



INSTA-CHAIN™

The AUTOMATIC ICECHAIN

Snow chains deployed on NAIPTA buses with the flip of a switch



When you think of a gadget that gives a vehicle more traction at the press of a button, it may sound like something out of a James Bond movie, but such devices are now being used by Flagstaff's Mountain Line buses.

The Northern Arizona Intergovernmental Public Transportation Authority (NAIPTA) has equipped most of its buses with the Insta-Chain automatic chains system, devices that, with the flip of a switch, can deploy chains onto the wheels of their buses.

"It's a game-changer," said NAIPTA operations director Jim Wagner, adding that this may keep buses from getting stuck at a far lower rate.



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NAIPTA CEO Erika Mazza agreed and said they have been in need of such devices for some time, having previously tried simply using studded tires or snow tires with limited results. Particularly, the agency has been looking for such a solution ever since the Coconino National Forest changed the rules for vehicles that travel Snowbowl Road, requiring the use of either chains or four-wheel drive on all vehicles making the trek during winter weather conditions, Mazza said.

This change presented a problem for NAIPTA that has provided service to Arizona Snowbowl for the past four years. This is because, due to their low floors, buses generally can't use traditional tire chains, Wagner said.

But this is not a problem with the Insta-Chains, Wagner said, and they allow drivers to deploy them only when needed before retracting them to reduce wear. Generally, Wagner said, buses are heavy enough that they actually drive fairly well in most snowy conditions.

Problems only arise when buses are forced to stop at the bottom of, or while ascending, a hill. When a vehicle ahead of the bus, trying to navigate the winter conditions itself, forces the bus to come to a stop, this is often the reason buses become stuck, Wagner said. And while the bus may have had an easy time climbing the hill normally, getting it going in the snow from a standstill can be difficult.

This is where the chains come in. With them installed, all the driver needs to do is flip a switch and the chains are deployed onto the wheels. The bus can then use the extra traction to get moving again before the driver then retracts the chains.



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Before these chains, when buses got stuck, it would also mean sending out either a service vehicle, or often another bus, to pull out the stuck vehicle and get it moving again, Wagner said.

Now free from being forced to do this as often, Wagner said the chains are “saving us manpower and service time.”

Mechanics and the service team don’t have to leave the garages as often providing them more time to service the fleet. Since the chains have been installed before the last two snowstorms, they have only had two buses need be unstuck.

Currently, the chains are on all 23 of NAIPTA’s non-articulated buses, although they are looking at ways of equipping the six articulated buses with the chains as well as their smaller transit buses that make door to door trips, Wagner said.

Source: ADRIAN SKABELUND Sun Staff Reporter