

Grand Island Voters to Decide on Borrowing \$10 Million

Buffalo News Story – Jonathan D. Epstein Stephen T. Watson,

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Grand Island officials are hoping to build a long-sought senior center and indoor recreation facility for town residents at the site of the former Fuccillo Hyundai dealership on Alvin Road, and they're asking voters to approve a \$10 million bond sale to help fund it.

But this proposal stunned Buffalo developer Frank Chinnici, who thought he already had struck a deal with town officials three years ago to include both amenities in the new Rivertown project he is he is planning on Grand Island Boulevard, with more than 300 apartments and commercial space. He says his project will be more visible, and centrally located, and would achieve the town's oft-stated goal for a walkable town center. And it was already approved by the town, with construction ready to start in the spring. "Rivertown already checks every box in the town's comprehensive plan – it's walkable, central and ready to go," said Chinnici, CEO of Legacy Development.

Town officials say they now prefer their latest plan because it would have the town owning the 75-acre property and the buildings at 1910 Alvin Road, rather than leasing it from Chinnici. The referendum is the major item on the ballot for Grand Island this fall, along with two seats on the Town Board. The last time the town voted on a community center was 1998. The 15-year bonds would result in a property tax increase of 30 cents for every \$1,000 of assessed value, or \$120 per year on a \$400,000 home. But those plans aren't set in stone.

If the bond sale is approved by voters, they'll pursue the town-owned senior center. If it is voted down, it will be back to square one. "We put it to a referendum. Everybody gets a vote. Everybody gets a say," Town Supervisor Peter Marston said. "I have not come out for or against this project. Here is the opportunity: Do you want it or don't you?" The Hyundai dealership on Alvin Road has been sold twice since former owner Billy Fuccillo died. The new owners of what is now Niagara Hyundai, Joe Cecconi's Chrysler Complex, want to move it to Niagara Falls, leaving the property vacant. The site is owned by Maguire Auto Group.

Initially, Marston said, town officials looked at the car dealership for a new highway garage, but they changed course after touring it and realizing that it had more potential for recreation.

The rear building has high ceilings that are ideal for indoor athletic space, while the building has "a lot of opportunities for flexible space" for meetings, programs or exercise. "Grand Island really struggles to have all those places. So, it checked all those boxes, and really fit in well with our master plan," Marston said. However, if the referendum doesn't pass, the deal for the property sale is void. According to a summary prepared by LaBella Associates, the project would cost \$9.8 million, including \$3.5 million for the acquisition and \$5.1 million for renovation.

The existing building is only about 20 years old, and could accommodate indoor and outdoor activities ranging from pickleball and batting cages to club meeting space. And there is abundant extra land for expansion or additional amenities, LaBella noted. Tentative plans show that the site could accommodate a tennis court, two basketball courts, four pickleball courts, a playground and a walking path on just half of the current paved parking lot. Inside, the building could feature an indoor turf area and a multipurpose court that could be divided for basketball, tennis, pickleball and volleyball, as well as meeting space and areas to store, wash or maintain town vehicles.

The town's new plan flew under the radar for months, so Chinnici said he was blind-sided when it became public less than two weeks ago. And he is upset because, he said, the town's proposal "puts them in a position of competing with us, instead of cooperating and supporting the project." Rivertown would be located on a 25-acre site off Grand Island Boulevard, between Webb and Whitehaven Roads. That's within an area that the town has previously identified in its comprehensive plan as the most appropriate place for a walkable town center. The land was rezoned in April 2022 under a "planned development district" to allow for the \$95 million mixed-use project, which received site plan approval in May 2024. Plans call for 319 apartments, along with up to 80,000 square feet of commercial space. And it's across the street from Rane Management's Heron Pointe development, with another 376 units of housing. When the project site was rezoned, Chinnici said, the town asked the developer to provide it with a two-year option to lease 15,000 square feet of space at 20% below the market rate for a senior center and broader recreation and athletic facilities.

But the town allowed that option to expire last December, even after previously extending it, Chinnici said. And its new plan means not only spending additional taxpayer money to buy and renovate a building, but also taking a property off the tax rolls – at a time when the town still needs to fix its sanitary sewer system, which has operated under a state consent decree since 2011 because it can't handle large volumes of overflow water from heavy storms. "So it's completely contrary to their own planning process and documents," Chinnici said. "You cannot make a municipal planning argument for this."

Marston acknowledged that the town had looked at leasing space at Rivertown. But he said the makeup of the Town Board has since changed, and so have their views, especially toward leasing versus owning. The town could still go with Rivertown, especially if the referendum is rejected. But "we would be a tenant. We wouldn't be an owner," the supervisor said. "The pitfall of that is you're spending a lot of money on someone else's building, and even if you're there for a long period of time, you're still investing in someone else's building. If there's a better opportunity, we need to explore that."

Meanwhile, Chinnici is still proceeding with Rivertown, which will be constructed in three phases over four years. The first phase will consist of 178 units of housing and 70,000 square feet of commercial space, with the athletic facility. He hopes to break ground in the spring. Full construction will depend on the how fast the apartments are rented.

Republicans have dominated recent elections on the island, winning all townwide races since 2017, despite a narrow, 36% to 33% edge over Democrats among registered voters. This year, four candidates are running for two seats on the five-member Town Board.

Incumbent Jose Garcia, is running again on the Republican and Conservative ballot lines. He's a retired special agent with U.S. Customs and Border Protection who runs a private investigations and language interpretation business. He won a special election in 2024 to fill a Town Board vacancy for one year, and now must run for a full term. Garcia said he's seeking re-election to continue his work promoting fiscal responsibility and smart growth that encourages needed development while preserving the town's rural character. "With my background in law enforcement, my experience navigating complex government systems and a lifelong love for this island, I am well-prepared to meet the challenges ahead," Garcia wrote in a Facebook campaign message.

Another Town Board member, Christian Bahleda, opted not to seek re-election after the town Republican Committee declined to endorse him for another term. Town Republicans instead backed Sherry M. Steffans, a nurse and former Grand Island School Board member. Steffans states she was a "strong, conservative voice" on the School Board and, if elected to Town Board, would focus on eliminating wasteful spending, ensuring transparency in town government and preventing crime on the island. "I am running for you, the hardworking families of Grand Island, who deserve a town government that respects your values, your tax dollars and your safety," Steffans said on Facebook. Steffans does not have a second ballot line.

One of the Democratic candidates, Rhonda G. Diehl, won the Conservative line in the June primary. Diehl has Democratic support for the race, even though she was a registered Republican until January, when she switched to the Conservative Party, records show. Diehl has served as assistant to the town supervisor for six years and her campaign Facebook account includes lengthy informational posts on topics such as zoning or the proposed community center. “I believe in accountability to our community and taxpayers at every level,” Diehl wrote. “My heart is in serving this community. It saddens me to see good ideas for Grand Island dismissed in favor of party politics.”

The second Democrat, Wayne M. West, a retired Union Carbide manager who now works as a Realtor, lost to Garcia in the special election last fall. He also finished third in a four-way race for two Town Board seats in the 2023 general election. West has just the Democratic line on the ballot. He said on his campaign’s Facebook page that he has heard from island residents about flooding, traffic safety, E-ZPass account issues and the state of Staley Road, among other concerns. “What’s become clear to me is that how we handle these issues is just as important as the issues themselves,” wrote West, who vowed to conduct a thorough audit of town finances and procedures if elected.

Highway Superintendent Richard Crawford Jr. is not seeking re-election. James Sedita, a mechanic shop supervisor and 30-year veteran of the Town of Tonawanda Highway Department, has Republican, Democratic and Conservative backing for the job. And Town Justice Mark J. Frentzel, first elected in 2005, has Republican and Conservative support and is unopposed for another term.