

Southpointe project proposal is back on Grand Island. So is the opposition to it.



An aerial view of the Southpointe property, looking northwest from the Grandyle Village subdivision. The site is bordered by Staley Road to the north, Love Road to the south, Baseline Road to the west and the I-190/South Parkway to the east on Grand Island. (John Hickey/Buffalo News)

By [Stephen T. Watson](#) - Published September 2, 2019

Harold Schertz was hoping Grand Island residents would greet his reincarnation of the Southpointe development with more enthusiasm than they did a previous version 25 years earlier. That didn't happen. A recent special Town Board meeting drew a large crowd, and all but one of the 30 or so speakers asked pointed questions about the project or raised deep concerns about its effect on the island.

"People on Grand Island do not want any more development. We want our small town," Wendy Peters, an island resident since the 1950s, told the developers. "You have your rights, but don't the citizens of Grand Island have our rights? Don't you have to listen to us?"

Schertz leads the group reviving the long-stalled Southpointe development. It's a campus of senior housing, traditional houses and some commercial space eyed for 284 acres of woods and wetlands. The latest proposal has more assisted living for seniors, removes a planned nursing home, has less retail space and lowers the density by spreading the construction across a larger footprint. Schertz's architect attempted to explain how and why the project fits within the site, just off the I-190, which is zoned for the development.

But residents – most of whom began their remarks by noting how long they had lived on the island – said the development would remove much-needed green space, add to the island's traffic problems and tax the town's infrastructure. Monday's forum was informational only. But it started what shapes up to be a contentious review process as the town wrestles with how much growth it's willing to accept. "Until you can tell me there's going to be another Grand Island Bridge built, I don't know how we can handle the traffic," said Peter Rasch, a Bronson Road resident.

The 284-acre Southpointe property is bounded by Baseline Road, the I-190 and South Parkway, Staley Road and Love Road. A group of Canadian investors in the 1990s planned for retail outlets, offices and high-density residential units on the entire site, with 1 million square feet of commercial space.

They scaled back the plan several times, and the final version called for 586 units of housing and 83,000 square feet for retail, office and other uses. After a lengthy battle, the developers gained the necessary approvals but never built anything.

Schertz's SRI, a real estate asset management company in New York City, bought the Southpointe site in 2013 for about \$1.1 million after learning the previous owners wanted to cut their losses and sell. The Schertz team that year submitted a revised concept plan for the project.

Compared to the 1997 plan, SRI's proposal would use more of the site, spreading out the development; produce less sewage; have roughly the same number of residential units, about 590, though more are assisted living and fewer are independent living; reduce commercial space from 83,000 to 30,000 square feet, and focus it on service-related businesses; lower the expected population from 1,288 to 1,031; and create double the permanent jobs, from 100 to 200.

The northern portion of the site would have an assisted living campus aimed at seniors, an independent-living facility, multifamily residential buildings, commercial space and some single-family housing. The eastern side of the property, along South Parkway, and the southwest corner, at Baseline and Love, would have subdivisions of single-family houses, allowing for multiple generations of a family to live on the campus together.

"This fits Grand Island," Schertz said in an interview hours before the informational meeting, noting they tried to create a suburban feel. Schertz said he's put together a local team to work on the Southpointe project, including architect Douglas Scheid, attorney Jeffery Palumbo and public relations consultant Earl Wells III.

Last Monday was their first chance to sell islanders on the project. Scheid, a former member of Grand Island's planning and zoning boards, gave [a project overview](#). Afterward, about 30 people went up one by one to ask questions or make observations, according to a video recording of the meeting preserved on the Grand Island News Facebook page. Many of the residents who packed Town Hall applauded any critical comments.

Most said Grand Island already has enough development and said the Southpointe project, even when scaled back, would remove valuable green space and add congestion to an island that weathers traffic backups during rush hour at the north and south bridges. "I like our nature," said Jack Norgiel, who lives on Staley Road near the development site.

Grand Island's population grew 4.5% between 2010 and 2018, the census estimates, to 21,294. "I moved here because it was a rural community," said Dean Morakis, who added it can take as long as 10 minutes for him to cross East River Road to get his mail and cross back to his property. "We don't need it here," added Daniel Oliveri, a West River Parkway resident.

When Scheid insisted the project would develop just 11% of the property – that figure counts only buildings, roads and parking lots – some in the audience reacted with skepticism. "We're not trying to hide anything from you," Scheid said. "We want to be honest."

Scheid and Palumbo fielded most of the questions from residents. Maureen Phillips of West River Parkway pointedly asked Schertz to stand so she could question him directly. After some back and forth about how to pronounce Schertz (it's "shirts") and whether Long Island is one of New York City's five boroughs (it isn't) Phillips said she was glad to meet him because he was the "mystery man" of the project. Prodded by Phillips, Schertz said he wanted the development to fit in with the surrounding community. "Mr. Schertz, if the people of Grand Island really send a resounding message, that it is not in keeping with our character, would you respect that?" Phillips said. Schertz did not appear to answer.

The discussion highlighted the tension between the rights of the property owner and the rights of town residents. The one resident who fully embraced the project noted the property is properly zoned for the Southpointe

development. Scheid at one point said some islanders don't want any development at all and, instead, want to "roll up the bridges." "That's not realistic. We have a lot of acres here. We need to do something with them," Scheid said, a comment that drew howls and derisive laughter.

Wells, a public relations consultant working for Schertz, said after the meeting the developer appreciated the chance to listen to residents and get their feedback. "There's a lot of misinformation out there, and we need to continue educating people about the project," Wells said.

The project, which has a ballpark cost of \$50 million, already was OK'd for a sewer extension into the top section of the project. The developer needs approval to extend the sewer into the lower half, as well as site plan approval and approval of an updated review of its environmental effects. If it gets the green light, it would be developed over six or seven years.

Supervisor Nathan McMurray emphasized that the project is far from a done deal and residents will have ample opportunity to weigh in as it goes through this new approval process. McMurray is not running for re-election this fall, so this project largely will fall into his successor's lap. "You need to stay involved and active," McMurray told the audience.