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**Grand Rapids leaders celebrate kickoff of fare-free Route 19 bus service along Michigan Street**

*Agreement to help fund access to public transportation hailed as first-of-its-kind public-private partnership in The Rapid’s 55-year history*

**GRAND RAPIDS, MI –** City leaders today kicked off a three-year pilot program partnership with the Interurban Transit Partnership (The Rapid) and Spectrum Health that improves bus service by offering fare-free rides to help reduce traffic and ease parking congestion along the Michigan Street corridor, one of Grand Rapids’ most heavily traveled routes.

“We recognize that as the Grand Rapids community grows, it’s vital for our city planning and transit systems to adapt to the changing needs of users, including city residents and downtown-area employees,” Mayor Rosalynn Bliss said during a news conference at Rosa Parks Circle.

The Rapid’s agreement with Spectrum Health and the City of Grand Rapids to help fund access to public transportation represents the first-of-its-kind public-private partnership since the City created what was then called the Grand Rapids Transit Authority in 1963.

“The Rapid’s new and improved Route 19 is a game changer for Grand Rapids,” said Andrew Johnson, the new CEO of The Rapid. “For people who live, work, study or enjoy relaxing near the Michigan Street corridor or want to travel fare-free on the DASH throughout downtown, the new Route 19 service is a fast and easy way to all of the places and activities that the Michigan Street corridor offers.”

The debut of free fares along the new and improved Route 19 – in combination with the City’s fare-free DASH service and City-sponsored fare-free portion of the Silver Line north of Wealthy Street – will provide free travel throughout downtown Grand Rapids without the hassle of parking. Another feature is the convenience of buses coming every 10 minutes on Michigan Street during peak afternoon and evening travel demand.

“This new Michigan Street corridor partnership will help Grand Rapids achieve its goal of providing safe and equitable service that connects people to jobs, promotes economic development in a vital business district and offers a first-class transit experience,” said Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. (DGRI) President and CEO Tim Kelly.

Route 19 runs along the Michigan Street corridor from Plymouth Street in northeast Grand Rapids and continues west along Heritage Hill and the Medical Mile to the City’s near West Side along Bridge Street up to Stocking Avenue.

The route includes stops near such anchor institutions as Spectrum Health, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids Community College, Michigan State University’s College of Human Medicine, Meijer’s soon-to-open Bridge Street Market and more than 50 additional popular, high-traffic destinations. Many of these businesses will offer special deals and discounts to patrons who simply mention the “Route 19 Discount” while at the establishment through Sept. 23. Details are available [HERE](https://www.ridetherapid.org/route-19).

More highlights of the Route 19 improvements include:

* **Offering free fares** by subsidizing service with approximately $293,000 in annual funding support each from Spectrum Health and the City’s Mobile GR and Parking Services Department. An awareness and education outreach effort will encourage Spectrum Health staff to use The Rapid to travel between offices and the medical center for meetings vs. driving personal vehicles.
* **Expanding the service** to operate from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday to better meet the needs of employees and students. Estimates suggest Route 19 ridership will grow from approximately 54 daily passengers to as many as 800 during the workweek. No weekend service is currently proposed.
* **Increasing the frequency** of The Rapid’s Route 19 service. Buses will arrive and depart at stops every 15 minutes from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. as well as from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. Buses will stop every 10 minutes during the afternoon and evening peak from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Grand Rapids is part of a national trend of businesses increasingly drawn to downtown environments where they can attract young talent. The Route 19 improvements are part of Grand Rapids’ broad strategy to alleviate parking congestion as more businesses and workers locate downtown.

“The new Route 19 will benefit the City’s parking customers by providing them more options,” said Josh Naramore, the City’s Mobile GR and Parking Services manager. “This partnership allows Michigan Street corridor employees and residents, for example, to connect with existing facilities that have capacity on the west side of the river. That includes the Scribner Lot and Lots 7, 8 and 9, which have available monthly permit parking for $48 or daily parking ranging from $2 to $4. It also gives us the opportunity to pursue additional park-and-ride investments along the corridor to deliver more capacity and options.”

The City Commission’s decision to upgrade Route 19 service aligns with recommendations in the Michigan Street Corridor Plan. The report notes that even with four lanes in each direction, the Michigan Street path can move about 4,000 cars per day – a volume of traffic that is routinely exceeded at certain times of the day and occasionally poses hazards to emergency vehicle drivers’ ability get through the corridor due to gridlock and congestion. Projected development by 2035 predicts the corridor will have 15,000 daytime employees arriving and then leaving over two peak hours in addition to the creation of up to 10,000 new residential units.

City Commissioners Ruth Kelly and Joe Jones, who serve the city’s Second Ward that includes the Michigan Street corridor and Route 19, said they look forward to promoting the innovative public-private partnership with Mobile GR and The Rapid.

“The new Route 19 service will inspire people who have never previously considered public transportation and build acceptance of transit as a viable alternative for getting around Grand Rapids easily and efficiently,” Kelly said.

The plan also will help Grand Rapids develop lasting solutions to challenges, such as parking, while allowing for long-term growth along the entire Michigan Street corridor, Jones noted.

“This historic agreement will help create jobs and provide reliable transportation for both workers and people who live along the route,” Jones said. “It’s a major step forward in improving the quality of life in Grand Rapids.”

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