

# Critics: \$25M welcome center on Grand Island is like a ghost town



A view of the Western New York Welcome Center on Grand Island. The state spent \$25 million on the rest stop in 2018 to promote tourist attractions in the region. But criticism persists over the center's location off the I-190. (Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News)

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When Chuck Eckert exited the Thruway's I-190 on Grand Island to check out the Western New York Welcome Center on a Friday afternoon this summer, he was taken aback at how empty it was.

"It's Aug. 9 and 3 o'clock in the afternoon on one of the busiest days of tourism season. Thousands of cars are driving by and I'm looking around and I see less than 20 people at the center," Eckert said. "It's a wonderful building in the wrong location. It's a waste of money."

The \$25 million center opened a year ago to much fanfare with public officials saying how it would play an important role in bolstering tourism but criticisms persist over the center's location and whether it is succeeding in its mission.

None of the more than two dozen visitors interviewed on Aug. 9 by The Buffalo News said they had intentions of extending their stays in Western New York to take in regional sites promoted at the center.

Most were either on their way to Niagara Falls or heading elsewhere on their vacations, part of a stream of motorists whose numbers total about 23.7 million driving on that section of the Thruway annually.

Built with state funds from the second phase of the Buffalo Billion, the cavernous 12,442-square-foot center drew praise from visitors for its design, which was inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's prairie-style architecture, and what it offers.

Missing, though, are direct access ramps from the Thruway, making it cumbersome to reach, according to critics. They say the money could have been used for other projects, such as a year-round attraction to draw tourists during the lean winter months.

The Thruway Authority says the center is succeeding and points to the number of visitors in the first year. There were 177,224 visitors, according to authority figures based on computer software that counts the people entering the facility.

But that number may be inflated.

The day The News spent at the center, many people were observed entering the center, stepping outside to sit in the sunshine or eat at the picnic tables, and then returning to the center to use the restrooms before leaving.

A Thruway Authority spokeswoman acknowledged that the people-counting technology was not capable of determining if visitors were counted multiple times. According to the authority's counting system, 728 people visited the center between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. on Aug. 9.

Yet unlike traditional Thruway rest stops that are frequently crowded, the welcome center, critics said, is often a ghost town.

There are 11 welcome centers in the state and the Thruway operates three, including the one on Grand Island. Its Capital Region Welcome Center near Albany is the busiest with nearly 500,000 visitors since last fall. The more remotely situated Mohawk Valley Welcome Center, only accessible to westbound traffic, had the least visitors at 96,487.

## **What's at the center?**

When visitors enter the Western New York Welcome Center, one of the first sights that grabs their attention is a massive video screen that features images of the different attractions in the region.

Digital kiosks provide additional information on those attractions and display cases feature everything from a handcarved carousel horse made in North Tonawanda to a pair of open-toed high heels matching what famed comedienne Lucille Ball of Jamestown once wore.

A Taste NY store is stocked with locally made products and other items produced by vendors across the state, providing New York businesses with a chance to expand their markets.



You can buy food and beverages made in New York State at the Taste NY store at the WNY Welcome Center on Grand Island. (Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News)

“The welcome centers present an efficient and effective opportunity to reach potential visitors, whether that is capturing the interests of travelers passing through the state, motivating visitors on an existing trip to expand or extend their stay, or planting the seed for a future visit,” Thruway Authority spokeswoman Jennifer Givner said.

## **Knocking the location**

Since the center opened, Patrick J. Whalen, director of the Niagara Global Tourism Institute, has used it as a temporary office two or three times a week while new quarters for the institute are built in Niagara Falls.

“It is clearly in the wrong place. I’ve been coming for a year and there’s usually nobody here, especially in the winter and those that do stop are here to use the restrooms,” Whalen said.

He said “the only thing that makes sense” for picking Grand Island was that the Thruway had already owned 16 1/2 acres of land where it built the center.

“I was told the center was built to market Buffalo attractions to tourists leaving Niagara Falls. If that’s the case, why wouldn’t you put it in Niagara Falls?” Whalen said.

The lack of direct access ramps is another of Whalen’s criticisms.

“What if the Whitehaven Road overpass needs to be repaired,” he said. “How will people get here?”

Givner said a decadesold federal law prohibits commercial enterprises, such as a Taste NY store, at rest stops with direct access to interstate highways, with the exception of existing facilities grandfathered under the law.

So in order to accommodate the store, the center could not be directly connected to the Thruway, Givner said.

Direct access ramps, she added, would have precluded the capability to have vehicle or pedestrian access to the local community. And while tourism promotion was being showcased by state and local officials at the center’s grand opening last year, Givner said community use was always part of the plan.

“Over the summer months we held outreach seasons for E-ZPass and tolls by mail. People were there waiting and many if not most lived on the island,” Givner said of some of the events, adding, “There’s a weekly farmers market and the community room is utilized on a regular basis.”

## **How Grand Island was selected**

In seeking information on reasons for Grand Island’s selection, The News obtained a 2017 Thruway Authority “Final Design Report” from the Town of Grand Island by way of a Freedom of Information Law request.

The report stated that a facility was needed to serve as a “gateway” to Western New York along the I-190 corridor in the Buffalo area with the purpose of supporting tourism.

The Thruway Authority determined that the strip of land it already owned adjacent to its roadway on Grand Island would be able to accommodate cars, trucks, recreational vehicles and buses.

In addition, the site was big enough for a picnic area, playground, dog park, shelter for motorcycles and charging stations for electric-powered vehicles.

Several other sites, the report stated, had also been considered.

A “Buffalo Welcome Center” at the Niagara Street interchange on the I-190 was ruled out because it would not be visible from the Thruway. The same reason was given for a “Galleria Mall Welcome Center” in

Cheektowaga. A “Canalside Welcome Center” was deemed unfeasible because of a “densely developed urban environment” that might “dissuade users from utilizing this site,” the study concluded.

Renovating the Thruway’s Clarence Travel Plaza into a welcome center was also considered, but it was determined that site already serves “as a natural gateway to Western New York and already has similar facilities and amenities” the center would feature.

Constructing a “Peace Bridge Welcome Center” in Canada was also rejected.

The Thruway Authority’s study had estimated the price of the center at about \$20 million for the purpose of soliciting bids, according to Givner. But a final cost figure has not been determined because of pending invoices. Earlier this year, the Thruway released figures that placed the center's cost at about \$25 million.

In February, The News filed a freedom of information request for all state spending on the center and contracts with vendors, including the Taste NY store. The Authority has issued seven delays in providing records, citing the need for more time to prepare its response.



The Taste NY store inside the Western New York Welcome Center sells food and beverages produced in New York. (Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News)

### **No rent from concessionaire**

At other Thruway rest stops concessionaires pay the state to operate restaurants or stores. For instance, Delaware North has paid the Thruway Authority \$396,529 to date this year for four rest stops, including the Clarence Travel Plaza.

But Taste NY stores are not under that type of financial obligation and occupy the Grand Island welcome center rent free, according to the state Department of Agriculture and Markets.

The state also gives money to Cornell Cooperative Extension to market the Grand Island site, said Agriculture and Markets spokeswoman Jola Szubielski.

Taste NY stores, she added, are not viewed as “revenue sources” for the state, but rather a statewide promotional program for New York farmers, food and beverage vendors to reach new customers.

“So, for example in 2018, the state invested \$3.4 million in the Taste NY program, but the impact was \$17.8 million in sales for its farms, food and beverage businesses,” Szubielski said of the return on public dollars.

## Supporters and critics

An official at the Martin House Complex, one of Wright’s most famous masterworks, said the welcome center has steered tourists to the Buffalo attraction.

“We regularly see guests who have visited the welcome center and they have told us that they have received information about the Martin House,” said Mary Roberts, the Martin House Complex's executive director, who could not estimate how many tourists were directed there from the welcome center.

James T. Sandoro, founder and executive director of the Buffalo Transportation/Pierce Arrow Museum, says the center “is not living up to its potential.” None of the visitors to his museum have mentioned that they came because of a stop at the center, Sandoro said.

People connected to the local tourism industry, he said, should be at the welcome center talking up the attractions so that visitors will rethink their plans and stay longer in Buffalo Niagara.



Mary Malone of Souderton, Pa., poses for a picture with her dogs in front of the ILOVENY sculpture in the front of the center. (Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News)

## What visitors say

Even if the center did not inspire the visitors who were interviewed to extend their stays, they were unanimous in praising its elegant architecture.

When Sal Mejia of Rochester walked into the center, he was so impressed, he shouted, “This building is beautiful,” and gave a thumbs-up. But his plans, he said, did not call for spending more time in Buffalo or Niagara Falls.

“We’re going to Toronto to see a Yankees game,” Mejia said.

Texas resident Belinda Hartung said she and her companions were in a hurry to get to Niagara Falls and had no plans to extend their stay.

“We have a limited amount of time,” said Hartung, who described the center in one word: “Fantastic.”

### **A future as a community center?**

Assemblyman Angelo J. Morinello, a Niagara Falls Republican whose district includes Grand Island, has been critical of the center and how much it cost. He also says criticism is not constructive at this point.

“It’s there and it is not going away. We need to multitask the building. Let’s move the focus to a community center. There are public and private meeting spaces,” Morinello said. “They could have high school reunions.”

Grand Island Supervisor Nathan D. McMurray, who often holds meetings there, said he lobbied for the center to be built on Grand Island because it would be “a natural connector” between the north and south parts of the region.

“The state wasn’t going for a commercial enterprise. They were trying to celebrate the best of New York, agriculture, products and history,” McMurray said.

As time passes, the supervisor predicted the center will become more of a focal point attracting Grand Island residents.

But when asked if the center will accomplish its mission of promoting more tourism, he said, “ ... I can’t predict that.”