

EDITORIALS

Free ride at GVSU

Higher parking fees, **gratis bus pass**
push students in the right direction

Students are headed back to class at Grand Valley State University this week, and more than ever, they're getting there on the bus. The decision to ride instead of drive is driven as much by self-interest and smart university policy as by a desire on the part of 20-somethings to spare the planet more greenhouse gases.

The university's success in getting students to pocket their car keys and brandish their bus passes is a lesson for other area institutions looking to limit the daily scrum for limited parking spots and nudge students toward mass transportation.

GVSU's formula is pretty elementary, especially for a university: charge more for parking, and make rides on The Rapid public transit system *free*. Since the Allendale-based university started charging for parking in 2004, the cost for an annual parking pass has gone from \$190 to \$300 this year. Those increases have a compensation: Students can ride the bus anywhere without charge with a valid student ID.

That carrot-and-stick approach has had predictable results.

The number of drivers on campus, as measured by annual parking permits, has dropped from 13,754 four years ago to just 8,846 as of Friday, the most recent numbers available. Those numbers will likely climb a little more as the academic year, which began Monday, gets more fully under way.

But the car count nevertheless will represent a significant decrease over previous years. This has occurred despite an increase in student population.

At the same time, bus rider-

WHY IT MATTERS

• People need financial incentives, in addition to a do-the-right-thing ethic, to make more frequent use of public transportation.

ship has gone up. Considerably. Individual rides jumped from 837,886 in the 2004-2005 school year, to 1.9 million last academic year. Gas prices and the latest parking fee hike will no doubt bump up ridership even more this year.

The parking fee can be difficult to bear for some students who feel they need a car on campus to get to work or for other purposes. But the price tag isn't out of line with other major universities. Students at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo pay \$300 a year for a parking pass. At Wayne State University in Detroit parking runs between \$360 and \$520 a year. And GVSU offers the alternative of a free bus ride as compensation. The university pays The Rapid \$2.1 million a year from its general fund for the free bus passes. That cost, ultimately born by all students, is well worth it.

The arrangement not only makes life better for everyone on campus, it helps keep expenses down for the university, where a growth in drivers would someday require construction of a costly parking ramp in Allendale.

Too, the free pass gets young people accustomed to riding the bus. That habit, not common in this state's car-bound culture, will come in handy throughout college. And, given rising gas prices, it could be an enduringly useful lesson *after* graduation, too.