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GRTC



MARGO WAGNER, TIMES-DISPATCH

People board and exit a GRTC bus Monday in Richmond. Bus rides have been free since 2020, when GRTC waived fares at the height of the pandemic. Last year, GRTC said it had facilitated almost 11 million rides between July 2023 and July 2024, a 14% increase over the previous year.

Free rides to continue

'Zero-fare transit is a total lifeline for a huge portion of our community'

SAMUEL B. PARKER
Richmond Times-Dispatch

If the Greater Richmond Transit Company were to resume charging bus fares, hundreds of Richmond residents would likely have to choose between eating dinner and seeing their doctors.

That's according to Jene Johnson, a social worker for Health Brigade's clinics, which offer medical and mental health care services for low-income and uninsured residents. Johnson estimated that roughly 60% of Health Brigade patients rely on city buses to get to their appointments — and every-

where else. "A lot of them struggle with transportation barriers," she said. For example, many of the patients can't afford a vehicle or to regularly pay for rideshares like Uber, and don't have friends or family who can drive them. "No-fare has honestly been life-saving," Johnson said.

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Tracking the news

What happened? A state grant that supports free GRTC bus fares is set to end in June. VCU, which also contributed to the program, will not renew its support. That will create a nearly \$7 million funding gap.

What's next? GRTC has committed to filling that gap, and is looking for donations from regional partners to help keep the program running. Their budget will be released later this spring.

VDH

Agency to lose \$200M

500 staffers will be lost after cuts from federal government

ERIC KOLENICH
Richmond Times-Dispatch

The state health department stands to lose more than \$200 million and 500 employees after the federal government said it would cut funding for projects related to COVID-19.

In late March, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told the Virginia Department of Health that it would cancel three COVID-related grants before their original end dates, said Maria Reppas, a spokesperson for the Virginia Department of Health.

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HIGHER ED

Visas revoked for 3 at VCU,

Free bus

From A1

In 2019, GRTC's fares were set at \$1.50 per one-way ride, plus 25 cents per transfer. For a person taking the bus roundtrip on a daily basis, that came out to more than \$1,000 annually — and that's without adding transfer fees.

That changed in 2020, when GRTC first began waiving fares to reduce human-to-human contact during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Then, in 2021, the state's Department of Rail and Public Transportation awarded the transit company a three-year, \$8 million grant to study the feasibility of running full-time, cost-free bus routes. Virginia Commonwealth University chipped in an additional \$3.8 million to fund free fares for university students and employees. GRTC covered the remaining \$8 million.

But with the state dollars set to run out and VCU declining to renew the agreement, both funding sources will dry up on June 30. A resulting \$6.8 million gap left the future of zero-fare unclear — until Thursday, when GRTC spokesperson Ashley Potter said the transit company would fund the entire program alone.

"We can project that (next year) is set for zero-fare funding," Potter told The



MARGO WAGNER, TIMES-DISPATCH

A person crosses the street in front of a GRTC bus Monday on East Broad Street. Funding from the state and VCU is set to dry up in June, but the transit company announced Thursday it would fund the entire program alone for the next year.

Times-Dispatch. "We can't break down funding details until the board adopts (the budget)."

Potter also projected that the program would continue running "long term."

That's a relief to Johnson, who said stakes couldn't be higher. The financial pressure of bus fares would mean that people with serious medical issues like diabetes and heart disease would "miss their doctors appointments."

"We're really running the risk of isolating people," she said.

GRTC worked to secure alternate funding

Last year, GRTC said it had facilitated almost 11 million rides between July 2023 and July 2024. That's a

14% increase over the previous year.

A majority of those riders were low-income and transit-dependent, said GRTC spokesperson Ashley Potter, and were "using the bus for necessities" — going to work, school or the grocery store.

"Zero-fare transit is a total lifeline for a huge portion of our community," Potter said.

Potter said that GRTC was "disappointed" by VCU's withdrawal, but added that the company had been working on ways to preserve zero-fare transit.

"Our biggest push has been to find more community partners who have a passion for public transportation to come onboard with us," she said.

That effort has centered

on GRTC's Transit Access Program, Potter said, through which companies and individuals can make tax-deductible donations to "directly support fare-free access to public transportation."

Why did VCU bow out?

In a statement, VCU spokesperson Brian McNeil said the university's contract with GRTC was "intended to cover the cost of VCU fares based on the estimated ridership of VCU students and employees."

But because GRTC started offering free rides to everyone, the contract became redundant — and therefore unnecessary.

"(It) fundamentally shifted the basis and need for the agreement between VCU and GRTC," McNeil explained. "As a result, at this time VCU does not require additional services beyond those provided to other riders throughout the region."

Of course, if the zero-fare program were to end, VCU students and staff will have to start paying to ride buses again. If that happened, the university "may consider contributing alongside other ... contributors in support of zero-fare service," McNeil said.

He added that VCU also might support GRTC by buying bus ads.

Meanwhile, a city spokesperson told The Times-Dispatch that Mayor Danny Avula had included more than \$9 million for GRTC in his proposed budget. But how the company chooses to use it will be up to them.

Avula "is supportive of fare-free transit," the city spokesperson said, and hopes GRTC and its regional partners will "be able to find a path forward" for the program.

"However, GRTC's board ... (will) ultimately make the final decisions," the spokesperson said.

GRTC's budget documents for the past two years are not available online, but during a June meeting, the company's board reviewed a proposed budget worth more than \$90 million for this fiscal year. A majority of those funds were taxpayer dollars from local governments — Richmond, Chesterfield County and Henrico County — and state and federal grants, meaning Richmond residents, in a sense, have already paid for bus access.

Employee wages accounted for \$40 million, or nearly half, of the total expenses. Exact operating costs, such as fuel and vehicle and facility maintenance, were not spelled out in the proposal.

The cost of zero-fare transit also is not clear, although going off the 2019 rates, the company missed

out on at least \$16.5 million in revenue.

'The region needs to step up'

Many Richmond residents simply cannot afford to lose fare-free transit, said Faith Walker, executive director of RVA Rapid Transit — an organization that advocates for an enhanced regional transportation system.

"A quarter of riders ... have fixed incomes," Walker said, citing a recent survey conducted by her organization. One respondent to that survey, who reported that he relies on Social Security, said that paying to ride the bus had left him with only \$40 per month after paying for rent and groceries.

Fare-free transit bumped that number to \$104 per month.

"So people have more money in their pocket because of this," Walker said. "There are so many stories."

Affordable transportation is important now more than ever, Walker added. Inflation continues to increase the cost of living, tariffs could drive up prices even further and a possible recession looms.

"This is serious," she said. "The region needs to step up."

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