

# Vail Daily

## Would you ride Eagle County's bus for free?

ECO Transit ponders idea of free bus service, but struggles for funds to expand

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Rising gas prices have county officials trying to figure out how to expand bus service and eliminate fares.

*Kristin Anderson/Daily file photo*

EAGLE COUNTY, Colorado — A free county bus system might encourage more people to ditch their cars and hop on the bus, said County Commissioner Arn Menconi.

However, if the bus system expands in places like Edwards, Eagle and Gypsum like county officials hope, that will require more funds from taxes, a bus fare, county funds or grants.

The current bus routes go up and down the valley on U.S. Highway 6 and Interstate 70, but future plans include local routes going up to Singletree, Homestead, or places like the Shaw Cancer Center.

"Edwards is prime (for a local system)," said Harry Taylor, director of ECO Transit. "There's more population located there than anywhere in the valley."

The county also wants to expand in Eagle, Gypsum and in Minturn.

## No more bus fare?

The county also is toying with the idea of a free bus system to encourage more people to ride, but losing fare funds would make it more difficult to add routes.

Bus ridership is up 27 percent this year, and the system is already struggling to keep up with and pay for the existing routes, said Taylor.

Rising gas prices have left the bus system a little cash strapped this year.

"We're tight on funds," Taylor said. "Our budget is dipping into reserves a bit, which means we won't have any excess next year."

Officials have talked about raising fares, but Menconi said he is against the idea — in fact, he'd like to see a free bus system, especially if gas prices continue to rise.

"I say we take out the fare if gas reaches \$5 a gallon," he said.

Menconi said he'd be willing to contribute some county funds to help the expansion in order to keep the bus fares low or non-existent.

ECO Transit expects to get \$1.78 million from bus fares in 2008. That constitutes about 20 percent of ECO Transit's operating costs. The rest of the \$8 million costs to run the system comes from a half-cent sales tax that is shared

between ECO Transit and ECO Trails.

A free and expanded bus system is feasible, Taylor said, but it would require getting funds from elsewhere.

One option would be adding half a cent to the existing half-cent transit sales tax to help fund the expansion, something that would have to be voted on by the public. Summit County has a free bus system that is funded by a similar tax.

The idea of a free bus system and a sales tax is something the county would need to see if the public would support, officials said.

Other funds could come from impact fees charged for new construction or additional federal grants.

### **Worker shortage**

However, providing more bus routes for more riders is further complicated by a shortage of bus drivers.

The county usually hires seasonal workers on H-2B visas, Taylor said.

However, Congress drastically reduced the number of workers who could come in on the guest visas, meaning that ECO Transit is now about 14 drivers short for the winter season.

They are working on hiring people from around Colorado and the country, but if they can't hire enough drivers in time, ECO Transit might have to offer a more limited winter schedule.

"We're interviewing right now to try and fill those positions," Taylor said.

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