



Gov. Andrew Cuomo speaks Tuesday on the removal of the toll booths on both sides of the Grand Island bridges. (John Hickey/The Buffalo News)

Sean Kirst: Let's honor the nameless commuters soon free of GI toll booths

By [Sean Kirst](#) | Published 6:00 a.m. August 23, 2017 | Updated 1 hour ago



The Grand Island toll booths are expected to come down next March, which means civic leaders will eventually need to choose someone to make the ceremonial first drive through the open area where the tolls, for so long, have served as a barrier.

Rather than a politician behind the wheel, here's a suggestion: Why not find a few commuters who've handled that daily grind for 50 years or more, men and women who've spent some astounding number of cumulative hours waiting at those toll booths to pay up and keep driving?

If you know anyone who qualifies, send the names this way. If nothing else, I'll get them in the paper - thus honoring the grassroots effort from which this unlikely movement came to be.

As a fitting example, Pat Whalen was about as far away as he could get Tuesday from the center of the action. He sat in the last seat of the last row of folding chairs at Fisherman's Landing on Grand Island, where officials held the formal announcement between the two great spans that link the island to Tonawanda. Up front, Gov. Andrew Cuomo and others were describing an historic moment on the Niagara Frontier, their voices barely audible above the clank and roar of trucks climbing the bridge.

The toll booths, a sharp stone in the collective regional foot since the 1930s, will finally be gone.

Many of us thought we'd never see the day. Western New Yorkers have griped about those toll booths for 80 years and counting with a sort of weary, this-won't-ever-go-away acceptance. The best toll booth memories many of us can muster involve the occasional moments when some generous stranger would pay a double toll at Grand Island and say to the person in the booth: "Hey. Take care of the car behind me."

Seriously. That sometimes happened in the days before E-Z Pass. Still, the toll booths were more often the kind of stress-inducing obstacle that caused Whalen, about 19 months ago, to sit down and [write an essay for LinkedIn](#). He maintained the tolls were a "psychological barrier" to the casual movement of people between Buffalo and Niagara Falls.

That essay is why Grand Island Supervisor Nathan McMurray made a beeline for the last row before Tuesday's news conference began. Beaming, he exclaimed to Whalen: "We did it!"

Then he turned and told anyone standing nearby how Whalen was a key player in bringing down the tolls.



Pat Whalen and Nate McMurray at Tuesday's news conference announcing cashless tolling for Grand Island. (John Hickey/The Buffalo News)

The story goes like this: Whalen wrote his essay and sent it to a friend, Mike Billoni, for a little editing. Billoni, a former vice president and general manager of the Buffalo Bisons, runs his own communications outfit – and also lives on Grand Island. There are different versions of the exact timing, but the end result is that Billoni introduced Whalen to McMurray, and the two men realized they had the same feeling about the toll booths.

They needed to go, and the campaign to bring it about had to be civil, passionate - and maybe even a little funny.

"It was either going to happen right away or take forever," Whalen said.

The alliance was complete once Brian Michel, a 28-year-old who lives in Niagara County and works as a grant writer in Buffalo, decided he'd had enough of tedious waits on his daily commute.

"It was the trifecta," Michel said of the three-man partnership.

Basically, Whalen said, it shook down like this. He'd approach the business community, McMurray would be the political lightning rod, and Michel brought an especially critical component:

Skill and passion with social media.

Our grandparents, when they ground their teeth about the toll booths, could hardly turn to Instagram. McMurray understands the power of a camera. In June, he did a tongue-in-cheek video that both praised Cuomo and gently needled the governor about the need for getting rid of the toll booths. The video exploded after Michel gave it a good ride on Facebook.

Sam Hoyt, regional president of the state Economic Development Corp., brokered a teleconference involving McMurray and top state transportation officials, who listened and then said – to McMurray's joyous surprise – yes, they agreed with his central point.

Cuomo came to Grand Island Tuesday and made it official. The state won't give up the proceeds from the tolls – cashless tolling means motorists will still pay by E-Z Pass or direct billing – but the toll booths themselves will soon disappear.

McMurray played point guard with his appreciation, dishing it around to many state and civic officials who helped out along the way. Michel, who saw the announcement as an early gift before his wedding Saturday, described Cuomo's decision as "a generational change," which might seem like hyperbole except for one thing.

He's right. Travelers have been waiting for those toll booths to disappear since Franklin D. Roosevelt was president.

As for Whalen, he is interim director of the Niagara Global Tourism Institute in Niagara Falls, founded with one core purpose. The goal is helping the larger community to "improve the visitor experience," and the toll booths, to put it mildly, hardly fit the mission. To Whalen, removing them represents the rare civic moment when the symbolic importance is almost as meaningful as the decision itself.

"So many people said about the tolls, 'This will never change,'" Whalen said. "And so many people feel the same way about Niagara Falls."

In other words, if you can take on a longtime regional annoyance and immediately make the lives of hundreds of thousands of people a little easier, maybe you can make them believe change can happen in other ways, with other enduring problems.

State officials promised that 52 full- or part-time toll collectors and managers affected by the decision will have the chance to transfer, and the general mood at the event was one of celebration. As recently as February, interim Thruway Authority director Bill Finch – Matt Driscoll, state transportation commissioner, will soon move into Finch's job – was saying the state had no plans for cashless tolling in upstate.

Yet here it is. A collective effort by a bunch of relatively little guys led to big change in Albany, to a decision that is expected to become a reality once the tolls come down next March. As I say, if you know of any commuters who've made that daily drive for a half-century or so, let me know so I can make this nomination.

They've earned the right to be the first over the bridge, without a wait.

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