



# The Rapid Reporter

News and Updates from The Rapid

THE RAPID

The Rapid serves Grand Rapids, East Grand Rapids, Grandville, Kentwood, Walker, and Wyoming

Summer/Fall 2009

## Rapid Stories

### Rapid History

Discover the evolution of our local transit service.

### The Art of Rapid Central Station

A movement of people, ideas and dreams.

### Rider Tools

Enhanced web tools make riding easier.

### On Board

A report from *Rapid* CEO Peter Varga.

### Rideshare Survey Report

See why over 700 rideshare residents no longer travel to work alone.

### Spectrum Goes Green

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### Bus Facility Renovation

The *Rapid's* Wealthy Operations Center gets an overhaul.

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Step-by-step instructions on how to take your bike for a bus ride.



### Before there were buses there were streetcars.

Grand Rapids' first downtown bus route appeared in 1932, the same year The Grand Rapids Railway Company went bankrupt. The Railway Company had embarked on a significant improvement campaign, investing in new streetcar rails and reducing the complexity of the existing rail system. As construction proceeded, buses were put into temporary service to transport riders. The impact of the Great Depression brought streetcar rail-laying to a virtual standstill, begging the question, "Why not switch to buses permanently?"

By 1934 the streetcar era had come to a close, and Grand Rapids became the second city in the country to replace streetcars with buses.



### More and more residents are getting on board.

It may be the increasing cost of fuel, it may be the challenge of finding parking, it may be a decision to be a little more "green." Whatever the reasons might be, ridership is definitely up — *The Rapid* added 1 million passengers last year and expects to reach close to 10 million rides late this year.

# THE ROUTE TO THE FUTURE

## A brief look at the evolution of one of Michigan's most dynamic metropolitan transit services

By Bob Young

You pass a bus that has stopped to pick up and release passengers on a street near your home or place of work. You likely don't even give it a second glance; it's merely another vehicle on the streets of a busy, growing metro area.

But that bus is a small, important part of *The Rapid*, a transit system that serves six West Michigan metropolitan communities, weaving them together in an economic, cultural and civic fabric. And it's been expanding and improving since before many of today's riders were born.

### First step — a system fondly known as "GRATA."

*The Rapid* was launched in 1967 as the Grand Rapids Area Transit Authority and everyone called it "GRATA." The Grand Rapids metropolitan area was a magnet for business and industry in the years that followed GRATA's launch. Growth brought more highways, more suburban expansion, more traffic, and more riders for a transit system that couldn't grow quickly enough to keep pace.

### Second step — pausing to plan for the future.

A regional task force, Mobile Metro 2020, began work on a plan to meet the immediate needs of the Grand Rapids metro area and to also guide future expansion. Community leaders and members of the public crafted a strategy that supported growth, boosted employment-related transportation, and extended service to senior citizens, persons with disabilities, and individuals without cars.

### Third step — picking up speed.

In 2000, following a successful millage vote, GRATA was dissolved and *The Rapid* was created to provide public transportation services for the area. The additional funding brought several much-needed enhancements to *The Rapid*, including evening service.

"Prior to 2000, there were no buses running after 6:15 PM." says Jennifer

Kalczuk, Manager of External Relations for *The Rapid*. "There was only limited service on Saturday and no service on Sunday."

The funds also added specialized employment transportation options and PASS, a service designed to help riders connect with *The Rapid* buses.

"I think that there was voter recognition at the time that we needed to have significantly better service, that it was really impacting people's ability to get to jobs," says Kalczuk.

Over the years, voters approved two additional millage proposals that further enhanced the number and quality of services. These millage funds were used to add service frequency on routes, provide more evening and weekend service, and to develop a carpool and vanpool program to assist West Michigan commuters and employers.

*The Rapid* has a contract with the city of Grand Rapids to provide DASH services, moving commuters from safe city parking lots to stops near their downtown destinations. A similar agreement with Grand Valley State University transports students and faculty between the downtown GVSU campus and the main campus in Allendale, providing two million trips per year.

### “Prior to 2000, there were no buses running after 6:15 PM.”

Other services provided by *The Rapid* include GO!Bus, door-to-door mobility for seniors and the disabled, and County Connection, offering 24-hour transport anywhere in Kent County for only \$14, with kids under five riding free.

### Fourth step — managing mobility.

There's little doubt that *The Rapid* is growing at a pace that reflects the progress of the region it serves, delivering services that were unimaginable in the days of GRATA. And no one has a better grasp of the significance of that growth than *The Rapid's* CEO, Peter Varga.

"When the system was still GRATA, we had, at most, 63 buses going out at peak. Now, nine years later, we have 98 buses going out at peak. We went from four million trips a year to nearly 10 million trips a year."

But the growth of *The Rapid* can't be measured solely in scale — it's also a story of a commitment to quality, of enhanced cooperation among the six communities served and, most important, of an operating philosophy that recognizes that a dynamic transit system isn't about vehicles, it's about giving people the freedom of mobility.

### “I think that there was voter recognition at the time that we needed to have significantly better service, that it was really impacting people's ability to get to jobs.”

"We call it 'mobility management,'" says Varga. That means we move people in different ways. We use fixed-route buses, the DASH shuttle system, and the Go!Bus service for seniors and the disabled. We created a vanpool system for local employers so they can help their employees get to work and a ride-sharing program to help drivers save money by sharing the cost of getting to and from their jobs. *The Rapid's* role is managing mobility."

While the visual representation of *The Rapid* is a bus, and bus service represents 80% of the system's services, *The Rapid* is very much about people, says Varga.

"It's about people communicating with each other, it's about people going through communities between home and work, it's definitely about serving the public. The fundamental benefit of public transportation is linking community to community, like a moving bridge. It's a very significant role of public transit."

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without long-range planning,” says Varga. “Mobile Metro 2020 established a number of objectives to accomplish over time, including the improvements the community told us they wanted. We’ve accomplished all the elements of that plan and we need to create new one, a new long-view.”

**“The fundamental benefit of public transportation is linking community to community, like a moving bridge.”**

Some of the improvements of the future will be, as Varga defines them, “what we know works.” That means an even higher-level quality of service, better rider experience, increased frequency, and a continuous review of route placement as population and employment centers shift.

Other changes will be those that reflect economic and environmental shifts already taking place on a national scale — ride-sharing, vanpooling, “green” buses — trends that will demand more innovative thinking from the regional transit system.

“The availability of high-quality public transportation is important to college students and young professionals. It’s part of what makes an attractive environment to live and work,” says Kalczuk.

Another important objective of the next strategic plan will be sustainability. *The Rapid* Central Station, completed in 2004, is the first LEED-certified public transportation facility in the country. Adding to its current fleet of five hybrid electric buses will help *The Rapid* strengthen its commitment to protecting the environment by consuming less fuel and emitting fewer pollutants into the air. Making the already popular ride-sharing and vanpooling programs even more robust will help reduce traffic and pollution, while saving participants money.

**“We’ve accomplished all the elements of the 2020 plan and we need to create new one.”**

**What’s up the road?**

*The Rapid* is making significant progress, matching the growth of the communities it serves, anticipating needs and creating innovative services to provide area residents with the freedom of mobility and the option to travel the region in a way that’s cost-effective and environmentally smart. Expect more innovation and continuous improvements in one of Michigan’s most dynamic urban transit systems.

# FUTURE matching the growth of the communities

Continued from page 1

**Destination — the future.**

The future of *The Rapid* will likely mirror the future of the West Michigan community that it serves. With 2020 still 10 years off, *The Rapid* has already responded vigorously to the goals and objectives set out in the original Mobile Metro 2020 plan.

Once again *The Rapid* will work with community leaders and members of the public to agree on new targets that dovetail with the needs of a metro area that continues to grow, even in a struggling economy.

“You can’t have good public transit

# KNOW WHERE TO GO

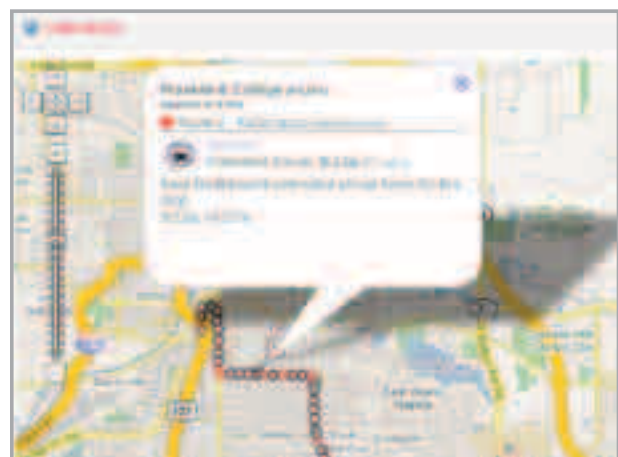
Tools that show the closest stop and location of buses on routes debut online



*The Rapid* has implemented a series of new rider tools that make planning a trip on *The Rapid* even more convenient. A number of site enhancements have been made to facilitate ease of access to route and stop information — including Google-based map data, real-time status information, and home page links to improve access to content. Visit [www.ridetherapid.org](http://www.ridetherapid.org) to try these tools.

**Rapid homepage updates**

*The Rapid’s* homepage has been updated to provide better access to key fixed-route functions such as fare purchases. Site navigation is also enhanced with a new menu column that lets you quickly jump between route pages.



**Real-time bus information**

Tracking the arrival of the next few buses to a specific stop is now as easy as clicking on the stop on your computer screen. Each Rapid route now provides a real-time stop and bus location page that shows current position of buses — by direction of the route — as well as next bus status for each stop.

Clicking on a stop reveals a pop-up text display that includes stop description, stop number, status of next bus, and estimated arrival time. For example, if a bus is running three minutes behind schedule, that time, not the scheduled time is shown.



**Nearest stop locator**

If you’ve ever used one of the address-locating tools on the Internet, you’ll feel right at home with this tool, which allows you to quickly find the nearest Rapid bus stops as simply as typing in your address.

Using Google address functionality, your address will be shown on a Google map along with the closest stops to your location, as well as the distance to each stop. A zoom feature visually identifies stops and related routes.



**Routes mapped with Google Maps**

*The Rapid’s* main system map and individual route maps now use Google’s mapping system, allowing you the same viewing and zooming functionality available in Google Maps. Click on a specific route on the system map and you’ll be able to link to the route’s overview, schedule, transfer points, and maps/stops.



## EXPLORING THE UNIQUE ART OF RAPID CENTRAL STATION

Take a stroll through Rapid Central Station, the downtown hub of *The Rapid*, and you might think you've wandered into a small art museum. Examine the work there more carefully and you'll realize that every piece — mosaic, sculpture, oil painting, print — shares two common themes: community and movement.

Near the Information Center you'll see a mosaic, in zinc and steel, by artist Brian Alexander. Titled "Common Roots," it speaks to the diversity of travelers and the melding process that happens when we travel together.

"This piece is primarily about commonalities," explained Alexander. "It's an abstraction on the idea that we are all different. But when we are in transit our differences fade — like migrating birds or fish headed upstream. As we move together we are a collection of elements, blending and functioning as a single entity with a common purpose."

On a nearby wall you'll notice an oil-on-linen painting, "Jayden's World," by artist John McDonald. An urban scene, it captures life at an intersection in a city that looks reassuringly familiar.

"My own work deals with diversity and travel — it's what you actually see and experience as you move through Grand Rapids," says McDonald. "Having artwork in Rapid Central Station is a big plus. I love public art and I admire mass transit. They are both real gifts to the people from a city that is growing up."

If the painted porcelain tile work by artist Daleene Menning looks familiar, it's because she traveled the city by bus before painting the tiles, taking photos and making sketches of the cityscape she saw. Appropriately titled "The Ride," it captures not only familiar scenes but also Menning's philosophy that public art should be site specific and should embody something unique that speaks to the people and the space.

"The Ride" took about a year to complete. I rode the bus many times, saw the idea

emerge, and went back to take photos of the sites I wanted to include. The people in the mural are real, pictured doing what they were doing at the time."

Beautiful art. But what does it have to do with *The Rapid* or Rapid Central Station?

"*The Rapid* believes that public art is an important part of a vibrant community and that we have a responsibility to continue the great tradition of public art in the Grand Rapids metro area," says Jennifer Kalczuk, Manager of External Relations for *The Rapid*.

"The paintings, sculptures, and mixed media combine to create an art experience that can be shared by the entire Grand Rapids community for years to come. Works were specifically chosen for their perspective on public transportation, travel, and the movement of people."

The most dramatic piece of art is also the newest and the largest. "Journey Home" is a mixed media sculpture by renowned international artist Dennis Oppenheim. Located in the plaza outside Rapid Central Station's front entrance, "Journey Home" is a 20' circular sculpture, a corkscrew of aluminum zinc-coated steel frame, multi-colored transparent plastic sheets, and perforated aluminum mesh.

Oppenheim spoke at the dedication on July 17 and described the sculpture, which grows from a very small point and expands until it forms the image of a home.

"As you near a destination, it becomes larger and larger and appears to loom," Oppenheim explained. "It's something we look forward to, something we yearn for. The anticipation is part of the journey and the arrival is our reward."

Oppenheim participated as an artist in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China, and his works can be found in museums and public buildings across the United States and around the world. Born in 1938 in Electric City, Washington, he received his B.F.A. from the School of Arts and Crafts, and an M.F.A. from Stanford University. He lives and works in New York.

# GROWING RIDESHARING PROGRAM SERVES A DIVERSE POPULATION

700 ridesharing residents tell us why they no longer travel to work alone

A June survey of 700 of the total 4,675 participants in *The Rapid* Rideshare Program shows that the program is not only growing, it's also meeting the needs of a diverse range of area residents.

### 81% of respondents use the program to save money.

Not surprisingly, financial savings is the overwhelming reason why people rideshare. With fuel prices remaining high, 81% of the respondents said they use the program to reduce the number of times they have to fill up at the pump.

36.2% of respondents see a monthly savings of up to \$50. Another 32.2% saved \$51-100. 16.4% saved between \$101 and \$150 per month, and 15% of respondents saved more than \$150 monthly.

Other popular reasons for ridesharing includes parking — imagine only having to find a spot once or twice a week versus five — and environmental/ecological concerns, a reflection of the "green" movement sweeping the country.

**"My wife enjoys that since I started riding in the vanpool, I get home earlier and we can eat dinner together for the first time in several years."**

The geographical reach of the program — Kent, Ottawa and northern Allegan counties — is also significant. Nearly 50% of all respondents travel between 21 and 60 miles roundtrip. An additional 17% travel 61-80 miles, and 13.2% travel over 100 miles daily.

### Area companies are actively promoting the program to employees.

Area employers, including Spectrum Health, Amway and Perrigo, are enthusiastic supporters of the Rideshare Program, actively promoting advantages to employees. Over 52% of all respondents told us they'd heard about the program through their employer. An additional 21% learned about ridesharing on-line.

A car shared by two or three riders is most typical, with 72.8% of participants

Cars with three to four regular riders total 11.9%. Most are female (61.1%) and the age range of riders spans 26 to 54, with the majority (30.8%) between 45 and 54.

**"I have a great group for my car pool. We always have interesting stories to share. We laugh a lot and it makes things in our life not as rough to think about. You could say we counsel each other. The best thing is we all care about each other."**

### Program participants travel to a wide range of jobs.

Demonstrating the region's diverse economic base, 18.5% of survey respondents said they worked in manufacturing while 18% are employed in the quickly growing healthcare field. Several key companies in these and other areas are proponents of *The Rapid* Rideshare Program, offering incentives to employees who participate. Some companies, like Amway, offer employer-only programs, allowing employees to match easily with co-workers who share similar work schedules.

Can the program become even more expansive? Absolutely, says Jennifer Kalczuk, Manager of External Relations for *The Rapid*.

**"The person I carpool with has been my friend and co-worker for over eight years. We send our children to the same schools, but it took the website to match us up and tell us we should be riding together."**

### Improvements have made the program easier to use.

"The more people in the database, the better the opportunity to find compatible matches. Having this tool on-line makes it very easy to sign up, run searches, and connect with potential matches."

## ON BOARD THE RAPID

By Peter Varga, CEO

Beginning this fall, *The Rapid* starts work on a comprehensive 20-year master plan for the metro region's public transportation services. The process is expected to take 10 months. Public input will be critical to establishing priorities for services and mapping future needs.

The most recent long-range plan, Mobile Metro 2020, was adopted in 1998. It identified a number of objectives, almost all of which have been achieved. Similar to the Mobile Metro 2020 process, a taskforce will be established that will include elected officials, business leaders, residents of the service area, riders, partner agencies, and other community leaders to guide the project and make recommendations for implementation. There will be a series of public meetings and community-based workshops, as well as web-based tools, to collect input from area residents.

The master plan will include a review of the most recent comprehensive operational analysis, the development of a fleet management plan to determine our vehicle needs, and a review of the existing paratransit service (GOiBus). It will link land use and transportation decision-making, optimize means to match transit services with projected land use patterns, identify existing and future transit needs, examine alternative courses of action, identify what can be achieved in the near term (2010-2014), mid-term (2015-2020) and long-term (2021-2030) with the projected available funding for projects and programs, and identify gaps between future plans and current conditions, including specific recommendations and steps to address funding gaps.

The plan will also help *The Rapid* understand how our system stacks up against those of comparable cities,



identify what we can learn from those systems, ways we can enhance our transit system and services, and how we can improve service, attract and retain riders, increase efficiencies, and lower costs based on peer best practices.

The Silver Line bus rapid transit (BRT) route, designed to serve a corridor with the highest commuter volume in the

region, will be re-evaluated as part of the long range planning process.

This is a very collaborative process and relies very much on community involvement to be successful. I encourage you to look for ways you can be an active participant in shaping our region's future.



## BUS FACILITY RENOVATION PUSHED AHEAD BY FEDERAL STIMULUS FUNDS

A major construction project not scheduled to begin until 2011 may now be completed by that date thanks to federal stimulus dollars

*The Rapid's* Wealthy Street Operations Center, a combination garage and maintenance facility for the system's bus fleet, had been scheduled for a major renovation beginning two years from now. But thanks to \$10 million in federal stimulus dollars approved in mid-January the project at 333 Wealthy Street, long in the planning stages, will likely be done by December 2011.

"We've been planning to renovate this aging facility for quite some time, but didn't expect to have the funds until next year at the earliest," said Peter Varga, CEO of *The Rapid*. "The stimulus dollars give us the opportunity to move that renovation up and have it completed much sooner."

The facility will be key to helping *The Rapid* meet its objectives for timeliness, dependability, rider experience and enhanced service levels. Every service, every technician, every tool necessary to keep the system's buses in tip-top shape will be housed in the new facility. There will be space for 174 buses, 18 maintenance bays, three body repair bays, two wash systems and below ground parking for up to 200 employee vehicles.

**“The stimulus dollars give us the opportunity to move that renovation up and have it completed much sooner.”**

Like Rapid Central Station, the Operations Center has been designed to achieve LEED certification, yet another example of the transit system's commitment to sustainability. Natural light will provide much of the illumination, which will flow through the building's transparent wall panels. The bus washes will have water reclaim systems and the building features rainwater collection to further reduce water consumption. Wind turbines and solar collectors will provide much of the energy needed to operate the center and its services, and the building materials are primarily durable/recycled.

The renovation is scheduled to begin this December, the first of four phases. The final phase should be complete before the end of 2011. Total cost of all four phases is \$32.3 million, with \$10.6 million coming from the federal stimulus package.



Wealthy Operations Center design concept

## INNOVATIVE TRANSPORTATION IDEAS HELP SPECTRUM HEALTH MEET SUSTAINABILITY GOALS

The region's largest healthcare system integrates carpooling and ridesharing into its ambitious sustainability effort

What began as a simple recycling/waste reduction program at two of its major Grand Rapids campuses has grown into a significant sustainability commitment for Spectrum Health, and programs offered by *The Rapid* are playing an increasingly important role in helping Spectrum reach its goals.

"Our sustainability commitment started at our Downtown and Blodgett campuses here in Grand Rapids," explained Joshua Miller, Spectrum's Sustainability Coordinator. "Initially it was a waste reduction and recycling study, but the positive results quickly moved us to a comprehensive program focused more at the system level with all seven of our hospitals. Now we're taking it to our Spectrum Health Regional Hospital Network, some 20 hospitals, and addressing sustainability initiatives."

Spectrum leadership was quick to grasp two important realities of a comprehensive sustainability program — it's an excellent way to contain and reduce costs, and it's an ideal and very visible expression of the system's commitment to a healthier environment for its employees and the community at-large.

"Sustainability is important to Spectrum Health on a number of fronts," says Miller. "The most important is that it really helps us prove our mission statement, which is improve the health status of our communities. So reducing waste, reducing energy consumption, reducing emissions — it reduces our impact on the environment and makes the communities we're a part of much healthier places to live."

Miller pointed out that sustainability

at Spectrum Health, with an employee population of almost 14,000, quickly spreads to the larger community, and Spectrum has encouraged people to embrace the philosophy in their lives.

Spectrum's initial interest in *The Rapid's* Rideshare Program was pragmatic — thousands of employees means thousands of parking spaces and the system was short on them in both on- and off-site lots. But advantages beyond parking soon made themselves obvious.

"Spectrum has partnered with *The Rapid* on various transportation initiatives for almost three years," said Miller. "Transportation is a very integral piece of our sustainability program — it's right up there with design and construction, facilities, environmental services, sustainable sites management — it is a major component."

*The Rapid* and Spectrum Health worked closely to develop a company-specific rideshare program, a web-based application that helps interested employees find carpooling partners by searching for others who live near them and have similar work/commute schedules. The program covers the greater Grand Rapids metro area and surrounding counties including Allegan, Kent, and Ottawa.

The rideshare program developed with *The Rapid* lets Spectrum Health employees/staff ride fixed-route buses to and from work at no cost. A special badge gives employees access to the service and also tracks the number of employees riding *The Rapid* each month.

"We've noticed an increase in the numbers of employees using both programs," said Miller. "We started with 10 or 20 in the rideshare program and now have upwards of 300-350 employees. And we have other employees carpooling outside of the program, so it's safe to say that we have more than 300 people sharing rides to work."

"When the rideshare program first launched in 2007 there were 3,000 rides per month and we've pretty much doubled that with an average of 6,000 rides per month."

Miller said that the health system was now working even harder to convey the benefits of carpooling and ridesharing with even more Spectrum employees — economics plays a larger role than it did, especially when fuel prices rise.

"We'd like to see the numbers come in at about 10,000 rides per month," Miller added.

Spectrum Health employees are very positive about both programs, said Miller. Along with the growth in number of riders, the health system has noticed another trend, one that bodes well for the future of transportation as a part of the sustainability commitment at Spectrum Health.

"We've seen the programs, especially the ride sharing program with *The Rapid*, drawing a wide cross-section of employees and staff. Physicians, cafeteria workers, physical therapists, physical plant workers, nurses, nutritionists, landscaping employees — everyone is taking advantage of it."

## TAKE YOUR BIKE FOR A BUS RIDE



If you're one of the thousands of area residents who enjoy biking, you can now cover a lot more of the metropolitan area and explore parts of the city and countryside you've never visited.

There's a double-loading bike rack on the front of each *Rapid* bus. Most two-wheeled bicycles, including children's bikes, will fit on these special racks. You can ride your bike to your bus stop, load your bike, ride across the metro area, and then get off the bus to continue exploring on two wheels. You can access local bike trails that might have been beyond your reach. You can bike to one university campus for class, then take your bike with you to another campus or dormitory miles away. You can even add a few miles of exercise to your work commute without committing to biking the entire trip — the freedom is yours!

### How it works.

- Before loading your bike, be sure all loose items are secured or removed.
- When the bus comes to a complete stop, walk your bike to the front of the bus. Keep toward the curbside of the street — stay out of the way of traffic.
- Lift the handle to release the rack and lower it into the Down position. Listen for the "click" to make sure it locks in place.
- Place the front tire of your bike in the position marked "FRONT TIRE" and slip your rear tire into the back slot.
- Lift the spring-loaded arm over the front tire — your bike is now loaded. Just hop on and take your bike for a bus ride!