

Group continues push to eliminate Grand Island tolls

By [Nancy A. Fischer](#), Published Wed, Mar 22, 2017

A newly formed group – [WNY for Grand Island Toll Barrier Removal](#) – has attracted 3,100 Facebook followers in less than a month and just reached its first goal:

To garner 1,000 signatures on an [online petition](#) calling for Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo to "tear down the tolls."

The next goal will be to raise that to 10,000 signatures, which co-chairman Brian R. Michel of Lewiston said they should be able to reach by June.

And, if the mood of the dozens who packed into a community meeting Wednesday night to renew the call to [eliminate tolls on the bridge](#) is any indication, that goal could come even sooner.

The grassroots group had its first meeting at the Global Tourism Institute in Niagara Falls.

Residents used the forum as a mouthpiece to speak out against tolls that have plagued them for decades, but politicians have also joined in the fight and several were on hand, as well, to throw their support into the ring.

Patrick Whalen, director of the Global Tourism Institute, co-chairs the toll removal group with citizen advocate Michel, a commuter who helped to form the group after one-too-many waits in traffic jams at the toll barrier.

The effort is a three-pronged approach, with Whalen reaching out to the business community, Grand Island Supervisor Nathan McMurray reaching out to fellow elected officials and Michel rallying the community.

Town of Tonawanda Supervisor Joseph Emminger, who came to Wednesday's meeting, said they have been fighting the toll barriers for a decade.

He said 15 months ago, when he and McMurray were elected, they joined with City of Tonawanda Mayor Rick Davis to write a joint letter to the state, noting not only the economic hardship, but also the pollution from commuter traffic that idles to cross the bridge in Tonawanda.

"The price of your health has no cost. Don't tell us in Albany that the cost is too high," said Emminger.

Community advocate to remove the Grand Island tolls, Brian R. Michel, holds a public forum at the Niagara Global Tourism Institute in Niagara Falls.

Residents filled up a meeting room at the institute – and spilled into the hallway – to show support for removal of the toll barriers.

Nancy Killian, of Grand Island, said she has been fighting to remove the tolls for 32 years. She wore a T-shirt proclaiming "Grand Island, home of unfairly tolled residents."

John Dudley, a resident and business owner on Grand Island, said he grew up in the town. He said the toll barriers have been a barrier to both businesses and population growth on Grand Island.

Michael Jablon, a retired truck driver from Grand Island, said the traffic has increased phenomenally in the past 30 years.

"You shouldn't be coming home from work and have to sit in traffic for another 30 minutes, every day, to go over the bridge," said Jablon. "Enough is enough. It's time. The governor should hear us. The people are not going away."

Nearly 23,000 vehicles cross the bridge every day, according to the state Thruway Authority.

Whalen said the design of the bridge is "horrible," blocking traffic for even a minor fender bender.

But, he also called the bridges a barrier to tourism in Niagara Falls.

"The barriers represent a psychological barrier between Buffalo and Niagara Falls," said Whalen. He said businesses in Niagara Falls are trying to attract residents in the off-season from Buffalo and points south.

Whalen said he supports a high-speed, cashless toll which he called an inexpensive alternative.

Michel called the forums a chance to be heard and said they will continue to hold public forums and meet with business leaders.

"This movement won't go away until there is definitive action," said Michel. He said if not they plan to load up a bus and take their petitions to Albany.

A representative from the office of State Sen. Chris Jacobs said both Jacobs and Assemblyman Angelo Morinello have introduced legislation to remove the tolls.