



After 22 ski seasons Mountain Explorer bus service will cease operation March 2nd

The Mountain Explorer was started in 2001, as a community initiative, operated by Western Maine Transportation Services. Its purpose was to reduce traffic congestion, provide convenient access to Sunday River for skiers and workers staying in Bethel, ease parking lot congestion, reduce pollution, and provide a reliable designated driver alternative for anyone taking advantage of the area's nightlife. The free Mountain Explorer bus service, having provided transportation for 22 ski seasons, will cease operation when the bus arrives back at the Bethel Inn at 5:55 PM on Saturday, March 2nd.

"It's been a very good 22 years," said Western Maine Transportation Services, Community Relations Manager, Craig Zurhorst. "However, due to changes in skier habits, including increased day visits, and more young families coming to ski, the Mountain Explorer's ridership was already declining before the pandemic. Understandably, it was even lower during the pandemic, but has dropped further since." According to Zurhorst, there were only 23 riders for the entire month of January.

Zurhorst says, other than ridership, there were two factors contributing to the decision to shut down the Mountain Explorer. "For the last three years, we approached each season with enough drivers to operate a full schedule, only to have drivers walk-away to take other commercial trucking jobs, or just retire. While it's difficult to find drivers anywhere, Oxford County has presented a unique challenge." Because of this, Zurhorst said, the only option was to operate the Mountain Explorer at known peak use times on weekends.

The second reason Zurhorst cited was the lack of available sponsorship, coupled with rising costs. "Operating costs for the Mountain Explorer have continued to increase over time, while profit margins for restaurants, lodging, and other establishments have been shrinking. Coupled with a few seasons of unfavorable weather, and then the pandemic, the money to continue supporting the Mountain Explorer isn't there as it had been when the service began," Zurhorst said. He stated that funds raised from sponsorships, and from the towns of Bethel and Newry are used, not only to directly cover operating costs, but also used as local match which is required to receive federal funding.

Due to a lack of drivers, with the exception of the Presidents' Day vacation week, this year, the Mountain Explorer is operating only on Fridays and Saturdays, offering one round-trip between Bethel and Sunday River in the morning, one round-trip midday, and one round-trip in the early evening.

When asked if more hours of operation on more days would help ridership, Zurhorst responded, "While there would probably be more riders, from what we can tell through discussing this with lodging managers, and from other conversations in the community, the number of additional riders wouldn't be enough to warrant continuing the service."

When asked why the service will stop on March 2nd, Zurhorst explained, "We wanted to keep the Mountain Explorer running, even with limited service, through the time leading up to spring skiing, for anyone who planned to use it. For the past few seasons, contrary to what many would think, after the first weekend of March, ridership has declined quickly, even on weekends, so we don't believe we'll be inconveniencing anyone by ending service on March 2nd."

The lesser-known component of the Mountain Explorer service, which will also end, has been a partnership with Gould Academy's On-Snow Program, providing two round-trips, 4 days a week when Gould is in session. "These runs have always been open to the public but, other than Gould skiers, there have been very few riders from the community for the years we've offered it. In turn, Gould's sponsorship for these runs has been instrumental in sustaining the main part of the Mountain Explorer service," said Zurhorst.

Zurhorst continued, "We are indebted to the Maine Department of Transportation, the towns of Bethel and Newry, Sunday River, the Bethel Inn Resort, River View Resort, Riverbend Condominiums, and Gould Academy, for their support this season, and to them, along with all of the sponsors from previous years, who have made the Mountain Explorer possible."

Is there public bus service in Bethel's and Newry's future? Zurhorst says he believes there may be. "It may take a few years to reach an understanding of what the area's current public transit needs are, seasonally, and year-round, and it may require commissioning a transit study, but once the need is identified and validated, Western Maine Transportation Services will be ready to help.