

Grand Island is ready to welcome a new welcome center



Preliminary plans for a Grand Island Welcome Center shared by Supervisor Nathan McMurray.

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A multimillion dollar New York state welcome center for tourists is being planned on Grand Island with a prairie-style design, inspired by the historic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. "I've been telling people 'This is not a rest stop,' " said Grand Island Chamber of Commerce President Eric Fiebelkorn. "Rest stops are nice, but they don't do anything for the communities they sit in. Our understanding is that this will benefit the local business community and we can point them to all the great things we have."

The visitor welcome center, which has been unofficially estimated to cost somewhere between \$6 million to \$15 million, according to Fiebelkorn and Grand Island Town Supervisor Nathan McMurray, will be fully funded by the state and located on state-owned property, along I-190, near Whitehaven Road.

According to the governor's office in [Buffalo Billion Phase II](#), the state has requested \$20 million for the project. McMurray said the state has informed the town that the welcome center could be completed by as early as 2018. The Grand Island Welcome Center will serve as a welcome center for all of Western New York – including Niagara Falls, according to initial plans announced by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo at his regional State of the State speech in Buffalo in January.

Empire State Development Regional President Sam Hoyt and Fiebelkorn helped him lobby the state to locate the welcome center on Grand Island, McMurray said. "All of sudden the governor showed up and said 'We're doing it,' " said McMurray, who called Grand Island the "green gateway" – connecting Buffalo to Niagara Falls."

Jennifer Givner, director of media relations for the New York Thruway Authority said, "We're excited about the project too," but cautioned it was still too early for them to release any details on the design, costs or construction dates. "We are still in the preliminary design phase," said Givner.

Empire State Development President Howard Zemsky said the Grand Island Welcome Center is part of an overall strategy in tourism investment. "The first phase of the Buffalo Billion helped leverage \$200 million in private investment in Niagara Falls. The welcome center will point visitors in the right direction to find the new hotels and attractions that will encourage them to extend their stay in the region," Zemsky said.

An estimated average 60,000 vehicles cross the Grand Island bridges daily, 30,000 on the north Grand Island bridge and 30,000 on the south bridge, said McMurray. "Most people just pass through it," McMurray said of his town. "It's time for people to stop and look and see this incredible gem - a freshwater island in the middle of the Niagara River."

McMurray, who released preliminary renderings for the Grand Island Welcome Center that show a design reminiscent of a Frank Lloyd Wright house, said the Grand Island Welcome Center will be better than the recently completed Long Island Welcome Center.

The Long Island Welcome Center, in Dix Hills, opened in October. The \$20.2 million, 15,200-square-foot site also features satellite New York State Police and Suffolk County Police offices; locally grown products; and interactive I LOVE NY kiosks to connect visitors with Long Island history and recreation opportunities.

"I've been to the one in Long Island and the governor's design team said, 'Yours will be better,' " said McMurray. "It's going to be fantastic."

"This is a place that will celebrate the history of the region," said McMurray. And similar to the Long Island center, the Grand Island site will also feature artifacts that reflect the history of Western New York, he added.

"This will not be a place to sell tours or sell candy bars, this will be celebration of the history and culture of Western New York," said McMurray.

There has been some pushback about what can be sold at the welcome center, after the Federal Highway Administration declared that the Long Island Welcome Center has violated the federal statutes which prohibits welcome centers on highways from selling over-the-counter goods because that would discourage visitors from stopping at local businesses.

"If the purpose of the law is to protect local commerce, wouldn't you think that something that is directly celebrating local business would be appropriate? And I think the Cuomo administration has made that same case," said McMurray. "The worst case scenario they just remove the food and go to vending machines and (kiosks) which highlight attractions, but I don't think this will stop the project."

Fiebelkorn agreed, noting the I-190 section of the State Thruway, which cuts through the middle of Grand Island, already discourages travelers from shopping there. He said travelers will stop at the welcome center and find out about what is available in Grand Island and across Western New York.

He said most of the development on Grand Island is not along the Thruway, but rather along the waterfront. "Hopefully we can stop them (from driving through the middle of Grand Island) and keep them for an hour," Fiebelkorn said.

Cuomo first announced plans to spend \$55 million to bolster the tourism industry in New York at the New York State Tourism and Craft Beverage Summit in October. Part of his plan includes welcome centers – a total of 10 sites across the state to promote each region.

McMurray said the Grand Island site is expected to have digital interactive touch screens with information about the region and attractions, including some of the lesser-known sites.

"Buffalo is more than chicken wings and the Bills – and I love chicken wings and the Bills," McMurray said. "This will celebrate some of the rest of the story that the nation doesn't know about."