

Bus services halve fares to get riders back on board

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By Drew Johnson

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A Metro bus exits Oxford Street in Portland after a stop this week. *Drew Johnson / The Forecaster*

Bus fares for passengers from Freeport to Biddeford and everywhere in between will be half price this spring and summer as part of an initiative to attract new riders and get old riders back in the seats.

“We lost a lot of ridership during COVID and we’re back to probably almost 70%, but we have a ways to go,” said Denise Beck, marketing manager for Greater Portland Metro.

Metro is partnering with South Portland Bus Service and Biddeford Saco Old Orchard Beach Transit on the “Fare Deal” promotion, which is being paid for with American Rescue Plan Act funds designated for regional transit agencies attempting to reach pre-pandemic ridership.

South Portland Bus Service ridership was down roughly 75% at the peak of the pandemic, said Director Donna Tippet.

“Part of that was we were limiting how many people could board to social distance,” Tippet said. “So, we were capping our riders. I think at the lowest it was 20 riders per bus for a bus that normally can have 55 people.”

The South Portland service is now back to 77% of pre-COVID ridership, she said.

The promotion will run through the southern Maine transit entities' busiest time of year, from March 1 through Sept. 30.

A winter lull in ridership is routine, but between tourists, a lack of parking and more traffic, more people opt for the bus as the months grow warmer. September and October also see an uptick as students return to local colleges across the region, Beck and Tippet said.

During the promotion, full fares on local lines will cost \$1, and express lines \$2. The 50% discount also applies to already reduced fares for people with disabilities, seniors, youth, veterans and Medicare card holders, as well as the transit agencies' daily and monthly fares via the DiriGo Pass mobile app.

Riders can check the three bus services' tracker website, smttracker.com, to sift through different lines with bus stops clearly marked, Tippet said. The site also tracks buses in real-time via GPS.

"It's the entire system. All of our stops are in there," Tippet said. "I think it's helpful, in particular, for new riders."

Both Beck and Tippet hope the combination of discounted fares, increased accessibility via the tracker, and a busy spring and summer will attract new riders.

"Somebody might say, 'Hey, I don't wanna deal with parking in Portland' or 'It's only two bucks to go to Freeport, or one buck to go to downtown Portland,'" Beck said. "We want those people to ride."

To learn more about the DiriGo Pass and the Fare Deal promotion, visit DiriGoPass.org.

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