

# Another Voice: Tolls are needed to maintain Grand Island bridges

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By Maria Lehman

The editorial in the May 21 Buffalo News, “Grand Island bridge tolls have outlived their usefulness and should be abolished,” offered a view that did not take into account the reinvestment of tolls required to ensure the Grand Island bridges are maintained for the safety of the motorists crossing them on a daily basis.

The Grand Island bridges on I-190 are under the jurisdiction of the New York State Thruway Authority. The Thruway is a user-supported system of highways where tolls are reinvested back into its infrastructure. Residents of Grand Island pay 9 cents to travel over the bridges. There is also a Thruway Grand Island Commuter Plan that has a monthly minimum Grand Island bridge usage charge of \$5.60 (20 trips at 28 cents per trip) versus the full toll of \$1 per trip.

To put into perspective the commitment by the Thruway Authority to the residents of Grand Island, these modest toll amounts have translated into nearly \$120 million in capital improvements on the Grand Island bridges over the last five years, and an additional \$47 million will be spent during 2016-17. Included in these figures is the repaving of I-190 on Grand Island this summer. In addition to these investments, in 2010, the Thruway Authority erected “Business District” signs on I-190 in an effort to direct motorists to the downtown Grand Island business district.

Based on the amount of funds that have been and will be committed to ensuring the safe operational condition of the bridges, the suggestion that tolls are not being invested back into the bridges was surprising.

In 2015 only 2 percent of total revenue from tolls on the Grand Island bridges was attributed to Grand Island residents and just 10.5 percent of toll revenue was attributed to commuters.

Permitting free or reduced travel must be done in compliance with the requirements of the authority’s bond resolution. In accordance with its statutory powers, the authority has issued bonds, which are secured by a pledge of the revenues collected from tolls on the system. Removing tolls that are not revenue neutral violates the existing bond covenants and would negatively impact the authority’s bondholders in violation of statutory and constitutional protections. Additionally, simply removing the tolls along the system does not eliminate the need to operate and maintain the system. The southbound span opened in 1935 and the northbound span opened in 1965.

The Thruway Authority will continue its commitment to the residents of Grand Island, the motorists traveling through and the tourists enjoying the Buffalo Niagara region, to ensure the safety and pleasant riding experience for what amounts to, for residents, less than a dime.

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