

Grand Rapids getting 11 natural gas buses through \$6.2M federal grant



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People walk onto a bus at the Rapid Central Station in Grand Rapids (Anntaninna Biondo | MLive.com)

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GRAND RAPIDS, MI — The Rapid bus system is set to get 11 new compressed natural gas busses through a nearly \$6.2M grant from the Federal Transit Administration.

The grant was announced Tuesday by U.S. Rep. Hillary Scholten, D-Grand Rapids.

“West Michigan is on the move, and The Rapid is helping us get where we need to go,” she said in a statement. “Today’s announcement of a \$6.2M grant will go a long way in renewing and replacing aging buses, with cleaner options, creating green jobs and a healthier environment in the process. Providing consistent modes of public transit to West Michigan residents is critical to connecting thousands of residents to work, school, medical appointments, and entertainment.”

The grant for The Rapid was part of a larger package of federal assistance for transit projects announced Monday. The U.S. Department of Transportation grants total nearly \$1.7 billion and will help fund projects in 46 states, territories, and D.C., according to a news release. In addition to transportation, the funds are also helping pay for workforce training, registered apprenticeships, and project labor agreements, the release said.

Scholten’s office said it “supported The Rapid’s successful application for these funds through a series of visits, a letter, and conversations with FTA leadership.”

Deb Prato, The Rapid’s CEO, said the bus system will receive natural gas to power the busses from a local biodigester operated by the city of Grand Rapids and DTE Energy.

“This funding will allow us to continue with this commitment to providing greener transportation options for our community, while aligning with the Biden Administration’s initiative to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve air quality,” she said in a statement. “We are excited to keep working towards a cleaner and more sustainable future for our region.”

Rapid spokesperson Cassi Cooper said the bus system will order the busses this fall. They should all arrive and be on the road by fall 2024, she said.

Currently, 102 of The Rapid’s 133 bus fleet have capacity to run on natural gas, she said. However, not all those busses are currently using the fuel because natural gas is in short supply, Cooper said. The Rapid began receiving renewable natural gas from the biodigester in April.

“We don’t have enough RNG (renewable natural gas) yet from the biodigester to be able to fuel every single one of those 102 busses fully on RNG,” she said. “So as the biodigester makes more, then we can fuel those busses fully.”

Because the renewable natural gas project was launched so recently, it’s unclear when The Rapid will be receiving enough natural gas to fully fuel all its busses using the substance, Cooper said.

“We only started accepting RNG (renewable natural gas) as of April 13,” she said. “We don’t know enough yet to say when we will be able to fuel all of them.”