

# 'I'm still optimistic': Grand Island Dems see hope in 2025, despite years of defeat by GOP

- Buffalo News Story - [Stephen T. Watson](#)
- Mar 29, 2025

Spring used to bring two Grand Island traditions: The seasonal opening of Adrian's Custard and Beef, and expressions of optimism from town Democrats that this year will be different. Adrian's sold itself to Anderson's Frozen Custard earlier this year. But Jim Sharpe, who runs the Grand Island Democratic Committee, remains ever hopeful for town Democrats, despite a Republican sweep of all town races since 2017.

To try to turn the tide, Democrats in the two Town Board contests this year are backing one candidate who was, until January, a registered Republican and another who is mounting his third race for the board after running and losing the two previous years. "I have candidates that I think have the guts now to get out there and do what they have to do. I think the community is ready to hear about a lot of the issues that it's facing," Sharpe said, adding, "I'm still optimistic, believe it or not."

On the GOP side, town Republicans have endorsed one Town Board incumbent but declined to support another in favor of a Grand Island School Board member. Candidates for highway superintendent and town justice are unopposed. The island's top GOP official said he's confident the party will keep its winning streak going in 2025. And, the decision to spurn a Town Board member notwithstanding, he insists Republicans have healed the rift that stemmed from a bruising 2023 primary fight.

## Republican divisions play out in Grand Island town election

Peter J. Marston Jr. was the GOP's endorsed candidate for town supervisor. He lost in the primary to fellow Republican Michael H. Madigan but opted to stay in the race on the Conservative line. "It's been quite a while since we've been as unified as we are in right now. Everybody's out running petitions. There's no sign of any kind of a primary occurring. We're all fully behind our four candidates for the town. I think we're in a very good position right now going forward," said Michael H. Madigan, the Grand Island Republican chair and a key player in that intraparty battle.

Republicans hold a narrow, 36% to 33% edge over Democrats among registered voters but the last Democrat to win a town election was Nate McMurray in the 2015 supervisor's race. Endorsed or registered Republicans hold all five seats on the Town Board, although the 2023 election saw Peter Marston Jr., a Republican running on the Conservative ballot line, beat Madigan, who held the GOP line, for supervisor. Marston had received the Republican endorsement but Madigan bested him in a Republican primary that also saw a Madigan ally, Dan Kilmer, beat an endorsed Republican candidate and later win election to the Town Board.

## Conservative Marston beats Republican Madigan for Grand Island supervisor

Marston, a Republican running on the Conservative line, won 58% to 42% over Madigan, also a Republican, with all early votes and same-day votes counted. Term limits forced Madigan from the Town Board at the end of 2023 but he garnered enough support on the town's GOP committee to win election as chair at last October's reorganizational meeting. Madigan acknowledged he hasn't spoken directly to Marston in quite some time but said the party as a whole has moved on from its divisions. He pointed, for example, to strong attendance at the committee's recent St. Patrick's Day gathering.

The seats of two Republican incumbents are up for re-election this year: Christian Bahleda and Jose Garcia. Bahleda was elected to his first term four years ago. He sought the party's endorsement again this year and interviewed for it but didn't receive it. Jose Garcia is a Republican candidate for Grand Island Town Board. Bahleda said he decided not to try to win the Republican line in a primary, or seek another party's endorsement, after concluding that a promotion at the financial institution where he works would leave him less time for campaigning and government service. He said he plans to finish out his term, which ends in December. "I'll be taking my hat out of the ring when it comes to politics. I don't think I could have given it the amount of time that it respects and deserves," Bahleda said.

Town Republicans did endorse Garcia, a retired special agent with U.S. Customs and Border Protection who runs a private investigations and language interpretation business. He won a special election last year to fill the one year remaining on Marston's Town Board term – which opened up when Marston was elected supervisor – and now must run for a full, four-year term.

Madigan said the party was fortunate to have several strong potential candidates interested in its support. In place of Bahleda, the Grand Island GOP endorsed Sherry Steffans, a nurse and School Board member. "Sherry's a fiscal conservative, social conservative. But her big concern as well is providing opportunities for the kids in terms of parks and recreation and things of that nature, maybe improving our game in that area," Madigan said.

Democrats haven't had a spot on the Grand Island Town Board since 2019. The GOP's shutout streak in Tonawanda has lasted even longer: Their candidates have lost every race for Town Board and town supervisor since 2007. One Democratic candidate is a familiar name for voters: Wayne M. West. A retired Union Carbide manager who now works as a Realtor, West ran for Town Board in 2023, when he finished third in a four-person race for two seats, and lost to Garcia in the 2024 special election.

"I think candidates get the wrong impression of themselves, saying, 'I won on the first time. I got all the answers,'" Sharpe said. "Then you run your second time – then they get their butts kicked – and they go, 'What happened?'" So sometimes losing makes you smarter as to what you're there to do and what you need to do to stay there. The other Democratic-backed candidate, Rhonda Diehl, was a registered Republican until Jan. 21, when she switched to the Conservative Party, voter records show.

Wayne West is making his third run for Grand Island Town Board this year. Diehl has served as assistant to the town supervisor for more than five years. Sharpe said he's talked to Diehl about running for Town Board in part because he's impressed by her work supporting the town's long-range planning efforts. Her party change made way for the Democratic endorsement. "I believe in putting people forward that will make a difference on Grand Island," he said. Diehl and Garcia also have Conservative Party backing for the Town Board.

In other races, town Highway Superintendent Richard Crawford is not running for re-election. He initially was elected in 2017 and re-elected in 2021. James Sedita, a mechanic shop supervisor and 30-year veteran of the Town of Tonawanda Highway Department, has the support of town Democrats, Republicans and Conservatives for the post. He has lived on the island since 2013, as is allowed under the union contract with the Town of Tonawanda. Grand Island Town Justice Mark Frentzel, first elected in 2005, has Republican and Conservative backing for another term. Democrats aren't cross-endorsing Frentzel but aren't endorsing their own candidate, either, Sharpe said.