

Buses free on popular South Lake Tahoe routes

By Kathryn Reed

Offer a free bus ride and people will jump on board.

That is what BlueGo officials discovered in September when two routes through South Lake Tahoe were free for five days. Ridership jumped 60 percent, according to Curtis Garner, who runs the transit system.

What isn't known is if the riders were locals or out-of-towners.



BlueGo buses will be free on two routes Dec. 22-Jan.6

Photo/LTN file

“The long-term goal of the program is to get people to use public transportation a few times, discover how convenient it is, educate them about the benefits of public transit, whether it's economic or environment, and increase ridership for the long run,” Garner told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Starting Saturday, routes 50 and 53 will be free. Part of the reason for picking the Dec. 22-Jan. 6 time period is because this is when a huge influx of vehicles will be in town for the holidays. The goal is to get visitors out of their cars and

onto the bus.

These are essentially what metropolitan areas call spare the air days.

“We hope to have a decent impact on congestion this year,” Garner said.

Route 50 goes from the transit center at the Y to the transit center at Heavenly Village – all on Highway 50. Route 53 is from the Y, through Bijou, along Pioneer Trail and ends at the transit center on Kingsbury Grade.

Garner said those two routes transport approximately 70 percent of the riders who use the bus system.

Normally it costs \$2 one-way on either of these routes.

BlueGo will be reimbursed through Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funds. The Tahoe Transportation District, which oversees BlueGo, is eligible for the state funds because Lake Tahoe’s air is substandard.

“CARB, or the California Air Resource Board, determined many years ago that our carbon monoxide levels were too high. Steps have been taken to bring the area into compliance, but as of this time CARB has not changed our designation,” Garner explained.

Lake Tahoe is what’s called a “non-containment area” because the air is “worse than national air quality ambient standards,” Garner went on to say.

Future of free buses

Mayor Tom Davis has long been vocal about wanting to develop a free bus service in town like other resort areas have. He is hoping the data collected from these free trial periods will help his cause.

The South Shore bus service has a budget of \$4.5 million. Of that, \$700,000 comes from the fare box.

Carl Hasty, executive director of Tahoe Transportation District, told the City Council this month, "In order to continue the service we have today and to make it free all the time it's that \$700,000 from the fare box (that needs to be funded). It would need to be more if you want to increase service."

Councilwoman JoAnn Conner brought up the fact that there is no service to Meyers.

While ridership is increasing throughout the system, buses are not full. That is one reason the free rides can also be offered – there is room for people without adding buses.

In September, ridership increased by 8 percent compared to September 2011, and it was up 6.7 percent in October compared to October 2011.

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Notes:

- Schedule and bus stop information is online, as well as at the transit centers and on buses.
- Free rides are Dec. 22-Jan. 6; only on routes 50 and 53 of BlueGo on the South Shore.