

SWRPA looks to change into a Council of Governments

NORWALK

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The outgoing and incoming chairman of South Western Region Metropolitan Planning Organization on Thursday said converting their organization into a Council of Governments is worth considering.

SWRMPO focuses on transportation planning and comprises chief-elected officials. The affiliate South Western Regional Planning Agency represents the eight municipalities in southwestern Connecticut on housing and other issues. It is governed by representatives selected by chief-elected officials and planning commissions.

Forming a Council of Governments, as exist elsewhere in the United States, would consolidate the two operations and put transportation, housing and other inter-municipal issues under the leadership of chief-elected officials.

"It's more direct involvement of CEOs in the decision making," said former Weston First Selectman Woody Bliss during his last meeting as SWRMPO chairman and member.

New Canaan First Selectman Jeb Walker, elected to a two-year term as SWRMPO chairman during the meeting at the Norwalk Transit District offices, afterward told The Hour that the organization of SWRMPO "is probably our top priority."

"What can be a more effective organization for this group of regional chief-

elected officials?" Walker said. "There seems to be some distinct advantages to a COG over the current organizational structure."

Westport First Selectman Gordon Joseloff, newly elected SWRMPO vice chairman, said an effort was made unsuccessfully years ago to convert SWRPA into a Council of Governments. Opponents labeled the effort the first step in a return to county government. Joseloff disagreed and said the idea is worth considering again.

"I'm committed to supporting Woody and looking at it at least once again," Joseloff said.

SWRPA representatives and SWRMPO officials each meet 11 times a year. Consolidating the organizations would "put it all under one roof" and result in one meeting a month, said Floyd Lapp, SWRPA executive director.

"Instead of the South Western Regional Planning Agency, it would be called the South Western Council of Governments," Lapp told The Hour.

Lapp said creating a COG would require the approval of the legislative bodies of five of the eight municipalities. "But if this went forward, we would hope it would be unanimous, all eight," he said.

Talk of forming a COG came during the first meeting of the SWRMPO since the Nov. 3 municipal elections. Bliss, who was praised for his work as SWRMPO chairman since 2006, chose not to seek reelection as selectman. Walker, after being seated as chairman, said SWRMPO cannot look to the state for solutions.

"We've got to keep up the dialogue, we've got to keep up the pressure, but we're going to have to focus on those things that are absolutely the most important," Walker said. "My priority going forward ... will be able to help us all choose those absolutely must-have issues that we need the state to agree with us on."

Walker told The Hour that his priorities are overhauling the Route 7-Merritt Parkway interchange, improving rail service and train station conditions, and relieving traffic congestion in various ways. He said he hasn't formed an opinion on Super 7 -- the planned but never built expressway between Norwalk

and Danbury.

"I think the work that is going on in Wilton right now to widen Route 7, I think we need to see that through and then have a clearer understanding of what the right answer is once that work is finished," Walker said.