

Norwalk now requires solicitor badges

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The Hour

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EDUCATION

School funding fix a top priority

Duff crafts bill, says it's a 'once-in-a-generation moment'

By Kevin Schultz

NORWALK — A more equitable system for the way Connecticut divvies out money to its public school systems could soon become a reality.

Connecticut legislators have made the development of a new school funding formula a top priority in

the General Assembly's new session.

The move comes after a state Superior Court judge made a September ruling in a more than decade-long lawsuit — brought forth by Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding — giving the state six months to fix what the judge dubbed an irrational school-

funding formula.

Though the court decision was appealed to the state Supreme Court, legislators said the decision provided an impetus for action.

"It opened the door to general frustration that had been out there about changing the formula and actually having a formula that works," said state Senate Majority Leader Bob Duff, D-Norwalk.

Duff and several other state legislators have said

they've tried bringing forth changes to the state's education funding formula in the past, but those initiatives gained little-to-no traction — until now.

Earlier this month, Duff proposed Senate Bill 2, co-sponsored by state Rep. Bruce Morris, D-Norwalk, with the aim "to develop a more equitable education cost sharing grant formula."

"I introduced it," Duff said, "because it is one of the highest priorities of the General Assembly."

See Funding on A6



Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media file photo
State Sen. and Majority Leader Bob Duff, shown reading to students at Fox Run Elementary School in Norwalk, is co-sponsoring a new education cost-sharing formula.

ACLU REPORT

Roadblocks remain when complaining about police

By Pat Tomlinson

NORWALK — Despite recent reforms, police agencies across the state are still making it difficult for the public to obtain basic, legally required information regarding police misconduct complaint forms and processes, according to a new report from the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut.

Under a 2014 state law, all police agencies in the state, including municipal departments, state police troops, and special agencies such as university departments, are required to adopt or exceed a model complaint policy created by the Police Officer Standards and Training Council.

See ACLU on A6

ROUTE 7 CONNECTOR

FREEWAY NO MORE?



Alex von Kleydorff / Hearst Connecticut Media

The Route 7 Connector in Norwalk looking north to the Merritt Parkway overpass and the southbound exit to New York City on Thursday. A proposed change would turn the freeway to a signalized boulevard by installing two traffic signals — one north and the other immediately south of the parkway.

New alternative would add traffic lights, shave \$100 million

By Robert Koch

NORWALK — Motorists driving the brakes if the state Department of Transportation picks Alternate 26 to overhaul the Route 7-Merritt Parkway interchange.

Alternate 26, as the design is called, would add missing links, make the interchange fully directional and create three traffic lanes in each direction along the connector near the parkway.

It would change the connector from a freeway to signalized boulevard by installing two traffic signals — one north

and the other immediately south of the parkway.

That would create a whole new commute for the thousands of motorists, many of whom use the connector to get to and from their jobs at the nearby Merritt 7 Corporate Park.

David Fiore, principal of Marcus Partners, the leasing agent for the corporate park, said he has yet to review the design. But anything that completes the incomplete interchange is a step forward, he said.

"As a person who lives in Westport and works in Norwalk and travels quite a bit in the tri-state area, any way of (better) connecting the Merritt to Route

95 (Interstate 95) would be beneficial to everybody," Fiore said. "It would seem to me it could be a plus if it's well designed."

While still requiring extensive study, Alternate 26 is the freshest design on the table in the state's long-but-frustrated effort to complete the Route 7-Merritt Parkway interchange. Although the design would slow traffic by converting the connector from a freeway to signalized boulevard, it could bring benefits.

Less money, smaller footprint

Before the interchange overhaul project halted in 2009 amid the economic recession, the DOT had arrived at Alternate 21C as its preferred design.

See Parkway on A6

CITY GOVERNMENT

Tax sale nets \$4.2 million

By Robert Koch

NORWALK — The city's 2016 tax sale last summer brought in \$4.25 million in back taxes to the Norwalk Tax Collector's Office.

That includes money paid during the run-up and at the sale, which took place July 18 in Norwalk Concert Hall.

"The collection of more than \$4.25 million in back taxes makes this tax sale successful," Tax Collector Lisa Biagiarelli wrote in a statement. "We exceeded our projection of \$4 million. The tax sale is the city of Norwalk's primary means of collection enforcement for past-due real estate taxes."

See Tax on A4

Testifying before the General Assembly can be a bumpy ride

Getting a chance to speak hardly worth ride to Hartford

Don't look now, but our Legislature is back in action considering dozens of bills affecting transportation. Everything from tolls to train fares, from airports to Uber could be up for grabs this session.

But how are citizens

supposed to voice their views, let alone follow these machinations from afar? Aside from following the Connecticut media or watching every moment on CT-N, the state's version of C-SPAN, there is not much to keep

us informed.

Some bills, like H.B. 773 proposed by state Rep. Gail Lavielle, R-Wilton, deserve our support. That bill would require legislative approval for proposed fare increases on Metro-North. But offering your support (or disapproval) of any of these bills isn't easy.

Sure, you can submit testimony by email. But

there are 36 members of the Transportation Committee, each juggling hundreds of bills coming before this and other committees on which they serve. Will your e-mailed comments make a difference or just be seen as spam?

Forget about lawmakers coming to you for a public hearing. You must go to them.

I traveled to Hartford for decades to testify on various bills in my capacity as a member of the Metro-North Commuter Rail Council, as a commuter and just as a taxpayer. But not anymore.

GETTING THERE



Jim Cameron
COMMENTARY

#GettingThereCT

Use #GettingThereCT to chime in on Facebook and Twitter.

It's a waste of time.

You have to give up an entire day to go to Hartford, arriving early in the morning to sign up on the testimony list (or enter a lottery for a slot).

Knowing where you are on the testimony list, you then settle into the hearing room waiting for your three minutes of time.

See Cameron on A4



FROM THE FRONT PAGE

ACLU

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This requires all police agencies to make their complaint policies publicly available on their websites and at municipal buildings separate from the departments themselves, as well as accept all complaints, including those submitted anonymously, online, by mail, over the phone or by a third party.

During community forums hosted throughout the state by ACLU-CT, however, members of the public described a “chilling disregard” for these rules among some police agencies, explained Meghan Smith, one of the report’s coauthors.

“These requirements are not simply suggestions for police agencies to take or leave. They are critically important for building community trust in police, and they carry the weight of the law,” wrote Smith in the study.

People from across the state expressed concern about notarization requirements, in-person and in-station filing requirements and lack of access to com-



Alex von Kleydorff / Hearst Connecticut Media file

Capt. John Lynch of the Wilton Police Department stressed the importance of residents’ complaints about police misconduct, whether anonymous or not, as a matter of public transparency and accountability.

plaint forms outside of police stations.

In the resulting October 2016 study, the ACLU-CT found there are nearly one million people living in municipalities around the state where police departments were found to be non-compliant with state compliant law or policy.

Furthermore, an examination of 102 police agency websites found that 40 had failed to clearly post their complaint policies and/or complaint forms online.

In a followup telephone

survey of 60 police agencies, they also found 42 percent contradicted state law by suggesting that they did not make complaint policies fully available to the public. Nearly one-third stated or implied that they would not accept anonymous complaints.

While anonymous complaints may not be fully heeded in some parts of Connecticut, Capt. John Lynch of the Wilton Police Department stressed the importance of residents’ complaints about police

misconduct, whether anonymous or not.

“We take every tip, even if it is hearsay from someone else, and we look into it,” Lynch said. “We are accountable to our community and we want to do the best job that we can for them.”

Where most local police department websites tend to bury their civilian complaint links beneath other links on their homepages, and others don’t even advertise the tab on their homepage at all, Wilton’s complaint submission link can’t be missed, with its boldfaced text that is a few points larger than all surrounding text.

In 2016, Lynch said that the Wilton Police Department received 10 citizen complaints last year. While most complaints come to nothing, Lynch said some have led to procedural changes and officer discipline in the past.

“It helps us identify if officers need training in certain areas or if changes need to be made, so it’s a really helpful tool for us. And it just helps provide the feeling of transparency and accountability to the public,” Lynch said.

For Norwalk, the study shined a light on some policies that needed some slight amendments.

The study found Norwalk was a part of the 30 percent of agencies statewide that indicated their complaint forms needed to be turned in in-person.

Since the study was conducted, Norwalk police have made police complaint forms readily available on their website, and these forms can be transmitted via email or regular mail. However, these avenues of complaint still create paper trails that prevent complainants from remaining anonymous.

Lt. Terry Blake, a Norwalk police spokesman, said the issue with anonymous complaints is trying to verify the information in them. Without a name to the complaint, police have a hard time following up.

“We do request that an individual does come down and speak to a supervisor, but that is most certainly not a requirement. ... As a matter of policy, we would certainly contact the complainant and interview them to find out what exactly happened,” Blake said.

To ensure departments take the state’s mandate seriously, the ACLU-CT report also recommended that the state institute punishments for departments that don’t comply.

Since, as the study states, the “police agencies’ widespread lack of compliance with existing complaint law and policy only underscores that police cannot consistently police themselves in this area,” the ACLU-CT recommends the state should withhold state funds from departments that fail to comply.

Other suggestions include establishing an improved universal statewide complaint policy, requiring law enforcement agencies to track and public report complaint data.

“One of the goals of this report was to improve transparency and accessibility,” Smith said. “We’re glad that some departments have used this as a learning opportunity to post their policies online and to make their complaint processes more accessible for people.”

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PARKWAY

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The design, which emerged after numerous meetings with residents and other stakeholders, would rely upon ramps but not traffic signals.

Alternate 21C, if built, would improve the existing connections and create the four missing connections between the parkway, Route 7 Connector and Main Avenue. The design would minimize impact on wetlands and existing bridges, and wouldn’t employ high-flying ramps, a DOT engineer said in 2006.

It would cost roughly \$200 million to build, according to the DOT. John Eberle, principal and project manager with Stantec, the consultant engineer engaged by the DOT, explained Alternate 26 along with its benefits and drawbacks during a recent public information meeting at Norwalk City Hall.

“We anticipate you would need seven bridges on this one where 21C was 14 bridges, so you can see how the compactness of it is certainly a savings,” Eberle said. “This would be significantly less expensive than 21C. I think we’re looking on the order of half the cost.”

Based upon the DOT’s initial analysis, the poten-

tial benefits of Alternate 26 are a smaller footprint, fewer structures, a significantly lower cost and fewer impacts to the environment and historic resources along the Merritt Parkway.

On the downside, the new design could worsen air quality and increase traffic noise, and yet still lack the capabilities necessary to handle future traffic loads as rated by level of service. The DOT rates motorists’ grief and wait times in traffic on an A-to-F scale with A representing excellent service and F unacceptable.

Under Alternate 26, motorists would encounter C-service or better at the Route 7 Connector stoplight north of the Merritt Parkway, and D-service or better at the stoplight to the south, according to the DOT’s initial analysis. Eberle described D as minimally acceptable in an urban environment. That’s a drawback.

“While the levels of service, at least at this point, appear to be satisfactory and OK, they’re actually reduced from what 21C was offering,” Eberle said.

In 2005, the parkway conservancy and other preservationist groups filed a lawsuit against the Federal Highway Administration and the DOT in an effort to get the state to downsize its original design, which the

groups considered too large, too costly and destructive to the parkway. U.S. District Court in New Haven found that the Federal Highway Administration had not met its legal “obligation to ensure that all possible planning was done to minimize harm prior to approving the interchange project.”

Merritt Parkway Conservancy Executive Director Jill Smyth, while noting Alternate 26 “is just a concept,” said she is pleased with what it would mean for the parkway.

“Obviously, the conservancy is pleased to see that the footprint is much smaller and more compact, less structures are going to be needed, and also it’s less expensive,” Smyth said. “And it appears that this plan, compared to the previous Alternate 21C, has less impact to the Merritt Parkway.”

More vetting ahead

Adolph Neaderland, a Norwalk resident, asked at last week’s meeting if engineers had considered the thousands of new apartments being built in Norwalk. Last January, plans were approved for Grist Mill Village, which will entail 710 apartments along Glover Avenue.

“When this (analysis) was done, did you have an understanding that there

were going to be a thousand houses on Glover Avenue, a thousand residences, which is 2,000 additional cars?” he asked.

Eberle said engineers actually anticipate “5,000 units coming on board” as part of ongoing apartment construction in Norwalk.

At this point, Alternate 26 remains one of a half-dozen design alternatives that may emerge through further review and public input. Said Eberle, “it still has to go through the full vetting.” For all the previous design work and review that have gone into the interchange overhaul,

more remains.

This year, the DOT plans to continue its public information meetings, develop all alternatives, identify a preferred alternative and begin preliminary design. The department hopes to complete required environmental reports, begin final design in 2018 and start construction in 2021.

That leaves time for residents, motorists and elected officials to weigh Alternate 26, Alternate 21C and whatever else might emerge.

“I’m not an engineer or anything but I found it very interesting,” state Rep. Gail Lavielle, R-Wilton, said of

Alternate 26. “What I like about it is that it’s less disruptive to the character of the Merritt Parkway and it spends \$100 million less, approximately.”

But she added, based upon the DOT information, that the design could add to air and noise pollution and slow traffic down.

“Someone joked it will slow down the traffic for anyone going up to Wilton,” Lavielle said. “I think everyone in Wilton would want an answer to that, but I just don’t have a clear idea yet on how long you would spend in traffic.”

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FUNDING

From page A1

Education advocates encouraged

Individuals and organizations across the state seemed pleased with the idea of bringing the issue of educational funding to the forefront.

ConnCAN, the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now, an organization dedicated to improving education outcomes for Connecticut’s kids, is encouraged that Duff sponsored Senate Bill 2.

Jennifer Alexander, CEO of ConnCAN, said his action sends “a strong signal that the development of a new, more equitable education funding formula will be a top priority this session.”

“It is time that we fairly fund students based on their learning needs, across all types of public schools,” Alexander said.

While the details of the bill are still “light at the moment,” Duff promised there is a lot of “behind-the-scenes” work going on.

He said it would ultimately be important for

the bill to “address student achievement in a way that fairly funds schools in places like Norwalk and Stamford and actually gets results that will produce graduates who are ready for college or career.”

As Duff and other General Assembly members work on the issue, ConnCAN recommends the new school funding formula incorporates what the organization calls “six key design principles,” including equity, innovation, coherence, transparency, fairness and accountability.

Those core principles were put forward by several other education advocacy organizations as well, including the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, the Connecticut Association of Schools and the Connecticut Council for Education Reform.

Norwalk ‘poster child’ for inequity

Any changes to the formula to encompass factors such as a school system’s number of English language learners or number

of students who receive free and reduced lunch would be sure to aid Norwalk Public Schools, which receives roughly 7 percent of its total funding from the state Education Cost Sharing formula and has been called a “poster child” for the problems within the current system of funding.

About 50 percent of Norwalk Public Schools students are receiving free and reduced lunch and nearly 15 percent of students are English language learners.

The state currently uses a formula primarily based on property taxes, which many say represents Norwalk unfairly due to the city’s inflated property values — by virtue of its location along the coast and near New York City.

Duff said a public hearing would take place on the bill in the coming weeks.

“This is a key moment that we have,” Duff said. “A once-in-a-generation moment to help all of our students in the state, to help close our achievement gap and to make sure all students have the ability to have the necessary resources to succeed.”

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