

Sequoia National Park bus service marks 6 years

Ridership up within the park

By Teresa Douglass

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Sat., July 7, 2012

Sharon Sanders of Los Angeles waited a long time to show her two teenage sons the Giant Sequoia trees.

"That's all I've been talking about — the big redwood trees," she said. "As a child I came here."

She remembers camping out, a lake and the feel of butterflies flying around her. On Thursday, the three Sanders boarded a Sequoia Shuttle in Visalia. They planned to see the General Sherman Tree, Giant Forest Museum and possibly Moro Rock — all that and back to Visalia in one day.

Halfway through the summer tourism season, the Sequoia Shuttle, which ferries riders from Visalia, Exeter and Three Rivers to Sequoia National Park, remains popular. However, ridership numbers between Visalia and the park are not as high as last year. But within the park, ridership doubled from May 2011 to May 2012, according to the latest data available.

Typically, ridership peaks in July, said Gamaliel Anguiano, transit analyst for the City of Visalia. The Sequoia Shuttle is in its sixth year of operation.

Any number of things can have an impact on ridership, such as the price of gas, weather, school being in session versus out of session and the number of days in the summer season, he said.

"But overall we see a growth trend with 2012 on the heels of prior seasons," he said.

Like Sanders, almost three quarters of shuttle riders are from California, he said. However, most of the Californians riding the shuttle are from the Central Valley.

Last summer was a banner season for the Sequoia Shuttle. More than 340,000 people rode the free Sequoia Shuttle within the park and 11,001 people bought tickets to travel from Visalia, Exeter or Three Rivers to the park.

The Sequoia Shuttle's last day of service this year will be sooner than last year. Last summer the shuttle ran through Sept. 25, but because of projected tourism trends and budget restraints, its last day this summer will be Sept. 9. However, the free shuttle will be running within Sequoia National Park during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays this year, said Dana Dierkes, spokeswoman for Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

The National Park Service pays just more than \$1 million annually to the City of Visalia to cover capital and operational in-park shuttle expenses, Anguiano said.

That money comes from federal grants and park fees.

For shuttle service from Visalia to the park, the city has been awarded competitive federal grants of \$300,000. Each rider's \$15 fee is put toward operational costs. It costs about \$250,000 a year to run buses between Visalia and Sequoia National Park during the summer months.

"No monies come from the city's general fund to operate the shuttle service," he said.

Outside the park, patrons ride a 22-foot bus much like an airport shuttle at Los Angeles International Airport, Anguiano said. A fleet of eight of these mini buses run on unleaded gasoline.

Operating inside the park are four new 35-foot and two new 29-foot diesel/electric hybrid Sequoia Shuttle buses. The 35-foot buses have skylight roof hatches. These buses drive 90 percent cleaner than the diesel buses that they replaced, Anguiano said.

They are 25 percent more fuel efficient and significantly quieter to ride.

This free shuttle operates from Giant Forest to the General Sherman Tree to Wolverton, Lodgepole, Wuksachi resort and restaurant and Dorst Creek Campground.

Only the Sequoia Shuttle can travel the narrow, windy road from the Giant Forest Museum to Moro Rock and Crescent Meadow on weekends and holidays during the summer, Dierkes said.

If visitors drive to the park, they are encouraged to leave their vehicles at the Giant Forest Museum parking lot and take the shuttle.

Since the free shuttle service within Sequoia National Park has become popular, park officials are studying a possible shuttle service between Fresno and Kings Canyon National Park, she said.

Typically, Sequoia National Park gets about twice as many visitors per year compared to Kings Canyon National Park. About 1.6 million people have visited these parks each year since 2009.

For visitors to Sequoia National Park, riding the Sequoia Shuttle can be convenient.

"You don't have to deal with the hassle of the existing road construction on the General's Highway nor trying to find parking inside the park," Anguiano said. "I like to say that you get to spend more time circling trees instead of parking lots."

Sanders, the Los Angeles mother, said she was impressed by the shuttle service.

"I like the convenience that I don't have to drive," she said. "I'm not a great driver in the woods."

How to ride the Sequoia Shuttle

What: Sequoia Shuttle

When: The shuttle leaves hourly from Visalia from 6-10 a.m. on the hour. The return shuttle leaves from the Giant Forest Museum for Visalia on the half-hour from 2:30-6:30 p.m.

Where: in Visalia, at the Holiday Inn, Fairfield Inn, La Quinta Inn, Hampton Inn, Lamp Liter, the Visalia Convention Center and the Visalia Transit Center. In Exeter, at the Barn Service Station on Highway 198. In Three Rivers, at the Comfort Suites and the Veterans Memorial Building.

Cost: \$15 roundtrip from Visalia, Exeter, or Three Rivers to Sequoia National Park, includes the park entrance fee. Within the park, the Sequoia Shuttle is free.

Information: www.SequoiaShuttle.com; 1-877-BUS-HIKE for outside the park; and 565-3341 for inside the park.

Park Website:

www.nps.gov/seki

Reservations: Reservations are required except for the 9 and 10 a.m. buses that depart from the Visalia Transit Center. Those are the only two buses that accept walk-on traffic.

Accessibility: All shuttle buses have wheelchair access.

High-speed reaction to High-Speed rail vote

Central Valley Business Times, Late Fri., July 6, 2012

Reaction to Friday's approval by the Legislature to release money to begin construction of the nation's first high-speed train system is mixed, but follows expected lines.

Here's a summary:

- Gov. Jerry Brown: "The Legislature took bold action today that gets Californians back to work and puts California out in front once again."
- Sen. Anthony Cannella, R-Ceres: "California has traditionally been at the cutting edge and this project would redefine regional travel in this state. Unfortunately, because of our current fiscal crisis, we cannot afford to undertake this project at this time. Not only is the debt service a strain on the general fund, but the plan for future financing of the project relies too heavily on federal funding that has not yet been offered."
- Senate Republican Leader Bob Huff, R-Diamond Bar: "On the same week we have new survey results that highlight the link between voters' declining support for new taxes should High Speed Rail be forced upon us, the legislative Democrats have done precisely that — forced High Speed Rail upon us."

"The voters want a do-over vote on High Speed Rail, but the Democrats blocked legislation for a new HSR ballot measure."

• California High-Speed Rail Authority Board Chairman Dan Richard: "Not only will California be the first state in the nation to build a high-speed rail system to connect our urban centers, we will also modernize and improve rail systems at the local and regional level. This plan will improve mobility for commuters and travelers alike, reduce emissions, and put thousands of people to work while enhancing our economic competitiveness."

[Merced Sun-Star Guest Commentary, Sat., July 7, 2012:](#)

Chelsea Carey: Failure to adopt Climate Action Plan is disappointing

At the June 4 Merced City Council meeting, up for adoption was the Climate Action Plan.

On the surface, this plan may only seem to address issues of global climate change, with its overall purpose to decrease greenhouse gas emissions below 1990 levels. For those who need a refresher, greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane are the key players responsible for gradual increases in global mean annual temperatures, but other greenhouse gases, such as nitric oxide, are responsible for the creation of the smog that sits heavy on our Valley.

Whether or not you are on the global climate change bandwagon, it doesn't take long to realize that this plan has many benefits besides decreasing greenhouse gas emissions. The action items of this plan are to create and sustain a healthy community, to conserve key natural resources that are vital to the lives of Merced citizens, to increase energy conservation and to build public outreach programs and community involvement. These initiatives, among other things, will ensure clean air and water for our children and grandchildren.

Sounds great, right? With the exception of Mary-Michal Rawling who voted for the plan to be passed, the City Council members didn't think so.

The tone that was set during the meeting was that of intolerance to change -- a change that many people would argue is necessary in order to better the lives of the citizens of Merced. Indeed, with Merced County being one of the top 10 counties in the nation for the number of at-risk people exposed to dangerous levels of ozone and with most of the San Joaquin Valley falling under the American Lung Association's top-25 worst polluted list, it seems only reasonable to assume our leaders would want to work toward increasing the health of our city.

Why, then, would all but one of the City Council members be opposed to passing the Climate Action Plan? While I can't answer that question with certainty, it seemed apparent at the City Council meeting that the bottom line was money. Was it going to make us money? Cities, small and large, all around the nation are realizing that, yes, sustainable communities not only save money in the long run but also save the most important thing of all, human life.

So even though the City Council chose not to adopt the Climate Action Plan on June 4, I believe that at some point in the near future the folks we have elected to office will be forced to adopt a sustainable plan. All of us, climate change believers or not, should be hoping for that day to come soon. Because that's the funny thing about sustainability, by definition: In the end, it is the only way.

Carey is a doctoral student in UC Merced's environmental systems program.