

TRANSPORTATION

# Super 7 project in limbo as state keeps focus on bridges

By Robert Miller

In the world of state transportation, the Super 7 project — a divided, limited-access highway between Danbury and Norwalk — is the walking dead, a ghost project.

“It’s in limbo,” said Kevin Nursick, spokesman for the state Department of Transportation. “It’s out there in the Milky Way somewhere.”

But the Norwalk River Valley Trail, which will zig and zag 38 miles along the corridor that was to have been Super 7 — is a happening thing. Already a mile of trail

joins Union Park and the Maritime Aquarium in Norwalk, and there’s a half-mile of “demonstration” trail in Wilton.

“We’re out here almost every day,” said Pandora Wojick, who was walking the Wilton trail recently with her daughter Kara. “We love it.”

This is the dilemma faced by state Sen. Robert Duff, D-Norwalk, the outspoken champion of Super 7.

“It should have been built 50 years ago,” he said. “It should be built today.”

But he is pushing a project the state DOT

*See State on A5*



**Traffic builds up along Route 7 in Ridgefield. The Super 7 highway project — a divided, limited-access highway between Danbury and Norwalk — remains in limbo, off the state’s priority list.**

Scott Mullin/  
For The Advocate

# State highway project remains in limbo

already has dropped off its priority list.

"Routine bridge maintenance is a priority for us," Nursick said. "Super 7 is not a priority."

Should the 38-mile trail be completed, it will create a constituency of walkers, runners and bicyclists who might not take to the idea of relocating it to make way for another long ribbon of concrete.

Towns and other entities along the Super 7 corridor also might try to wrest some of the state-owned right-of-way for other purposes. But Duff said they would need to win approval from the General Assembly, which he is determined to prevent.

"We have to make sure nothing happens to the land," Duff said.

He believes that longtime opponents of the project, including environmentalists of the 1970s, have given way to a younger generation more open to the prospect of quick highway access.

But state Sen. Toni Boucher, R-Wilton, Duff's unyielding opponent on the Super 7 project, argues that the battle already is over, and he has lost.

Told of Duff's claim that opposition to the project is fading, Boucher was blunt.

"He's delusional," she said.

Redding First Selectman Julia Pemberton is not part of the old guard that's been fighting the project for more than 40 years; she was elected the town's first selectman just last year. But she, too, scoffed at Duff's suggestion that opposition to Super 7 is fading.

"That just isn't so," Pemberton said, adding that she is "very skeptical" the highway would ever be built.

Redding would like to use some of the Super 7 right-of-way for an innovative proposal to provide more affordable housing.

Ridgefield First Selectman Rudy Marconi is also an unyielding opponent of the plan, saying the state should focus instead on making improvements to Metro-North's Danbury-to-Norwalk rail line, including laying a second track.

"We really need to begin looking at new ways of moving people," Marconi said.

And even Danbury Mayor Mark Boughton — whose city would be at the terminus of the new highway — is realistic, and doubtful, about Super 7 ever being built.

"We're for anything we can do to support better transportation," Boughton said. But given the opposition to Super 7, he said, spending more money on rail service would be "better and more expedient."

"You don't get all the environmental opposition with trains," he said.

The history of Super 7 dates back to the 1950s and 1960s, the grand era of roadbuilding in the United States, when the federal government created the Interstate Highway system. Originally, Super 7 was intended to run from Norwalk all the way to Burlington, Vt.

Two sections of the road did get built — from I-95 in Norwalk to Gristmill Road in Wilton, and from I-84 in Danbury to the old Route 7 near Four Corners in Brookfield.

But beginning in the 1970s, environmentalists fought further construction, saying it would destroy valuable wetlands along the Norwalk River and spoil the mix of small towns and rural landscapes between Danbury and Norwalk.

By the 1990s, the cost of building a major highway had grown substantially. Eventually, the state DOT lost interest in the project.

As a compromise, the state widened sections of the road in Danbury, Ridgefield and Wilton and built a 2.3-mile bypass around the badly congested Four Corners intersection in Brookfield. The cost of the bypass alone was \$100 million.

Boucher said it would cost \$2 billion to build the entire highway.

The DOT's Nursick agreed it would be "hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars" at a time the state is already looking at a \$1 billion price tag to rebuild I-84 through Hartford.

"We have mega-projects," Nursick said. "Super 7 isn't one of them. It isn't a project at all."

But if Super 7 isn't alive, it's not quite dead, either. The DOT hasn't killed it outright.

The reason is simple, Nursick said: The state owns hundreds of acres of right-of-way, and walking away from that land would be difficult.

"It would involve a lot of discussion with all the stakeholders," he said. "It would be a political decision."

But for Duff, the issue remains a simple one. For economic reasons, he said, it makes perfect sense to link Danbury and Norwalk by a limited-access highway, providing an easy commute.

"Danbury has a good labor force," he said. "It also has lower housing costs."

The state also needs a better evacuation route out of Norwalk in case of hurricanes or other natural disasters. The existing Route 7, which clogs daily with commuter traffic, couldn't handle the pressure of an evacuation.

"Route 7 didn't work in the 1980s," Duff said. "It doesn't work in 2014."

The cost of building the highway could be offset by making it a toll road, he said.

"I'm not a big fan of tolls," he said. "But I think people would be willing to pay to have that road."

Boucher countered that Super 7 does exactly what state planners are pushing against: promoting urban sprawl by giving city-dwellers an easy conduit to distant suburbs. The wiser course would be to promote development that clusters businesses around rail and bus centers.

Super 7, she said "is anti-transit development."

But while Super 7 is in limbo, the Norwalk River Valley Trail is rapidly be-

coming reality. Norwalk has several sections, and in Wilton a half-mile demonstration trail with packed stone winds through the woods.

Pat Sesto, Wilton's environmental director and the chairman of the trail project, said Wilton recently got a \$500,000 state grant to plan further sections of a trail. There's also discussion in Redding and Ridgefield about possible routes through those towns.

"Danbury is waiting to see where the trail will end," she said.

When that is settled, she said, planning there can start in earnest there as well.

The result — which may be years in the making — would be a trail accessible to walkers, runners and cyclists along its entire 38-mile length. Side trails would link to train stations in Norwalk, Wilton, Ridgefield and Danbury so people could walk or bike one way and ride the other. Commuters could bike to a train station in the morning and bike home at night.

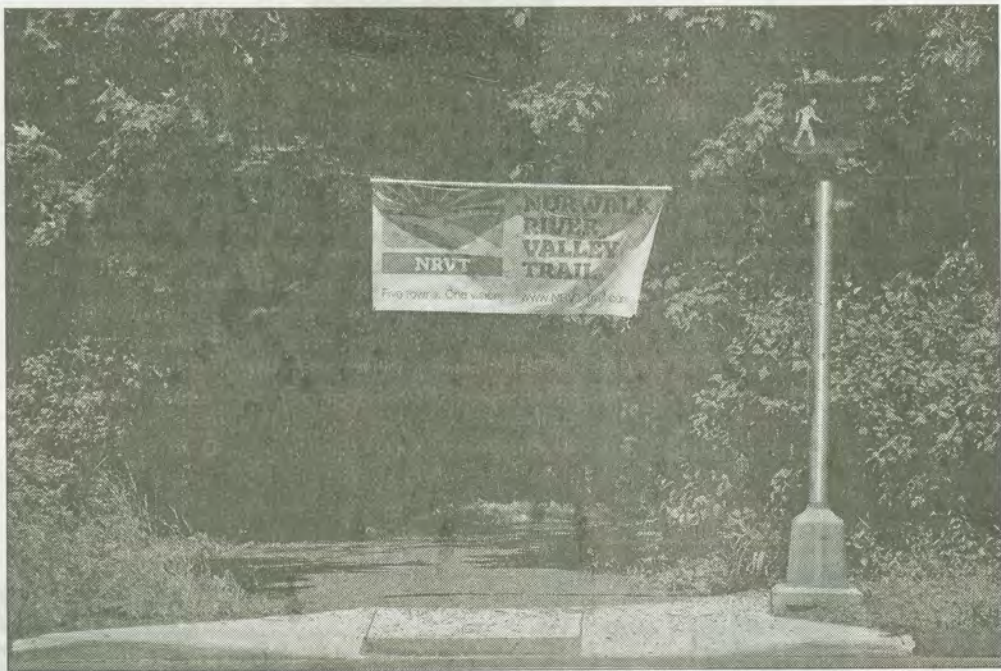
Some parts of the trail will cross the Super 7 right-of-way. Nursick said the DOT has no objection to such crossings as long as they do not prohibit construction of the highway in the future.

Duff has no objections to the trail either.

“The trail could exist along side a highway,” Duff said

But a fully developed trail would also create a constituency of walkers and bicyclists who might not want to see a highway built alongside their beloved pathway.

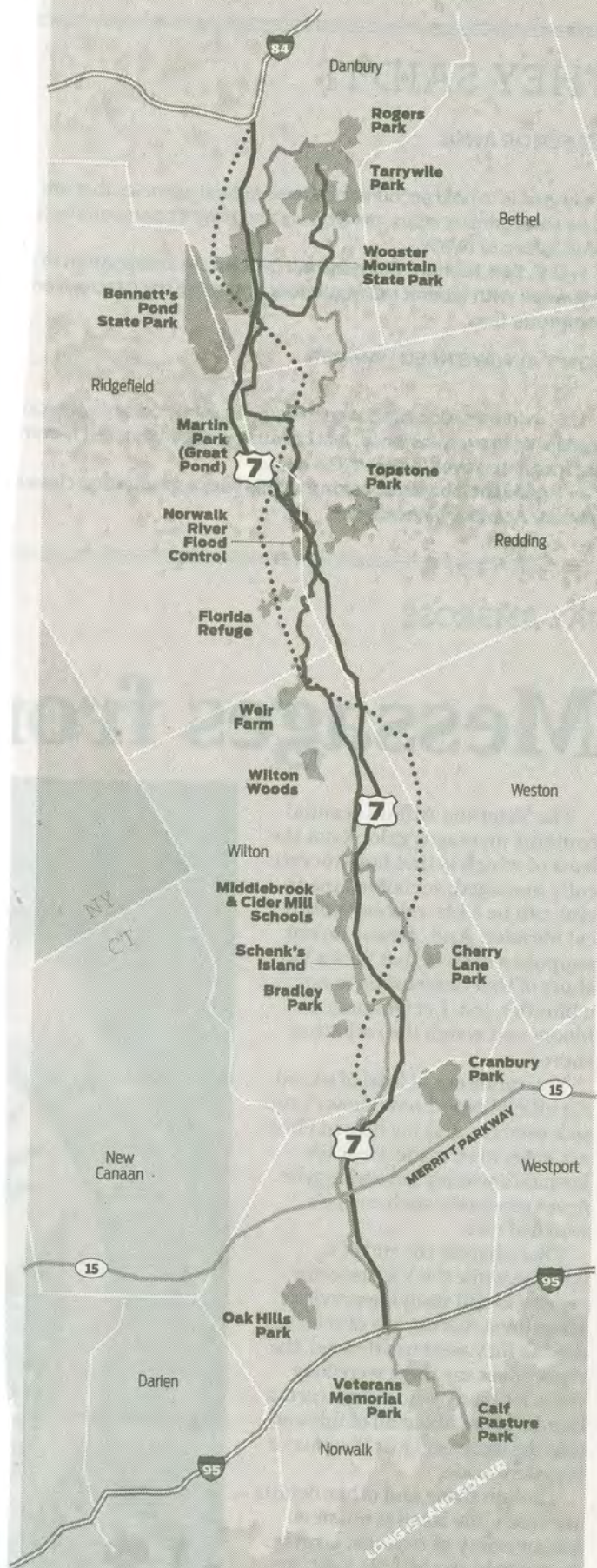
“Is that a concern? Yes and no,” Duff said. “There are always ways to compromise.”



Jason Rearick/Staff photographer

**The entrance to the Norwalk River Valley Trail is seen near the intersection of Wolfpit and Danbury roads in Wilton.**

# Multiple routes from Danbury to Norwalk



**EXISTING ROUTE 7**

**PROPOSED ROUTE OF SUPER 7**

**MULTI-USE TRAIL**

**PRIMARY MULTI-USE TRAIL WITH EQUESTRIAN FEATURES**

**SECONDARY MULTI-USE TRAIL WITH EQUESTRIAN FEATURES**

**PUBLIC OPEN SPACE**

**DOT PROPERTY**

LEGEND