

Neophyte supervisor sees Grand Island as more than ‘pass through’ town



Nathan McMurray, an attorney at Delaware North, won an upset victory over a long-term incumbent in November. Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News

By [Joseph Popiolkowski](#) | News Staff on January 1, 2016 - 6:35 PM, updated January 2,

Nathan D. McMurray has spent most of his adult life in Asia, working as an attorney for multinational corporations in South Korea and China.

But on Friday he became supervisor of Grand Island, the town of about 20,000 residents he now calls home.

While McMurray sees Grand Island as an “undiscovered gem,” he said it is too often dismissed as “pass-through territory” and could instead be a hub for ecotourism and smart, sensible development.

“It’s an island the size of Manhattan, in the middle of the Niagara River, at the edge of Niagara Falls,” McMurray said. “Every house I was in, from Delhi to Beijing to Seoul, someone had a picture of themselves in front of Niagara Falls. And to get to Niagara Falls, they all have to go through Grand Island. So I think Grand Island can be a lot more.”

McMurray, 40, grew up in North Tonawanda as one of seven children raised by their mother after their father died when he was 3. “Needless to say we had our struggles,” he said.

He recalls fond memories enjoying Grand Island’s amenities as a youth, including swimming at the Beaver Island State Park beach, hiking at Buckhorn Island State Park and visiting the Fantasy Island amusement park.

“We couldn’t go to Disneyland,” he said. “We could go to Fantasy Island.”

After graduating from North Tonawanda High School, he was educated at the University at Buffalo, the University of California’s Hastings College of the Law and Tsinghua University in Beijing. He also received a prestigious Fulbright Scholarship to study at the Constitutional Court of Korea.

After years working as counsel to companies such as Samsung and Hyundai, he decided to return to Western New York to be closer to family and join the region’s economic resurgence as an attorney with Delaware North. He was drawn to Grand Island, he said, because of its natural beauty and bought a house there in 2011 for himself and his wife, Min, and sons, ages 4 and 7.

“If you look at a map of Western New York, Grand Island is the keystone of the region,” he said recently in a downtown coffee shop. “It connects the north to the south, in a way, the Niagara Falls region to Buffalo.”

His interest in becoming politically active was sparked by controversies over housing and economic development, including a developer’s plan to build a large apartment complex near the River Oaks subdivision off East River Road.

“When I saw them starting to want to build buildings on the island, apartments on the waterfront, I thought, ‘Is this really the best use of this space? Or are we repeating the mistakes that have been repeated over and over again in the history of Buffalo – quick money schemes, bad development ideas that scar the landscape,’” he said. “I wanted to stop it.”

Getting to the supervisor’s office was a long shot for the political newcomer with no name recognition, who faced an incumbent with 18 years’ experience as a councilwoman and four as supervisor.

McMurray squeaked out what amounted to a major political upset on Grand Island with a victory over Mary S. Cooke by a razor thin 14-vote margin, 2,768 to 2,754.

But McMurray admits he didn’t win without “ruffling some feathers” with his unorthodox campaign.

He was accused of slinging half-truths about Cooke in posts on a campaign blog. In widely shared online videos, he blasted Twisted Sister’s rock song “We’re Not Gonna Take It” on a stereo outside Town Hall and “overcooked” a pork chop shaped like Grand Island on the grill – a

riff on the supervisor's last name. McMurray thought it was fun and sincere. Others thought it juvenile and unprofessional.

Hard feelings linger, but McMurray is unapologetic.

"I had fights with local political bigwigs about my campaign," he said. "They told me early on, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'No one wants the fake photo-op with the elderly man and a handshake. It's just bull. I'm not doing it.' "

McMurray denied he engaged in any personal attacks and said his campaign serves as a template for how younger voters want to engage in politics, although critics have questioned why he took the blog down following the election.

"Now it's time for me to lead," he said. "That chapter is over. I'll be judged on how I lead the next four years and the people of Grand Island will like it or hate it based on what I do. But I think it's time to look forward instead of look backward."

Some political observers in the town have also questioned whether McMurray will have the necessary time to devote to his new full-time job. While McMurray said he will still have a role with Delaware North, he promises "My priority will be Grand Island."

"Judge me by my performance," he said. "This is basically an executive role. I'm not hitting a clock when I come in to work every day."

McMurray is described as capable and smart, but without a strong mandate from voters, "He's going to have to work hard to prove himself," said one political watcher active in town affairs who asked not to be identified.

The previous town government was seen by some as one that overanalyzed issues to reach a consensus and took too long to make decisions, which stalled proposed development projects or forced them away.

McMurray's supporters say they hope he'll bring a balanced approach to growth, maintain the quality of life and focus on environmental issues. McMurray promises to not be afraid to try new things.

"If people think I'm running to get re-elected, I'm not," he said. "I'm going all out to try to do my best. I'm not thinking about four years from now."

There's also a tension between older, longtime residents and newer, younger families on the island. "There's been some competition there in terms of what values you adhere to," said the political watcher.

Grand Island is traditionally considered a conservative bastion. Republicans outnumber Democrats, 5,183 to 4,996, according to the latest enrollment figures. But its Town Board may have the most diverse makeup of any in Western New York. In the new year on the five-member

board, there will be two Republicans, a Conservative, an Independent and a Democrat, McMurray.

McMurray ran on a ticket that included Beverly Kinney, sister of Democratic chairman James Sharpe and the registered Independent, who was the top vote getter in the Council race. The conservative bloc of Ray Billica, Chris Aronica and Mike Madigan will hold the majority on the board.

Billica, a Republican who is halfway through his second term and who became the elder statesman of the board on Friday, said the new board will need to put aside political affiliations.

“I don’t care if I’m a Republican or Democrat or something like that,” he said. “We all need to figure out what’s the best for our town, because we’re a little town. We’re not the state government or the federal government. We’re a little town and we have to address our little-town issues.”

McMurray will have a learning curve early on to understand the inner workings and requirements of town government, said Billica, who noted the town is losing decades of governing experience with the ouster of Cooke and Councilman Gary Roesch.

“It’ll be different for him, having never been in government,” Billica said. “He will have to learn, just like anybody else coming into a brand new job.”

Privately, some say the upstart and idealist McMurray is “a breath of fresh air” who may also be in for an awakening when he confronts the realities of small town politics.

“I think there’s going to be people on Grand Island who want to make my life miserable, for sure,” McMurray said. “You know what though? I’m not a miserable person. So they can try all they want. We’ll just have a good time with it.”

A swearing-in for newly elected officials took place Friday.

McMurray is already planning personal touches for the office. His wife, who is trained in traditional Korean quilting, gave him a hand-stitched depiction of Grand Island, which will hang in his new office.

He said he has no qualms about giving up his globetrotting life, traveling business class on corporate expense accounts. Instead, he looks forward to leading the Light Up the Boulevard holiday parade, the town’s Fourth of July festivities and the Gus Macker basketball tournament.

“Those things are just as fun, if not more fun,” he said. “There’s all kinds of experiences you have in your life, and right now there’s no place I want to be more than here.”