

Sequoia Shuttle plans changes to service

By David Castellon

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TULARE - The Sequoia Shuttle will operate for the first time during the winter providing bus service inside Sequoia National Park during Presidents Day weekend in February.

And that's not the only change planned to the popular shuttle service this year.

Plans include offering "early bird" service from Visalia to the park for people who want to do early-morning hikes as well as for providing rides to work for park employees living in the lower Valley.

Also in the works are plans to restrict cars from the road to Moro Rock over the summer, requiring visitors to take in-park shuttles to the popular attraction, Monty Cox, Visalia's transit division manager, told a meeting of the Tulare County Association of Government Tuesday during their meeting Monday.

Cox said riders have been asking for the changes, and the National Park Service and the City of Visalia — which operate the Sequoia Shuttle — are trying to oblige.

The free shuttles operating in the park Presidents Day weekend, Feb. 19-21, will have only three stops: Lodgepole Village, the lower parking lot for the General Sherman Tree and the Wuksachi Lodge parking lot.

From those areas, people can walk to snowshoe and cross-country ski trails, but there will be no stops at other winter trails or at the Wolverton snow play area, said Colleen Bathe, Sequoia's chief of interpretation, education and partnerships.

For now, park officials want to see how popular this first winter shuttle service is before deciding whether to add stops or days of service in the future, she said.

In addition to the planned Presidents' Day weekend service, Cox told the TCAG members that there also are plans to operate during spring break, April 16-May 1, and during the Mothers Day weekend, May 7-8.

"Last year, [ridership] jumped quit a bit," Cox said.

From late May to late September of last year — Sequoia Shuttle's regular operating period — 7,849 passengers rode the paid shuttles from Visalia to Sequoia Park, a 42 percent increase from the average 5,500 riders in each of the prior three years, he said.

The cost per round-trip ride is \$15.

A second set of shuttles operate inside the park, offering free rides to the various tourist sites there. Cox said 299,555 people rode the in-the-park shuttles in 2010, an 86 percent increase over the average 161,000 riders in each of the prior three years.

"I think it should be noted that a lot of people are repeat customers," some riding the shuttle as many as nine times a season, Cox said.

He said the program is getting so popular that it's gained the attention of at least five other national parks looking to see if they can offer similar services.

Cox said its purpose is to make Sequoia National Park more accessible to the public.

"Not everybody can drive a car, and not everybody who drives a car likes to drive up the mountains," he added.

Cox estimated that the service has kept more than 2,600 vehicles out of the park, and those cars would have generated about 150 tons of carbon monoxide.

Sequoia National Park Superintendent Karen Taylor-Goodrich said the effects are visible in less traffic in the park, less congestion near road construction areas and less time monitoring high-traffic areas by rangers.