

Rapid ridership reaches all time high

By Kathryn Lynch-Morin

GVL Staff Writer

Grand Valley State University ridership on The Rapid is expected to exceed 2 million riders by the end of this academic year, an all-time high for the university.

Since the university was founded in the 1960s, The Rapid has grown from a single bus route that connected the Allendale Campus to downtown Grand Rapids to five bus routes which serve almost 17,000 riders per day.

Last year, bus ridership through March 31 was at 1,428,600, a figure that grew to

1,731,100 this year.

"We only need 270,000 to hit 2 million," said Erin Babson, operations manager for the Pew Campus and regional centers. "Based on last year, I anticipate almost 200,000 in April alone and we still have May, June, July and August to add to our total."

Babson said the greatest benefits of providing free public transportation are for the students.

"There is the obvious cost savings from parking permits, gasoline and operating costs for their vehicle," she said. "They also get door-to-door service in bad weather and don't have to hunt for a parking space."

The Rapid, free for anyone with a valid GVSU identification, saved students about 2.829 million gallons of gas last year, Babson said. The Rapid helped students save \$8 million in auto operating costs, she added.

GVSU sophomore Amy Wood said she rides the Rapid from the Kirkhof Center to the Pew Campus to save money.

"I ride it to save on gas mostly," the Dowagiac, Mich. native said. "Gas is on the rise and it costs a lot more."

While saving money is one of the biggest benefits of The Rapid, Babson said GVSU is creating a culture of public transportation in which the university's environmental impact is addressed.

"Helping people understand how easy and convenient it can be to keep GVSU green will help the future of the university," she said.

However, while GVSU's use of The Rapid is on the rise, sales of student parking permits, which generates revenue used for the contract with The Rapid and for parking lot maintenance and operation, are on the decline.

This year, 11,433 parking permits were sold, down from the 12,108 sold last year and the 12,648 sold in 2005-2006.

Jeff Musser, assistant vice president for university budgets, said while parking permits support the bus budget, so does the GVSU general fund, which consists of state appropriations and tuition.

"We are at the very bottom for state funding," Musser said. "And relative to other schools in the state we have relatively low tuition increases."

GVSU received \$3,020 per student in state appropriations this year, more than \$2,000 less than the state average of \$5,174 per student. But the university profited more than \$3 million from the sale of parking passes this academic year.

The projected contract with The Rapid for next year is \$1.725 million. Jennifer Kalczuk, a spokesperson for The Rapid, said the contract helps to significantly contribute to the ridership of the buses and offers positive benefits for both parties involved.

"It's been extremely beneficial for both sides and it's a partnership that we are very pleased to be a part of," Kalczuk said.

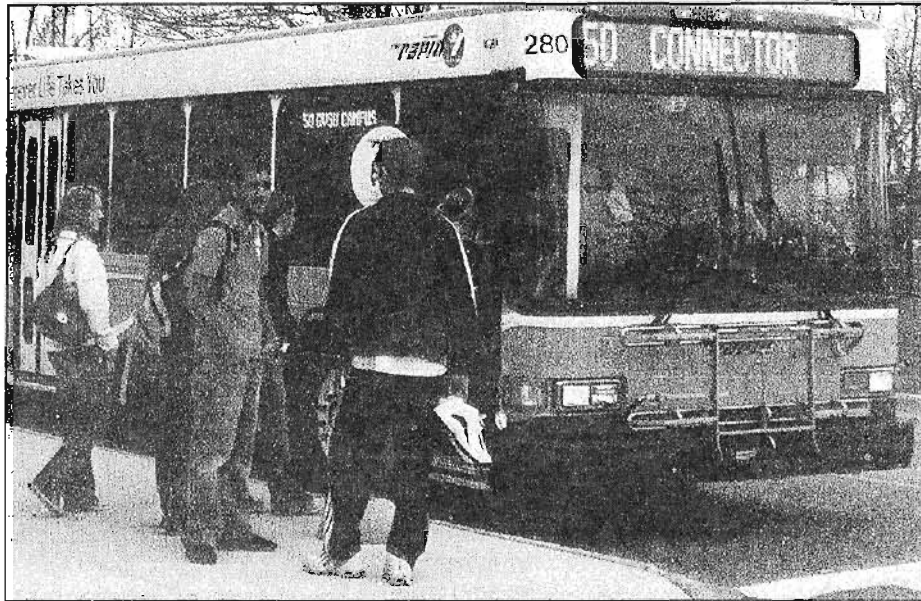
Student Senate Vice President of Campus Affairs Greg Kehr is on a parking, traffic and transportation committee which, he said, tries to advocate for improvements to the busing system that are beneficial to students.

Kehr said this year the committee has been advocating for expanded off-campus shuttle services, which helped lead to the addition of the 48 route.

"We have helped create an awareness mechanism to notify students when routes are running very late," Kehr said.

Kehr believes students are choosing to ride the bus instead of buying parking passes because of obvious savings on parking pass cost, gas and other vehicle expenses.

"The reality is the bus is providing a reliable and convenient service to students and they know it," he said.



GVL / Brittany Jacques

Hitching a ride: Students load the bus at the stop near Mackinac Hall. On March 31 of last year, Rapid ridership reached 1,428,000 at GVSU. This year that figure grew by 300,000 riders.

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