pays the rest, Rudolph said.

After that, the city will need to find funding for the route, whether through other grants and opportunities or the city's budget, Rivera said.

The new route requires 11 additional bus operators and 70 new stops, Rudolph said.

Riders board a People Mover bus at the Dimond Transit Center on Monday, August 16, 2021.
(Bill Roth / ADN)

A few other changes to the transit system are coming on Sept. 20:

- Routes 11 and 41 will use larger 40-foot buses help with overcrowding, instead of smaller 22-foot buses
- There will be schedule changes to most routes. Trip starts and end times on routes 10, 11, 20, 21, 25, 35, 40, 41, 55, and 92 will be adjusted.
- On Routes 40 and 65, service to the North Terminal at the airport will be discontinued. The bus stop at the North Terminal and the bus stop on Postmark Drive will no longer be serviced because of the airport's changing traffic patterns. The South Terminal bus stop will remain in service.

A People Mover bus heads towards Hillcrest Drive with the Anchorage skyline visible in the distance on Monday, August 16, 2021. (Bill Roth / ADN) A People Mover bus heads towards Hillcrest Drive with the Anchorage skyline visible in the distance on Monday, August 16, 2021. (Bill Roth / ADN)

Anchorage Daily News (AK)

Date: August 27, 2021

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