
'Rising star'

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By CHRIS BARRETT An esteemed fellowship, a retreat with some of America's top politicians and admiration from his peers - Mayor Scott Avedisian is slowly building the foundation for a run for higher office. In August, the nonprofit Aspen Institute awarded Avedisian the Aspen Institute-Rodel Fellowship in Public Leadership. The institute selected Avedisian and 23 other politicians that they labeled "true rising star[s]" in politics. Avedisian - the only mayor in the inaugural fellowship class - met his classmates for the first time at a December retreat in Aspen, Colo. where he impressed his peers. Republican State Sen. Jason Atkinson, who is running for Oregon governor, said Avedisian could "absolutely" rise to a higher office. "He carried himself really like an executive," Atkinson said. "I was like, 'You're the mayor of Warwick.' He was just on par, if not leading the discussion, leading the group that included U.S. Senators." The two-day, all-expenses paid retreat to the Aspen Institute's campus included 17 state representatives, state treasurers and other state officials from around the country and both parties. Seven members of Congress were scheduled to attend but remained in Washington D.C. because Congress was in session. The institute selected the class from more than 1,400 nominations from elected officials, businesses and individuals. The Institute wouldn't say who nominated Avedisian. The mayor said he has his suspicions but asked they not be printed because nominators are supposed to remain secret. He did speculate he was chosen because he is a moderate Republican from the Northeast. Avedisian is the only official from the Northeast in the class. As for the requirement that nominees be a "true rising star," Avedisian shrugged off such a label, saying in his City Hall office last week he remains focused on finishing his work in Warwick and seeking reelection next year. "For now I'm staying here but one never knows what the future brings," he said, adding later, "Anything beyond [running for mayor in 2006] I'd have to give some serious thought." Brown University political science professor Darrell West said Avedisian would be right to think about seeking higher office. "I expect big things from him in the future," West said. "This fellowship is a prestigious award and recognition of his demonstrated leadership abilities so I fully expect him to emerge or seek a higher office at some point in the future." West said it is difficult to predict what office Avedisian might seek but said Avedisian could certainly be on the Republicans' short list when the governorship opens up in 2010. He added that Avedisian being a Republican would probably not hurt him, even in a largely Democratic state. "He's a Chafee Republican and those are exactly the types of Republicans who do well in Rhode Island," West said. "We have a long history of electing people statewide who are socially liberal but fiscally conservative." Minnesota State House of Representatives Majority Leader, Erik Paulsen said Avedisian would fit in well at the state or federal level. "When I run into people from local government they usually don't have a grasp of what issues face states or the nation and Scott had a good grasp of those issues," said Paulsen, a Republican. He added, "I definitely think he has the capability [to serve in a higher office]. If nothing else I think he is very, very thoughtful, very bright and I think he has a bright future." Avedisian had the opportunity to start thinking about his future months before retreat when the class received an inch-thick book with readings from the preamble to the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, James Madison's Federalist Papers, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes and many more. "We started with the basics of where are we now, how did we get there and how can we take it and make it better and better in a non-partisan, non-political way," Avedisian said. As the officials shared experiences, Avedisian said he saw time and time again the same problem of an apathetic population unwilling to engage themselves in government. "By and large it was overall frustration with a system that doesn't want to change at all levels," he said. "When it really comes down to it people do not want change." Maryland's Montgomery County Council President Tom Perez said Avedisian could be just the man that inspires change. "He had a passion for helping people and common sense and sound judgment," said Perez, a Democrat and former Providence resident. "He is remarkably committed to the community and he is someone who is very, very passionate and the City of Warwick is very lucky to have him." Avedisian said he hoped the entire group would inspire change through a concise set of practical recommendations for better leadership. "We were all adamant that we didn't want to make a global and cerebral 500-page document with 24 names on it and have no one pay attention to it... Let's not try and answer every issue," he said. "Unfortunately, that's what happens. You put together a group and they try and go from A to Z on every issue." Avedisian said it was the group's determination that inspired him to accept the fellowship when former Congressman and program director Mickey Edwards asked him to. "I wanted to really talk about it because if it wasn't going to be productive and if we weren't going to come up with something of a concrete end product, I wasn't sure I wanted to invest the time," Avedisian said. The Aspen group is also unique in other ways in that the class did not become hung up on titles but rather treated each other as peers. "I said the first night we got there I was a little concerned about being the only mayor," Avedisian said. "What I really liked about this group, no parties no titles." Avedisian said he enjoyed the open discussions among officials, a sentiment echoed by Kansas State Treasurer Lynn Jenkins who called Avedisian "most impressive." "I learned so much from him being a Midwestern female that has only been involved in state government," she said. "To spend three or four days learning from someone who lives in a small state, involved in local government, you couldn't ask for a more diverse group." Avedisian said he hopes such a diverse group will provide him with ideas on how to help lead Warwick. "What I'm looking forward to is just a frank discussion with 23 other people and have real discussion about the issues that are facing local communities," he said. He'll have plenty of time, as the class is scheduled to return to Aspen and visit Maryland, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Gaza and China during the next year and a half.