Infrastructure weak

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By DAVID WINZELBERG AND ADINA GENN

The constant battle to secure Long Island's share of state and federal funding can sometimes resemble a street fight. And when it comes to paying for projects to improve and maintain the safety of hundreds of miles of area roads, that's exactly what it is.

On the front lines of the fight are the Long Island Contractors Association and its powerful leader Marc Herbst, who has been advocating for the group's membership of heavy construction contractors, subcontractors and suppliers for nearly 14 years.

A former state assemblyman who headed the assembly's Transportation Committee, Herbst has been lobbying elected officials to fund programs and projects critical to maintaining traffic and ensuring the safety of hundreds of thousands of drivers and passengers daily.

And upon the release of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's proposed state budget last week, the contractors group said it was "incredibly disappointed in the lack of funding allocated toward Long Island's decrepit roads and bridges."

While officials tout expansion of Long Island's limited mass transit system, roads remain the primary mode of travel here.

The LICA reports that the average Nassau motorist travels 35 miles per day, while the average Suffolk motorist travels 60 miles per day, leading to the region's often stifling congestion. On top of that, nearly 10 billion tons of goods travel each year over Long Island roads, many of which have suffered from years of neglect.

Herbst says a recent independent report from Advance Testing released last November, found that 82 percent of the 379 lane miles of Long Island roads analyzed in its study are in poor or fair condition, while only 17 percent were considered in good condition.

While the LICA agenda includes projects that would cost hundreds of millions of dollars, the group suggests that the delayed budget for sports betting, casinos and even prostitution would generate plenty of revenue that could help pay for it all. Herbst says there's a big price to pay by not doing anything.

"There's an economic cost to not improving our roadways," Herbst contends. "Traffic delays, damage to vehicles and safety risks cost millions of dollars annually." He added that the average Long Island commuter spends 74 hours a year stuck in traffic, costing $1,799 per-person in annual productivity.

Though there are plenty of projects and programs on LICA's wish list, Herbst gave LBNR five of the most needed.

Consolidated Local Street and Highway Improvement Program (CHIPs)

First established by the New York State Legislature in 1981, the Consolidated Local Street and Highway Improvement Program (CHIPs) provides state funding to municipalities to use for repairing and maintaining local streets. Based on a formula that considers the number of lane miles and registered vehicles, the state budgeted about $300 million in statewide CHIPs funding this fiscal year and about $40 million of that will go to communities in Nassau and Suffolk counties.

"The problem," Herbst says, is that Long Island needs way more than that money than it's been getting. "The $40 million from CHIPs hasn't increased since 2016. We told the CHIPs program should be dramatically increased to at least double what it is now," Herbst said. "It's been stagnant for five years."

He added that the lifespan of a residential street is 30 years and the last major program to reconstruct local streets on Long Island was in 1959.

The CHIP program is intended to repair the Oakdale Merge on Sunrise Highway has been on the drawing board for many years, according to Herbst.

Oakdale Merge

The project to improve the Oakdale Merge on Sunrise Highway has been on the drawing board for many years, according to Herbst.

The merger has 18 lanes of traffic collapsing down to just six.

"It creates the largest choke point for traffic on Long Island," Herbst said.

The state DOT held a public meeting on the proposed Oakdale Merge project in Nov. 2018 where more than 150 people showed up in support.

Herbst estimates the Oakdale Merge project could cost at least $100 million. LICA is planning a press conference for next week to urge state officials to fund the project.

Southern State/Meadowbrook Parkway Interchange

Another project that's been kicking around for a long time is the reconstruction of the interchange of the Southern State Parkway and the Meadowbrook Parkway.

The project, estimated to cost between $50 million and $70 million, would ease the flow of traffic and improve safety of the interchange.

Herbst says the Southern State/Meadowbrook interchange project is associated with the redevelopment of the Nassau Hub and was first hatched when the $4 billion Lighthouse plan for the property around the Nassau Coliseum was being discussed. Now that another Nassau Hub redevelopment plan is in the works, Herbst says it's time to get the interchange project going.

"They're been looking at this for that 15 years," he said.

Sagtikos State Parkway/Sunken Meadow State Parkway

Constructed as part of Robert Moses' Long Island Regional Park and Parkway Plan, the Sagtikos State Parkway portion was built from 1950 to 1953 and the Sunken Meadow State Parkway portion to the north was built from 1954 to 1957. The combined roadway was designated a National Historic
Transportation makes up just 4 percent of 2020 state operating funds.

Parkway in 2012.

The Sagtikos State Parkway handles about 60,000 vehicles per day between the Southern State Parkway and the Long Island Expressway and the Sunken Meadow State Parkway handles about 65,000 vehicles per day between the LIE and Jericho Turnpike exits.

In 2016, the DOT held a series of public meetings on a possible widening of a portion of the parkway, which was prompted by the proposed Heartland Town Square re-development of 460 acres of the former Pilgrim State Psychiatric Hospital in Brentwood.

But Herbut says the Sagtikos traffic bottleneck cause many delays for drivers and improvements to the road should not hinge on the Heartland re-development.

"It's been frustrating," Herbut said. "The capacity constraints are independent of the Heartland plan. But they're (the DOT) still waiting to see what happens with that project."

It's estimated that adding lanes to the Sagtikos and/or Sunken Meadow could run as much as $100 million.

The current DOT five-year capital plan authorized nearly $4.5 billion in state and federal funding for the Long Island region toward the renewal and modernization of roads and bridges, including the repair of the drawbridge over Long Creek on the Loop Parkway, constructing a wider bridge for Walt Whitman Road over the LIE and pavement renewal along Route 112 in Babylon.

According to Stephen Canzoneri, DOT spokesman for the Long Island region, who defended the state's commitment to road repair and maintenance.

"In 2020 alone, nearly $200 million in projects are expected to begin towards resurfacing, upgrades and safety enhancements," Canzoneri said via email. "The executive budget released last week proposes an additional $1.9 billion, two-year capital plan that is $3.5 billion, or 33 percent larger than the final two years of the previous capital plan."

Kevin Law, president and CEO of the Long Island Association, the region's largest business group, would also like to see the expansion of the Sagtikos Parkway, the completion of Route 497 out to Route 112 and the start of improvements to the infamous Oakdale Mercer.

"It's about time that project gets done," Law said, adding that it's one of the "biggest bottlenecks in all of Long Island."

Carl Oliver, a partner and the construction practice leader of Grady & Co., was speaking with two civil engineers last week who both said Long Island needs to improve its infrastructure to get people to home and to work.

People are leaving Long Island for other cities that have better infrastructure, less traffic, more mass transit," Oliver said.

"Those are the things we can't compete with," he said.

"Next it's the 1.3 percent. Clearly we are going in the wrong direction. One in four bridges is deteriorating. One in three roads is in need of repair," he said.

This week, the Suffolk County and Assembly headed their joint fiscal hearing on transportation, where the DOT and local elected officials make their cases for a bigger piece of the infrastructure funding pie.

There was some good news amidst the doom and gloom. LGA praised last week's announcements from the DOT that projects to repair portions of Route 112 and Route 25A will be renewed as part of a road funding plan for damaged roadways in need of deeper repair.

But Herbut maintains the DOT's outlay for the next two years is insufficient and that its spending should be planned over longer spans.

"It should be five years not two," Herbut said. "It's difficult for our members to plan over just two years because design and engineering takes a while."

However, Canzoneri said the two-year plan, which is subject to negotiations with the Legislature, was proposed "due to federal funding uncertainty as the Federal Fiscal Year 2020 Surface Transportation Act is set to expire in September 2020."

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