

# Senior housing plan, subject of bitter '90s battle, revived on Grand Island



This aerial photo shows the Southpointe property on Grand Island looking southeast from Staley and Baseline roads. The current owner is reviving a senior housing project that was controversial in the 1990s. (John Hickey/Buffalo News)

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Grand Island, larger than Manhattan but with just over 20,000 residents, is covered with large swaths of green space. This includes a heavily forested, 300-acre property just off the I-190 heading toward Beaver Island State Park that is home to deer, turkey, foxes, rabbits and songbirds.

More than 25 years ago, developers proposed constructing a senior housing and retail complex on the site. Residents organized in opposition and the bitter fight over the plan dragged on through most of the 1990s. The developer finally won the right to build the project, but never did.

Now, like the Spice Girls and other totems of the '90s, the Southpointe development is back. The property's new owners have revised the project, saying it is less dense and leaves more of the wetlands on the site untouched. Some town officials say there is a need for more senior housing on the island, but it isn't clear whether this updated version will win more community support than the earlier incarnation. It is part of a broader fight over what is an appropriate level of development for Grand Island.



An aerial view of the property, which 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, looking northwest from the Grandyle Village subdivision. (John Hickey/Buffalo News)

"I don't like the building on Grand Island. All these apartments on the boulevard? It's ridiculous. It's just too much," said Nancy Davis, who lives in the middle of the Southpointe site across the street from the house she grew up in. "I like it the way it was, before they did all this building."

The property in question is 284 acres of undeveloped land bounded by Baseline Road to the west, the I-190 and South Parkway to the east, Staley Road to the north and Love Road to the south. A group of Canadian investors originally planned for retail outlets, offices and high-density residential units on the entire site, with 1 million square feet of commercial space, including a Jubilee supermarket.

In a bid to win more support, developers scaled back the plan on several occasions, shrinking the commercial space, increasing the amount of open space for recreation – including bike and walking trails – and wetlands and shifting the focus to a full-service retirement community. It would have been the island's second-largest subdivision and had an estimated cost of up to \$50 million. The final version called for 586 units of housing and 83,000 square feet of commercial space.

Proponents touted how many jobs the project would create and how much it would boost the tax base. Critics said the project would tax the town's sewer system and roads and said it wasn't appropriate to rezone the property. The environmental review process began in 1992 and lasted six years, playing out at packed Grand Island Town Board and Planning Board meetings and through dueling flyers and letters to the editor.

[One 1997 public hearing](#) was moved to the Grand Island High School auditorium to accommodate a crowd of 250. At a 1998 Planning Board meeting, a Long Road resident presented board members with a copy of the Dr. Seuss book "The Lorax," which showcases how development can ruin natural beauty.

"There was a movement, basically, 'We just don't want this in our town,'" said James Sharpe, who served on the Town Board in the 1990s and recently returned to Grand Island government as deputy supervisor.

The Town Board in June 1998 agreed to rezone the property, paving the way for the project. Construction was supposed to start the following year, but nothing happened after the original ownership group ran out of money, according to Supervisor Nathan McMurray.

SRI, a real estate asset management company in New York City, bought the Southpointe site in 2013 for about \$1.1 million [through a limited liability company](#). The company that year submitted a new concept plan for the project.

Compared with the 1997 master plan, the 2013 plan from SRI, according to a document filed with the town, would use more of the site, spreading out the development; produce less sewage; have roughly the same number of residential units, about 590; reduce the commercial space from 83,000 to 30,000 square feet; reduce the expected resident population from 1,288 to 1,031; and create double the number of permanent jobs, from 100 to 200, because more health care workers would be needed. The developer has since replaced a proposed skilled nursing facility with commercial space, but otherwise SRI's plan hasn't changed much in six years.

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. "It's laid out nicely, it's well designed and it's very consistent with what the Town of Grand Island is looking to do with the island itself," said Harold Schertz, SRI's president, who did not provide an estimated cost.

Schertz said the plan spreads the buildings, including patio-style houses, over a larger area – 147 acres instead of 101 acres –and offers seniors a chance to stay on the island. McMurray said town officials can re-examine the project's environmental effect, because the development has changed, before it moves forward.

"To get approved, they are going to have to invest significantly in the existing town sewage system, which will help upgrade our overall sewage system on the developer's dime," McMurray said in an email. "It's the only way they could complete this project."

Many neighbors of the site weren't aware of Southpointe's rebirth, or only had heard something vague about plans for the property. Glen Avon Road runs north into the property from Love Road. A reporter driving to the street's dead end on a recent morning spotted a deer on the side of the road and several turkeys wandering through the tall grass.

"It's nice and peaceful here most of the time," said Bob Davis, who has lived on the street with his wife, Nancy, since 2004 and was out walking his dog, Dakota, on a sunny morning. Linda Hartman bought her home on Glen Avon in 1985. She said she likes the relatively rural setting, but she fears the island already has become too congested. "Take a look at the line over the bridge every day," Hartman said. "We have already gone too far."

A large subdivision of rented and owner-occupied duplexes dating to the post-World War II period, Grandyle Village, sits just south and east of the proposed development. Forty-year Grandyle resident Bill O'Connor helped lead the battle against the original Southpointe, which he said would decimate green space and create a "little city in the middle of Grand Island." O'Connor said many of the main Southpointe opponents have grown older or died. "I don't know if anybody else is going to pick up the mantle now," O'Connor said recently, listening to a boisterous family of blue jays in the trees that loom over his backyard.

Kevin Slachciak, owner of Say Cheese Pizza Co. and the Comic Book Cafe, said he tried to advocate for the development 20 years ago. "I liked it, I wanted more customers," Slachciak said. "So I engaged my customers in conversation a lot about it, and I don't think I found a single person who wanted it."

The current version must gain several approvals, including for a sanitary sewer district extension and the revised development and site plans. Work on the site would begin in June 2020 at the earliest, the developer told the town.

Sharpe, the deputy supervisor, said the project fills a need for senior housing and potentially offers benefits to the island, but he said town officials and the public need to have their say. "As a community, we're very skeptical of any development within our community," he said. "Therefore I still believe we're going to have a lot of public scrutiny of the project, but I would ask the public to take a hard look at what it is."