July 14, 2016

Rapid City Common Council
300 6th Street
Rapid City, SD 57701

Re: Public Transportation

Dear Council Member:

I will be placing an item on the August 1, 2016 City Council Agenda concerning the Rapid Transit System.

I am proposing a change in the transit fare structure for RapidRide (Resolution 2016-040) which would eliminate fares and provide free transit service for Rapid City youth (K-12) accessing any one of the six (6) RapidRide routes.

I've always had a concern that Rapid City youth from poverty-stricken families have higher truancy rates than other students. This is especially true during inclement weather conditions. Many RapidRide bus stops are located within a short distance of Rapid City schools. Further, I am concerned that youth in Rapid City become landlocked for a number of reasons, one being the unusually large geographic size of Rapid City. Student-age children are in need of resources within Rapid City and may not be able to access them as needed. I believe, and I suspect you will agree, that mobility and freedom contribute significantly to quality-of-life. Quality-of-life then in turn contributes to confidence and higher social intelligence quotient.

The basis of my position on this issue relates directly to three things:

1. Rapid City students should be encouraged to travel within our city for reasons related to school, social interaction or entertainment.

2. Although it may be hard to believe, the $1.50 one way bus fare and the $20.00 monthly bus pass currently charged to use RapidRide stand as a barrier to many Rapid City youth who wish to use public transportation.
3. This type of program has been implemented in several communities resulting in increased ridership and decreased levels of truancy.

In speaking with transit director Rich Sagen, public transportation ridership has plateaued in Rapid City over the past few years. This comes at a time when communities such as ours should be encouraging use of public transportation for many reasons to include:

- Mobilizing Rapid City youth will give better access to schools, libraries, recreation and social events. Our physically large and expanding city makes it difficult for some youth to explore and experience all that Rapid City has to offer.

- Public transportation saves money. Studies indicate families utilize public transportation, and as a result are able to reduce to one vehicle per family. Public transportation can save over $10,000 per year in vehicle related costs.

- Public transportation conserves fuel and reduces traffic congestion. This also provides the benefit of increased public safety and reduces stress among travelers.

- Public transportation reduces air pollution and it helps to create efficient use of roads and parking lots.

- Public transportation increases mobility for those with disabilities or those who are otherwise unable to drive.

- Public transportation encourages and supports higher density development in areas such as downtown and apartment complexes.

- Public transportation leads to a more active lifestyle. Simply walking to and from bus stops can triple daily physical activity for some users.

- Public transportation enhances personal mobility and freedom for people from every walk of life and provides access to job opportunities, therefore protecting our future workforce.

I believe encouraging Rapid City youth to use public transportation will provide these and other positive benefits and will create a learning and conditioning experience for future Rapid City adults. There is a stigma attached to the use of public transportation and if young people can achieve a greater comfort level with public transportation they will be far more likely to use it as adults. In my opinion, there is reason to believe this is one of the answers to encouraging and increasing use of public transportation into the future.

I would propose we implement this program to coincide with the start of the upcoming school year on an experimental basis. Initially, some marketing and public outreach will be necessary to get the word out to the students and parents. I am proposing free ride orientation week, August 22-26 for parents and students to familiarize themselves with the bus routes and schedules. The program will officially start August 31, the first day of school for the Rapid City Area School District.
Some things to be aware of:

- At this time, we are not proposing any form of identification be required to allow a student access to city buses. Whether we should require a high school ID card during the school year will be a decision I recommend we leave up to Mr. Sagen.

- Bus routes and times will remain the same as they are today. After future ridership has stabilized, bus routes and ridership can be analyzed to determine if any changes are necessary.

- We have met with feeding South Dakota and are evaluating options for providing service to their facility. This will continue to be handled separately.

I recommend that an evaluation of the experiment take place over the 2016 Christmas break. Furthermore, I recommend that a first-year experiment evaluation take place in June 2017. At any point during the evaluation phases, we could revert to the original rate and operation policy or adopt the changes permanently.

There is a cost: currently, students purchase monthly passes which generates revenue for RapidRide in the amount of approximately $32,000 per year. The reduction in fares would be offset with federal funds which would result in about a $16,000 net loss in fare revenues, which would increase the local tax dollar share of expenses. I believe however, this is a very minimal investment into the great potential benefits of this program.

I encourage your support of this new program and to that end, I would ask you to make an adjustment to resolution #2016-040, The City of Rapid City fee schedule.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me. I look forward to your input.

Sincerely,

Steve Allender, Mayor
Rapid City, South Dakota

cc: Rapid City Common Council