



**House  
Legislative  
Analysis  
Section**

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**BR-196; "CESAR E. CHAVEZ WAY"**

**House Bill 5220 (Substitute H-2)  
First Analysis (2-28-02)**

**Sponsor: Rep. Joanne Voorhees  
Committee: Transportation**

***THE APPARENT PROBLEM:***

In 1994, Cesar Estrada Chavez was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously, to recognize a lifetime of unrelenting effort and countless selfless acts that re-formed or removed many unyielding institutional structures that dehumanize people who live in poverty. After he died on April 23, 1993 at age 66, more than 40,000 people attended his funeral, little wonder since a 1975 Lou Harris poll showed that 17 million American adults were honoring the grape boycott he began five years earlier.

Cesar E. Chavez grew up on a small family farm near Yuma, Arizona where his grandfather homesteaded during the 1880s. His father lost the farm during the Depression, and when he was 10 years old, he and the other members of his family became migrant farm workers. Chavez served in the western Pacific with the U.S. Navy during World War II, then settled with his new wife in the East San Jose barrio close to the apricot orchards and the Delano vineyards where he worked. In 1952, Chavez joined the Community Service Organization (CSO), a barrio-based self-help group sponsored by Chicago-based Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation, where as a full-time organizer, and later as national director, he coordinated voter registration drives, battled racial and economic discrimination against Chicano residents, and organized new CSO chapters across California and Arizona. After 10 years he left the CSO, in order to form the National Farm Workers Association, moving with his wife and eight children to Delano, California. In 1963, after three years of slow recruitment in the fields of California farm communities, the NFWA claimed 1,200 member families, and the group joined an AFL-CIO sponsored union in a strike against major Delano area table and wine grape growers. Against great odds, Chavez led a successful five-year strike that rallied millions of supporters--a coalition of unions, church groups, students, minorities, and consumers--to the United Farm Workers. In 1966, the NFWA and the UFW merged and affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

The UFW adopted the principles of non-violence that were practiced by Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The 1965 strikers took a pledge of non-violence, and Chavez conducted a 25-day fast in 1968 to reaffirm the UFW's commitment to non-violence. In 1975, the state of California enacted a collective bargaining law for farm workers, called the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, and by the early 1980s, unionized farm workers numbered in the tens of thousands, able to work under contracts that ensured higher pay, family health coverage, pension benefits, and other contract protections.

Hardship was ever present: in 1963 when the CSO refused to turn its attention more exclusively to organizing farm workers; in 1973 when the Teamsters aligned with growers to negotiate "sweetheart" pacts that cause 10,000 farm workers in the coastal valley to walk out of the fields in protest; in 1982 when the Farm Labor Board of California stopped enforcing the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, prompting a second grape boycott in 1984, and a 36-day "Fast for Life" in July and August 1988, to protest the pesticide poisoning of grape workers and their children. Despite these and other hardships, Cesar E. Chavez persevered.

To recognize the compassion, courage, and steadfast commitment of Cesar E. Chavez, the people of Grand Rapids have proposed to commemorate a well-traveled roadway that passes through their community.

***THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:***

House Bill 5220 would amend the Michigan Memorial Highway Act to name a portion of highway in the city of Grand Rapids and the county of Kent as the "Cesar E. Chavez Way." More specifically and under the bill, the highway beginning at the intersection of business route 196 and Franklin street, and continuing south to Clyde Park Avenue, would be commemorated as the Cesar E. Chavez Way.

House Bill 5220 (2-28-02)

The Michigan Memorial Highway Act requires the Department of Transportation to place and maintain suitable markers to identify the name of the highway after sufficient private contributions have been received to completely cover the cost.

MCL 250.1001 to 250.1100

### ***BACKGROUND INFORMATION:***

The highlights of Cesar Chavez's life, above, and far more detailed information about the United Farm Workers movement can be found at <http://clnet.ucr.edu/research/chavez/chronology/>.

The United Farm Workers union is led by Arturo S. Rodriguez, Chavez's son-in-law. Chavez's family and the officers of the UFW have created the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation to inspire current and future generations by promoting the ideals of his life and vision.

### ***FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:***

Fiscal information is not available.

### ***ARGUMENTS:***

#### ***For:***

It is appropriate that the state recognize the extraordinary contribution of those who have been leaders in service to their country. In this instance, the state's recognition of Cesar E. Chavez is especially appropriate since he was the second Mexican-American to win the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and also was awarded the Aguila Azteca (the Aztec Eagle), Mexico's most distinguished award presented to people of Mexican heritage who have made major contributions outside Mexico. This lasting recognition of Cesar Chavez allows the citizens in the Grand Rapids community to honor one who demonstrated great courage and valor in defense of freedom. Further, the state's recognition makes an ongoing public dialogue possible as it keeps citizens mindful about the injustice of poverty, and the importance of an unrelenting effort to seek peaceful solutions to social and political problems.

### ***POSITIONS:***

The City of Grand Rapids supports the bill. (2-27-02)

Analyst: J. Hunault

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■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.