



New York State Thruway Authority

Grand opening held for expanded pet comfort area at WNY Welcome Center

The New York State Thruway Authority today announced the grand opening of the expanded pet comfort area at the Western New York Welcome Center in Grand Island. This collaborative effort between the Town of Grand Island and the Thruway Authority nearly doubled the size of the dog park.

Town of Grand Island and Thruway Authority officials, including Executive Director Matthew J. Driscoll, cut the ribbon on the expanded dog park Tuesday.

"The Western New York Welcome Center is a comfortable, welcoming setting for travelers and residents of all ages and no detail has been overlooked, including amenities for our four-legged friends," Thruway Authority Executive Director Matthew J. Driscoll said. "Our partnership with the Town of Grand Island has allowed us to provide a safe and friendly location for pet owners and their pets to stretch and enjoy some fresh air while traveling."

Town of Grand Island Town Supervisor John Whitney said, "I would like to thank Governor Cuomo, Executive Director Matthew Driscoll and Division Director Matt Latko for their assistance in making this dog park expansion project a reality. It's a great facility overall that not only serves the many travelers across this great state, but the people of

Grand Island as well. We are happy and proud to be a part of this tremendous project."

The nearly 5,600 square foot expansion project included the installation of new chain-link fencing, gated entrance, and separation gates. The expansion project mirrors the original dog park area and included two park benches, landscape boulders, a fire hydrant and a dog waste station.

The Town of Grand Island purchased and provided all materials related to the new park, while the Thruway Authority was responsible for all construction and installation aspects of the new design. The majority of the work took place in fall 2019 and was completed by Thruway Authority Facility, Division Support and Niagara Maintenance Section employees.

Grand Island Chamber of Commerce President Eric Fiebelkorn said, "The Grand Island Chamber of Commerce is excited to see the beautiful expansion of the dog park area at the WNY Welcome Center. This collaboration between the NYS Thruway Authority and the Town of Grand Island will benefit both local residents and visitors alike for many years to come. Yet another reason that our town, the Heart of the Niagara, is a grand place to live, work and play."

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Grand Island High School graduation at Beaver Island. Pictured, GIHS grad Kaylee Butcher celebrates on the beach after commencement. (Photo by Larry Austin)

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Drive-by 100th birthday celebration



Grand Island High School graduates from the Class of 2020 are all smiles during the 55th annual commencement ceremony at Beaver Island State Park Sunday. The ceremony included a drive-thru format. From left: Victoria Huang, Luke Hess, Matthew Aronica, Gabriella Bergstrom, Emily Reynolds, Kaylee Butcher and Benjamin Spiesz. Below, Reynolds receives her diploma on stage at Beaver Island. (Photos by Larry Austin)

The graduation that almost wasn't

Grand Island High School holds memorable 55th commencement

When schools closed on March 16, Cheryl Chamberlain didn't think it would impact her graduation class. March was a far cry from June, however the COVID-19 days turned into months and Chamberlain had to rethink her plan.

"Kleinhans was shut down and I needed to think about alternatives for our students. They really deserved a grand ceremony as everything else was cancelled," Chamberlain said.

Many people, including school board president Ashli Dreher and Grand Island High School Principal Michael Lauria suggested Beaver Island State Park as an alternative.

"I was skeptical at first, but after visits with Superintendent Brian Graham and AV Coordinator Mark Gorton, I was more on board with the idea," Chamberlain remarked.

After six weeks of planning, with a team of students and administrators, the event went better than expected.

"Parents, students and our team of volunteers made this an epic event in the history of Grand Island High School and I was proud to be a part of it," Chamberlain added as she departed from the park.

All in all, the event was a success due to a wonderful team of teachers and staff who aided in the day.

Dreher echoed Chamberlain's assessment of the 2020 commencement ceremony, which was a drive-thru format.

"Congratulations Class of 2020! As a board, we are very excited that students had the opportunity to walk across a stage with their classmates, and Grand Island High School's outdoor ceremony at Beaver Island is certainly be a graduation ceremony to remember!" Dreher said. "Given this was such a unique situation and experience, one might imagine the hours of planning involved in such an event."

"I was really happy with how our graduation went," said Senior Class President Sean Christian Rustowicz Wednesday. "While it wasn't what I imagined as a kid growing up, it was something that will always stick with me. And, honestly, it was so much fun being able to cheer my friends on and have one last special memory together as a class. This situation certainly hasn't been easy. However, thanks to the hard work and dedication by people like Cheryl Chamberlain, Amy Boutet, Julie Bowen, Mike Lauria, Dr. Brian Graham, as well as the entire Grand Island community, we've been able to turn this very tough situation into one full of memories that will truly last a lifetime."

On June 7, Gov. Andrew Cuomo



mo said announced plans for reopening the state and relaxing restrictions on public gatherings.

"We said the reopening is calibrated to the metrics in the data. If that's where we are, that's good news, it means the plan is working, it means that we bent the curve, and on those numbers, we can advance the reopening," Cuomo said at the time.

"We're going to allow socially distanced graduations outdoors with up to 150 people total beginning June 26. That's when the schools start to graduate, high schools, and it gives us a couple of weeks between now and then."

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