

# Pitch made to ditch Grand Island tolls

## Legislation drafted calling for their removal



Grand Island Supervisor Nathan McMurray speaks at a rally in Fisherman's Park to support removal of toll barriers. John Hickey/Buffalo News

By Michael Canfield, News Staff on May 15, 2016 - 10:49 PM, updated May 15, 2016 at 11:47 PM

A handful of elected officials and Grand Island residents gathered Sunday afternoon at Fisherman's Landing to deliver a message to the state asking for removal of the tolls on the Grand Island Bridges.

"Mr. Cuomo, tear down these tolls," Supervisor Nathan D. McMurray said during the press conference, to cheers from the crowd.

With several people in attendance wearing T-shirts proclaiming "Home Free, End the GI Tolls," Assemblyman John D. Ceretto, D-Lewiston, spoke first, after a brief introduction from Councilwoman Beverly Kinney.

Ceretto has drafted legislation calling for the removal of the tolls, he said. State Sen. Timothy M. Kennedy has also drafted similar legislation in the Senate, McMurray said.

"We're talking about tolls and a commitment the state made a long time ago that when these bridges were paid for, these tolls would go away," Ceretto said. "I'm hoping that, carrying the torch this time, we're successful."

Political activist and Niagara Falls resident Rus Thompson, who was charged earlier in the month with voter fraud in State Supreme Court, also spoke at the press conference. He started his remarks by saying he would not answer any questions on his case, which is heading to a grand jury.

“The issue that we’re here today for is the removal of the Grand Island Bridge tolls,” he said. “I will not, and I cannot, comment on the current case that is in front of what may be a grand jury.”

Thompson said he wouldn’t be “bullied or intimidated” into not speaking about issues he’s been working on, including the tolls, which he said he’s been working on since 1995.

Tolls to the island in the Niagara River “were supposed to be removed in 1996,” he said.

Offering his assistance in having the tolls removed, Thompson said he would reach out to Republican assemblymen and senators to help push legislation through.

McMurray, calling the push to remove the tolls an “old fight,” said there isn’t an economic draw on Grand Island to justify the tolls.

“It doesn’t just hurt Grand Island, it hurts all of Western New York,” he said.

Pointing to the original legislation on the tolls from 1929, McMurray said the legislation called for the tolls to be kept for only two reasons.

“The building of the bridges, and the maintenance of the bridges,” he said. “There’s a big problem. Even though the original legislation says that, we have no accurate accounting of how that money has been spent for 80 years.”

McMurray said the tolls are a profit source for the state, and the money is going toward other projects.

“Who knows what?,” he asked. “I have a saying: ‘Either you rip them up, or you start paying up.’ Grand Island should get a percentage of that money if those tolls stay.”

People avoid Grand Island, and thus businesses on Grand Island because of the tolls, McMurray said. Aside from the financial impact, the pollution and traffic jams are also an issue, he said.

Calling himself a “proud Democrat,” McMurray said he would work with anyone to find a solution to the problems presented by the tolls.

The next step, McMurray said, is to start writing letters and putting pressure on legislators.

“It’s not going to be easy,” he said. “It’s going to be hard.”

The bridges should be welcoming, he said, and not just known for tolls and traffic jams. They should be “covered” in lights, and match the Peace Bridge.

“These bridges should be a beautiful symbol of our region,” he said.

The basic toll for each car entering Grand Island is \$1, although there are substantial discounts for commuters and for Grand Island residents. Tolls for commercial vehicles are higher. The tolls are collected as each vehicle enters Grand Island but no tolls are charged for those leaving the island. The bridges, operated by the State Thruway Authority, are the only vehicular access to the island.