

Grand Island supervisor confident cashless tolls coming to bridges

- By [Nancy A. Fischer](#) Published Tue, Jun 27, 2017

Pleas from advocates asking to eliminate the Grand Island bridges' tolls or install a high-speed cashless tolling system had gone unanswered by Albany officials.

But after Grand Island Supervisor Nathan McMurray posted a video on social media called "Dear Governor Cuomo," Cuomo's staff contacted him almost immediately to talk about the tolls.

He feels he got results.

"I think I can say with confidence that cashless tolling is coming and that's a huge accomplishment after 80 years of nothing," McMurray said.

A top Cuomo aide agreed.

McMurray's video, seen by more than 10,000 people on Facebook, was a plea for the governor to meet to talk about toll concerns, interspersed with silly clips that range from a dancing cowboy to a begging kitten.

McMurray said he posted the video, which he shot and edited himself, on Friday night. By Monday morning, both he and Brian Michel, the leader of [WNY for Grand Island Toll Barrier Removal](#), had been contacted by Cuomo's staff.

Empire State Development Corp.'s Regional President Sam Hoyt quickly set up a special conference call with McMurray and Michel to discuss the tolls with the governor's senior transportation team, which included Deputy Secretary for Transportation Ali Chaudhry.

Hoyt told The Buffalo News that the video did not prompt the meeting. It was merely a coincidence.

Hoyt said the governor and New York State Thruway Authority, which maintains the Grand Island bridges and collects the tolls, are committed to bringing high-speed, cashless tolling across the state, including to Grand Island.

"(McMurray) made it abundantly clear how important cashless tolling is to Grand Island and those of us on the call made it clear (to McMurray) that the governor understands the importance and of his intention to have cashless tolling in New York State as quickly as possible," said Hoyt. "But it is in process and there are no definitive dates."

The Thruway Authority has said nearly \$20 million is collected in tolls each year on the Grand Island bridges, and the revenue is needed to maintain the bridges. Nearly 23 million vehicles crossed the bridges in 2015, according to the most recent figures from the Thruway Authority. Motorists pay a \$1 toll, except for Grand Island residents who pay nine cents and frequent commuters who pay 28 cents.

McMurray said the conference call allowed him to explain what the Grand Island tolls cost their region.

In addition to the tolls, the supervisor and others have complained that vehicles stuck in [traffic jams at the tolls are causing air pollution](#), with elevated levels of benzene that is harmful for Grand Island and Tonawanda residents.

Traffic begins to move after a multi-vehicle accident is cleared at the toll plaza of the Grand Island Bridge earlier this year. (John Hickey/Buffalo News)

"Having a forum to talk to them was really, really helpful," said McMurray. "We were able to make the case in a way we never have been able to before."

McMurray said he left the conversation with a feeling that Grand Island will see cashless tolling, as well as a clear, accurate accounting of how the tolls are spent.

He said his ultimate goal is to eliminate the tolls, but cashless tolling would be a good first step. McMurray said he will also lobby for a portion of the toll money to come back to residents.

Bills introduced this year by state lawmakers in Western New York would require the Thruway Authority to [share a portion of the tolls](#) collected with the towns of Grand Island and Tonawanda and the City of Niagara Falls.

"We pay nine cents to come back home. If we could even keep that nine cents here, that would be a million a year," said McMurray.

McMurray said he was told by the governor's representatives that the governor's office was "thankful for the video" and would put the "pedal to the metal" to make changes.