

Portion of ceiling collapses at Thruway's welcome center on Grand Island



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. (Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News)

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Published 5:30 a.m. October 16, 2019

Bob Dickie said he heard a "huge bang" as a portion of the ceiling in the state's new \$25 million Western New York Welcome Center collapsed, nearly hitting him. He was heading home Monday morning to Plattsburgh from a weekend visit with his daughter in Youngstown when he stopped for a cup of coffee at the year-old center on Grand Island "because I thought it was beautiful." But as he approached the restroom, a 3-by-21-foot section of ceiling panels fell, missing him by about 2 feet, he said. "I was unhurt but I could have absolutely been hurt or potentially killed. This was not like wafer board. These were significant panels," Dickie said. "They were about three-quarters of an inch thick ... "

The New York State Thruway Authority's welcome center, which opened in August 2018 adjacent to the I-190 section of the Thruway, has [come under fire](#) for other reasons. Opponents of the facility say it is underutilized because motorists have to exit the Thruway to get to it. State money from the second phase of the Buffalo Billion that was used to build the center could have been better spent on a year-round tourist attraction, they say.

The welcome center has been praised by supporters for its design, which was inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie-style architecture. Thruway spokeswoman Jennifer Givner said Tuesday that maintenance workers have inspected all of the panels in that section of that section of the welcome center ceiling and reattached them with additional screws. The spokeswoman offered assurances that the facility is safe and that the remaining panels, approximately a dozen in that area, are secure.

Within seconds after the ceiling panels crashed to the floor, Dickie said a worker ran up to him to check on his condition. "When I told him I was OK, he then proceeded to get another employee. When I came out of the restroom, they had pulled the fallen panels to side," Dickie said.

He contacted The Buffalo News about the incident, he said, out of concern for other visitors. "It bothered me that it appeared the panels had been put up there only with adhesive. I couldn't see any any hardware holding them," Dickie said. Givner, the Authority spokeswoman, said there are nails holding the panels in addition to the adhesive. Screws were used to secure the panels, she said.