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OPINION

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State transportation post vital to LI

Void created by Fuschillo's exit is best filled with a local who understands region

BY DESMOND RYAN

Long Island's economy, its property values and its future are predicated on a viable transportation system. So the departure of a key state senator with the power and political acumen to ensure our region gets its fair share of transportation dollars isn't good for Long Island.

After 16 years, Sen. Charles Fuschillo Jr. (R-Merrick) has decided it's time for a new career, and while many wish him well, he leaves a gaping political hole. Among his duties was serving as chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, the arena where many of New York's infrastructure funding priorities are set and policy is defined.

Most Long Islanders were unaware of the key role Fuschillo played when projects were debated during multiple gubernatorial administrations. Nor were many focused on how he put the state budget process on pause to ensure key Long Island projects were funded, or that attention was paid to the needs of the

Long Island Rail Road. His accomplishments also included an aviation passenger bill of rights and tough drunken-driving laws. That kind of advocacy goes unnoticed until it goes missing.

Fuschillo is not the only Long Islander who understood the power of his position. His predecessor, the late Norman Levy of Merrick, secured considerable funds for the LIRR and our parkways, and helped pass the nation's first mandatory seat belt law while serving as the committee's chairman. The person to hold that job will emerge from a more complicated political environment than previous appointees by the Senate majority leader. Republicans and Democrats share Senate leadership in an alliance that hinges on compromise. The new mayor of New York City will want to influence the selection — rail and roads are as essential to the city's future as to Long Island's.

Senators who enjoy seniority will make a play for the title, even if their districts have little more than a stretch of the Thru-



Ex-State Sen. Charles Fuschillo, right, with Sen. Charles Schumer.

way. And while the executive branch has no direct influence on the selection, one can expect Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo to be more than a casual observer; he'll be compelled to work with the committee's leader as he faces re-election.

The harsh truth is, if the next chair is not from the Island, few of our critical issues are likely to be addressed, especially if we look at past upstate-downstate battles over funding and policies. Would a new chair from Horseheads advocate for feder-

al funds with Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Rep. Peter King (R-Seaford) for the reopening of the Republic train station, creating a much-needed transportation hub for the Route 110 business corridor? If the chair hails from Herkimer, will he or she be engaged on funding initiatives, such as the second phase of the LIRR double-track project, which opens central Suffolk to job creation and economic opportunities vital to protecting our collective future? And with infrastruc-

ture investment by most local municipalities essentially flat, would a chair from Chemung be strong enough to persuade the state to make up at least part of the funding gap?

Much is on the line. Long Island faces high energy costs and burdensome taxes. In an era of tight budgets and finite resources, who allocates the available transportation dollars will make the difference between growth and stagnation.

One of the Island's few competitive advantages is our means of moving people and goods from here to there, and Fuschillo encouraged alternatives such as the Brookhaven Rail Terminal, which has taken the shipping of thousands of tons of products off our roads. While Long Islanders have little say over the selection of the next transportation chair, our region needs to understand what's at stake and why our Senate delegation must keep this job a Long Island seat.



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