

- **Grand Island looks for new ideas after voters reject \$10 million community center**

Buffalo News story by Stephen T. Watson - Nov. 13, 2025

Grand Island officials are back to square one in deciding how and where to expand the town's recreation and senior programming. That's after island voters last week overwhelmingly defeated a plan to borrow \$10 million to pay for a new community center. Voters rejected the proposal to buy and upgrade a Hyundai dealership by 65% to 35% in an election that also featured the first Democrat-endorsed candidate to win a Town Board seat in a decade.

The community center plan would have raised taxes on the typical island home by \$120 per year over the 15-year life of the bonds. Town officials said they understand why voters balked at the cost of the project. "We wanted to make sure that people are comfortable with it. It's never a good time for things like that," Town Supervisor Peter Marston said Wednesday. "And I would say, especially now with the current economy and the way things are playing out, people are being cautious with money. And that's OK."

The builder behind Rivertown, a major planned mixed-use project on the island, has said he's ready and willing to host a senior center and recreational venues for the town as part of his development. But Grand Island leaders say it's too soon to the

They say the referendum came together quickly, to make sure it would appear on this year's ballot, and now the town needs to takes its time in figuring out how best to provide recreational and senior services, and how to pay for any of this expanded programming. "You need a plan before you can put anything on the table, right?" said Rhonda Diehl, the incoming Town Board member who now serves as assistant to the town supervisor.

The estimated \$9.8 million project cost included \$3.5 million for the acquisition of the 75-acre property at 1910 Alvin Road, and \$5.1 million for renovation.

A town consultant said the existing dealership building could accommodate indoor and outdoor activities ranging from pickleball and batting cages to club

meeting space, without requiring extensive improvements. And there was considerable extra land on the property for expansion or additional amenities, officials said.

Marston said he started looking into the possibility the town could use the Niagara Hyundai site, which is owned by Maguire Auto Group, when he learned the dealership's owner, Joe Cecconi's Chrysler Complex, planned to move it to Niagara Falls. He said he didn't want to see the property remain vacant for long. The project came together quickly, because Town Board members wanted to get the proposal onto the ballot to let town residents decide whether to borrow the cost of the new community center. Marston and Diehl, who wasn't yet on the board, say they know this left some residents feeling they didn't know enough about the project to support it.

Opponents also pointed to the cost of the project. The 15-year bonds would have resulted in a property tax increase of 30 cents for every \$1,000 of assessed value, or \$120 per year on a \$400,000 home. Marston on Wednesday said he wasn't surprised by the outcome, figuring the referendum had a 1 in 3 chance of passing. "I think the intent was to just throw it out there and let the people decide," he said. "We obviously wouldn't have put it forth if there wasn't a pretty apparent need in the community." With the bond defeat, the town now can act with more deliberation as it figures out the future of its recreational and senior services.

The town has a Golden Age Center, a converted Nike base, that provides valuable programming for seniors, but it's the town's only indoor recreation center, Marston said. The town borrows space from the Grand Island School District when it's available, he added. And the town has limited space for its popular summer and vacation camp for children – especially so when bad weather forces campers inside, Diehl said.

A town committee is putting together a master plan for recreation and senior services. It also retained LaBella Associates as a consultant to assess the findings of an online survey that asks residents about Grand Island's future recreation needs. Diehl and Marston said those results are still coming in but they're pleased with the response rate. "That showed the interest in what amenities our community is looking for," Diehl said. Buffalo developer Frank Chinnici said his

Rivertown project on Grand Island Boulevard remains a viable option for a future town community center.

He previously told The Buffalo News he thought he had a deal in place with town officials three years ago to include a senior center and recreational hub in his development, where he plans to build more than 300 apartments and commercial space. Chinnici was frustrated to learn about the town's plans for the auto dealership and spoke out against the proposal.

Marston previously acknowledged the town's discussions with Chinnici but said new board members thought it was better if the town owned its community center instead of leasing space from the Rivertown developer. He said no one from the town has reached out to him since Election Day but he looks forward to further discussions with island officials. "We just thought we'd give it a couple of weeks, and then we're going to start a campaign to engage with the town, and be engaged with the citizens, to ask them to support us in our attempt to negotiate with the town," Chinnici said.

Marston said Rivertown remains an option, and its location is particularly well suited for a senior center, but noted work hasn't started yet on the project. "When he builds it, we can continue that conversation," the supervisor said.