

Leaders tap New Canaan's Walker to tackle transportation

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In coming years, elected leaders from Greenwich to Weston will have to prioritize which transportation projects to put their weight behind, such as the long-delayed Merritt Parkway Route 7 interchange, to capture the attention and funding of a cash-strapped state, New Canaan First Selectman Jeb Walker said.

"We will have to focus on those things that are absolutely the most important to get done," said Walker, the newly elected chairman of the South Western Region Metropolitan Planning Organization.

Walker, who has served as New Canaan's first selectman since 2007, discussed the state's financial condition and possible initiatives to coordinate transportation leadership efforts regionally after he was unanimously voted to lead the group at its meeting Thursday in Norwalk.

Walker takes the reins from Weston First Selectman Woody Bliss, who did not run for re-election after four two-year terms.

Bliss said the smaller towns in the group should continue to pursue and support road and infrastructure projects geared to easing travel to Stamford and Norwalk, and be prepared for a degree

of compromise to support economic growth in the two cities.

"The first thing is to support Stamford and Norwalk in their economic development, which we should be very proud of," Bliss said. "We need to keep on top of the job to make sure we have the transportation system so people can get to their jobs effectively."

Walker said he favors consideration of establishing the eight municipalities as a "council of governments," an arrangement which would allow them to cooperate on a wider range of concerns and possibly exert their political power more effectively in Hartford.

Under the current organization of a Metropolitan Planning Organization, the eight towns -- Greenwich, Stamford, Norwalk, New Canaan, Darien, Weston, Westport and Wilton -- cooperate on transportation issues only, leaders said.

"There seem to be some distinct advantages to being a COG (council of governments)," Walker said. "We'd be able to cooperate on a wider range of issues. It would take time to do, but it should be looked at."

Westport First Selectman Gordon Joseloff, who was elected to serve as vice chairman of the organization, said considering the "council of government" structure might help streamline and focus multi-town agreements to pool resources to meet transportation, public safety, sanitation and other needs.

"Transportation is virtually the number one issue for southwestern Connecticut and anything we can do to reduce, streamline or relieve congestion we need to do," Joseloff said. "Everything takes a long time, which makes long-range planning and

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pushing to get things done important."

Joseloff said he would like to focus efforts on modernizing equipment at Metro-North Railroad stations, including upgrades such as installing electronic signs on platforms to provide up-to-date schedule information to commuters.

"The technology has advanced to a such a point that you are able to offer that but Connecticut r emains stuck in the late 1970s in some respects," Joseloff said

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