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July 16, 2009

To Improve the M.T.A., Its Leader Must Tame Albany

By [MICHAEL M. GRYNBAUM](#)

The man poised to take the helm of the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) has spent a quarter century developing a reputation as a master overseer of public transportation.

Now comes the hard part: dealing with Albany.

For Jay H. Walder, who was nominated on Tuesday as the next chairman of the authority, expertise in the transit field may ultimately prove less important than his political skills, as he seeks to enact meaningful change at an agency where power often rests in the back rooms of the State Capitol.

Even in the celebratory moments after his nomination, the reality of politics intruded: State Senate leaders seemed almost gleeful in saying that Mr. Walder had little chance of being confirmed in an expeditious manner. (Some legislators predicted on Wednesday that the process could stretch past [Labor Day](#).)

The political challenges are so formidable that many transportation advocates, although immensely respectful of Mr. Walder's credentials, have expressed some surprise that he accepted the New York job. Mr. Walder grew up in Queens and became a transportation expert who transformed London's transit system into a world leader.

"It's a big risk," said Robert E. Paaswell, the director of the University Transportation Research Center at the [City College of New York](#). "Jay has every tool imaginable to run the system," adding, "But brilliance may not cut it."

The chairman of the transportation authority must balance the needs of a system that provides 2.4 billion rides a year against varying political agendas of board members appointed by the governor, the mayor of New York, and a scattering of county executives.

Then there is Albany, which authorizes the tax revenues and bond sales that make up the authority's financing. Mr. Walder has set an ambitious agenda, saying his top priority is to secure long-term funding to modernize the system's infrastructure. But just two months ago, after a fierce legislative fight, the agency barely eked out enough funds to avoid severe service cuts and fare increases.

Mr. Walder's post would come with a six-year term, intended to shield its occupant from the vicissitudes of short-term politics. But Gov. [David A. Paterson](#) faces a [tough re-election](#) fight in just 16 months, and past chairmen have rarely stuck around for long after a change at the top.

"You need, as chair, to make sure that the governor is on board with what you want to do," said [Peter S.](#)

[Kalikow](#), chairman of the authority from 2001 to 2007. “And if he’s not on board, you have to try to get him there.” Cordial relations with the governor can streamline fiscal requests and ease legislative disputes. If the relationship sours, the transit agency can be left without a crucial friend in Albany.

Mr. Kalikow, appointed by Gov. [George E. Pataki](#), left the job soon after [Eliot Spitzer](#) became governor. Peter E. Stangl, the authority’s chairman from 1991 to 1995, left shortly after Mr. Pataki took over from [Mario Cuomo](#). And [Richard Ravitch](#) announced his resignation eight months after Mr. Cuomo took office.

Governor Paterson had his own run-in with a transit chief appointed by a predecessor. In May, the governor forced out Elliot G. Sander, who had been appointed by Mr. Spitzer to lead the transit authority.

Mr. Walder said on Tuesday that he was eager to return to New York, where he got his start as a public servant. He suggested that he had been promised a certain amount of autonomy.

Governor Paterson “stressed to me the importance of this new position to be sufficiently independent, to be able to make difficult and actually sometimes unpopular decisions,” Mr. Walder said, adding: “The governor’s comments were very, very important to me.”

Later, in an interview, Mr. Walder was asked if he would feel confident navigating the political challenges of the new job.

“Success requires all the skills to handle transportation, the finance, the infrastructure — but it also involves working in a very open and public environment,” he said. “The reality is I have spent my career doing that, and I hope that will help in doing things right here.”

Ultimately, the appeal of coming to New York to lead one of the most prominent transit authorities in the world may outweigh the anxieties of facing down a difficult political scene.

“To run the M.T.A. is the sine qua non of transit jobs,” Mr. Paaswell said. “If it’s available, no matter where you are, you take it.”

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