By Michael Watt at <http://libn.com/2013/11/04/watt-li-biz-leaders-must-come-together/>

LONG ISLAND BUSINESS LEADERS MUST COME TOGETHER

The verbal spit-balling between former Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy and the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council on these pages recently regarding Levy’s call for a Long Island-specific metropolitan planning organization draws attention to how Long Island’s ongoing inability to flex its collective muscle once again results in insufficient funding.

This issue becomes particularly pressing when you read Mike Sweeney of HNBT Corp.’s recent op-ed piece (“[A year after the big one, time to act on infrastructure](http://libn.com/2013/10/25/sweeney-a-year-after-the-big-one-time-to-act-on-infrastructure/),” LIBN, Oct. 25), referring to the long-term and latent damage done by Hurricane Sandy to Long Island’s infrastructure.

[FEMA](http://www.fema.gov/%E2%80%8E), the Federal Transit Administration, the Federal Highway Administration, [Housing and Urban Development](http://www.hud.gov/%E2%80%8E) and other federal agencies are divvying up the disaster-relief pie between now and the end of December, and Long Island needs to be a part of the process.

Securing Sandy relief money and putting it to good use on Long Island is a (hopefully) once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to rectify and enhance the region’s transportation infrastructure. But if the approach to these agencies is piecemeal or confusing to the people making the decisions, then we will once again witness big piles of money going to New York City and other regions that can advocate for themselves in a unified voice.

Just look at the NYMTC’s “Plan 2040,” which was adopted in September. Of the 12 projects allotted more than $26 billion in funding, seven are New York City-centric and three are for bridges (Tappan Zee, Goethals and Bayonne) connecting New York to North America.

What’s left for Long Island – a region of 3 million residents generating more than $130 billion in annual economic activity? About $855 million for safety improvements along Route 347 and another $129 million for a second track along the Ronkonkoma Branch of the LIRR.

Long Island benefits from the infrastructure improvements bestowed upon the city, and as someone who holds his breath every time I traverse the Tappan Zee because of warnings about impending doom passed on by my engineering friends, I’ll be grateful once the span is replaced. But still, Long Island needs just as much support for its regional infrastructure.

We can no longer afford to support the imbalance of funds flowing off Long Island in relation to what comes back. But we are our own worst enemy when it comes to commanding the financial respect we deserve because we lack that crucial leadership focal point.

No elected official, for instance, represents the region in its entirety. Our congressional delegation must remain loyal to the districts they represent, and more often than not the desires of one district conflict with those in another – a third railroad line from Jamaica to Hicksville being an excellent case-in-point. The region as a whole needs that third line, but the communities directly impacted by the construction of it will fight it tooth-and-nail.

Statewide elected officials such as Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Sens. Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand have other components of the state to consider, and the prevailing wisdom in government funding is an expanded slice of pie for Long Island comes at the expense of another part of the state.

This is where Long Island’s business community can play an important role. The aforementioned $130 billion in annual economic activity gives us a powerful hammer that should get these agencies’ attention, but that only works if Long Island presents its case as a unified region.

This is no time to be bashful or modest. If we want to be treated with the respect and recognition deserving of New York State’s second-most-important economic engine, our leading corporate citizens have to direct our elected officials to circle the wagons and demand funding that reflects our significance to the economic health of New York State and the rest of the country.