

Grand Island billboard is sign of the economic times

By Samantha Maziarz Christmann / News Staff Reporter

Grand Island's Economic Development Committee is ramping up efforts to bring new business to the town. And it's looking all the way south to ... Tonawanda.

"Well, I've gotta give them credit for advertising," said John Bargnesi, Town of Tonawanda councilman and chairman of its Economic Development Committee.

Usually, towns looking to boost development appeal to a more national audience, attempting to lure businesses that may want to relocate to New York State.

But Tom Knight, co-chairman of Grand Island's economic committee, said Grand Island has a good reason for advertising close to home and insists he is not trying to poach business from Tonawanda or any other surrounding communities.

"We're hoping to grab anybody who's looking to expand," Knight said.

Rather than looking for companies to pull up stakes in Western New York and relocate to Grand Island, the committee is hoping to shine a light on Grand Island as a nearby place to grow.

"Developers have traditionally thought of Grand Island as being kind of closed off, as being more of a bedroom community, and we're trying to change that," he said.

While most of the communities here are built up pretty tightly, Grand Island has plenty of undeveloped space, he said.

The committee is hoping to fill vacancies in retail plazas on the island and has the Grand Island Gateway Center business park in development at the Long Road exit of Interstate 190. It has plenty of vacant, commercially zoned lots open for development.

“We just want to help ease the burden for residential taxpayers and create job openings for everybody in Western New York in the most reasonable, sensible way possible,” Knight said.

The committee unveiled advertisements last week on a digital billboard visible from the I-290 between the Delaware Avenue exit and the South Grand Island Bridge.

The billboard has a picture of a lighthouse with the words, “Surrounded by possibilities.”

One variation of the sign bears an arrow pointing in the direction of the bridge and says, “Opportunities Ahead.” One bears a “wanted” poster with a picture of a backhoe. “Expansion Time?” asks another.

In May, the billboard will move to the Kensington Expressway, to be seen by drivers traveling into Buffalo.

“We wanted to catch people near Grand Island who might say, ‘Hey, you know we’re already out this way, we already have a presence here,’ and also people coming in and out of the city who might not think about Grand Island,” Knight said.

Unlike industrial development agencies, town economic development committees have no power to grant tax breaks. Their purpose is to entice new business through marketing.

Grand Island has also focused recruiting efforts toward biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies in Canada looking to relocate to the United States.