

State to close Grand Island's West River Parkway despite Town Board vote



An aerial rendering provided by New York State Parks of the planned West River trail on Grand Island.

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A state plan to close West River Parkway on Grand Island to vehicular traffic and reuse the existing pavement for an 8-mile trail is moving forward.

The revised plan by New York's Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation calls for closing the parkway between Long Road and Oakfield Road and converting it to the \$2.5 million West River Greenway Connector Trail for bicyclists and pedestrians.

"We are advancing the project at this point, but we're in dialogue with the town and we need to make sure that we stay on schedule," said Mark W. Thomas, director of the western district for New York State Parks.

The project is in the final design phase now, with construction scheduled to begin in fall 2017 and the trail opening in summer 2018.

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State Parks in July identified the parkway closure option -- "option 3" -- from among three as its preferred option.

But option 3 was [rejected in August by the Town Board](#) in favor of an alternative -- "option 4," which called for a new 10-foot [multi-use path to be built alongside West River Road](#), and leaving West River Parkway open to vehicle traffic.

In a letter this month to town officials, Thomas rejected option 4 as "not a feasible project alternative" due to a number of safety concerns. The Town Board's preference would require nine crossings with vehicular traffic, including with the 55 mph parkway at the north and south ends, while the state's plan requires only three crossings, he said.

"It's a huge difference in terms of risk to pedestrians and bicyclists," Thomas told The Buffalo News.

Closing the parkway is a better option because it provides a wider surface -- 24 feet -- for the trail, is less environmentally disruptive and can be built within the \$2.5 million budget, he said. Building a new 10-foot trail is estimated to cost an extra \$800,000.

Three scenic overlooks of the Niagara River will also be enhanced as part of the project, Thomas said. And some vegetation along the shore may be removed to open up views of the water for trail users and residents of West River Road, he added.

Small trailhead parking areas had been incorporated into preliminary designs at each of the trail's major intersections, but were removed after public comment.

"We want to make sure that, in the end, we have a project that is going to work for the majority of people of Grand Island and the region," Thomas said. "But, also, is a value to the residents of West River Road."

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Several residents of that area contacted Friday said they don't want the West River Parkway closed to cars.

Bonnie FitzGerald said she fears that closing the parkway would force more traffic onto West River Road, where she's lived for the past five years, and make that road unsafe. She is one of many West River Road residents who have posted "Keep the Parkway Open" signs on their front lawns.

Sandra Englert said the state's plan to close the parkway "took most of the town by surprise. The decision makers are not listening to the people who live in the West River area."

At a recent Town Board meeting, FitzGerald suggested a compromise: Close the parkway to vehicle traffic only on weekends in the summer months, when it is likely that more bikers and walkers would use it, and allow cars on the parkway the rest of the time.

State Parks was also asked to look at a "shared-use" option, in which the parkway would be used for vehicular traffic on weekdays and as a trail on weekends. Thomas in his Nov. 9 letter also rejected that idea, saying it would be difficult to maintain the parkway for both uses.

"Additionally, Parks anticipates significant weekday use of the trail, particularly during the summer when children are out of school," Thomas wrote to town officials. "The potential that drivers would fail to understand weekend closures would create an unacceptable risk of vehicle collisions for trail users."

Councilman Michael H. Madigan, who has led opposition to closing the parkway, said the shared-use option would make a good compromise between options 3 and 4 and State Parks agreed to perform a more comprehensive review of the shared roadway concept at his request.

He said he has concerns about parkway traffic being diverted onto West River Road and other residential streets.

The trail is envisioned as a way to connect Beaver Island and Buckhorn Island state parks, in the south and north parts of the town, respectively. The parkway is currently maintained by the state Department of Transportation, although not in the winter, and it would be transferred to State Parks.

A landscaped bicycle and pedestrian trail will provide expanded access to the town's western riverfront and parkland, said Supervisor Nathan D. McMurray, who supports closing the West River Parkway to vehicles.

Thomas, in his letter, made "an official, definitive statement" that closing the parkway is the best option, McMurray said.

"We have data supporting their decision," the supervisor said. "It's the most safe, it's the most cost-efficient and it's the best way of getting people on the water, which in a town that's an island should be our top priority."