

Joseloff assumes leadership position in SWRMPO

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Thanksgiving may be over but First Selectman Gordon Joseloff has a little bit more on his plate. The South Western Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (SWRMPO), the transportation policy-making organization for eight southwest Connecticut communities, elected Joseloff as its vice chairman last Thursday.

Also, New Canaan First Selectman Jeb Walker was elected as chairman at the meeting, which took place in Norwalk. Joseloff and Walker take over the leadership reigns from Woody Bliss, the outgoing first selectman of Weston, and Evonne Klein, the outgoing first selectman of Darien.

SWRMPO is composed of the chief elected officials of the cities of Norwalk and Stamford and the towns of Darien, Greenwich, New Canaan, Weston, Westport and Wilton.

Joseloff is hopeful that he can help relieve congestion in the "southwest corridor, hopeful that rail improvements come along as scheduled and that the South Western Regional Planning Agency can transfer into a council of government (COG)." Westport's Planning & Zoning Commission has been talking about regional planning agencies versus COGs since at least former First Selectwoman Diane Farrell's administration.

The main difference between a COG and a regional planning agency (RPA) is that with the COG

approach, each of the eight chief elected officials is a member, therefore, they are the ones primarily in charge. With an RPA, there are other points of appointment, such as P&Z.

"The chief elected officials don't sit on the [SWRPA] board," said Dr. Floyd Lapp, executive director of SWRPA.

Farrell was of the opinion that COGs carried more clout up in Hartford and Joseloff doesn't disagree. Eliminating SWRPA, added Joseloff, would also eliminate some "duplication" between SWRPA and SWRMPO.

Joseloff noted that the existence of both SWRPA and SWRMPO is a two-headed entity right now.

The South Western Regional Planning Agency is a governmental agency formed and operating under the provisions of Title 8, Chapter 127 of the Connecticut General Statutes. It was organized in 1962 when representatives of five municipalities recognized the need for regional cooperation and coordination, believing that many community issues extend beyond municipal boundaries and require joint action. SWRPA is now the official regional planning organization for eight municipalities in lower Fairfield County, including Norwalk, Stamford, Darien, Greenwich, New Canaan, Weston, Westport and Wilton. SWRPA is one of 15 planning regions in Connecticut, as defined by the Connecticut Office of Policy and Management and brings together its eight-member municipalities to coordinate planning for the region's future.

SWRMPO, however, was formed as a result of 1962 federal legislation that required there be an MPO for any urbanized area greater than 50,000. Congress created MPOs in order to ensure that existing and future expenditures for transportation projects and

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programs are based on a continuing, cooperative and comprehensive planning process. Federal funding for transportation projects and programs are channeled through this planning process. Both SWRPA and SWRMPO meet monthly.

Joseloff believes a COG format would increase regional cooperation and open up an opportunity for more federal funds to come this way.

"A COG has a little more authority," said Joseloff. There are actually three different types of operating entities in Connecticut -- Regional Planning Agency (RPA), Regional Council of Elected Officials (CEO) and Regional Council of Governments (COG). However, COGs currently outnumber RPAs and CEOs, according to a map of the state in a report on Connecticut's Regional Planning Organizations by the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee.

Of the three available organizational structures, according to the report, both the Regional CEOs and the Regional COGs are required to have the chief elected official of each member town serve on the board, although provisions can be made for alternates to attend meetings. In addition, regardless of size, member towns only get one representative (and therefore one vote) each. The primary difference between these two structures is in their creation and dissolution provisions.

RPAs, on the other hand, offer proportionate representation to members, according to the report. Each member town gets at least two seats on the board of the RPA, plus additional representatives if the town exceeds 25,000 people. Furthermore, while chief elected officials serve on the boards of some RPAs, at least one of the town's representatives must be appointed by the local planning commission, if such an entity exists. Consequently,

at least some board members have backgrounds and direct experience dealing with planning and related land use issues.

Related to these discussions, said the report, is the issue of appropriate overall size for a regional board.

"During interviews with program review staff, representatives of many of the existing RPOs talked about the importance their members place on having a board that is small enough for the members to be able to have a 'conversation' about issues," the December 2007 report said. "They expressed concerns that too large a membership necessitates the use of subcommittees, thereby negating the personal contact among town leaders that can be so beneficial to achieving cooperative efforts."

Joseloff said Bliss expressed words of support for a COG organization structure at the end of his term.

A COG set-up, said Joseloff, will likely allow for a "streamlining to get things done and to increase our ability to promote regional cooperation."

"We're all trying to save money," he added. Joseloff said one thing that could be implemented in the event of a formation of COG is a "combined dispatch center."




Purchasing of supplies and materials -- perhaps even electricity -- might also be more cost-effective than is currently the case, added Joseloff.

Joseloff said rail improvements are needed, and improvements to the ports in Bridgeport and New Haven are needed, if there is any hope of alleviating the traffic problems in this area.

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"We have to get freight traffic off the road," he said.
"We have to put containers onto barges, onto rail."
The biggest obstacle to making improvements -- including re-building a rail line across the Hudson River that burned down long ago -- is money, said Joseloff.

Joseloff isn't the first Westporter to serve in a leadership role on SWRMPO this decade. Farrell served as its chairman during her last term as Westport's first selectwoman.

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