

914INC.

May/June 2022

[Click Here to View Online](#)

914INC.

Our Best
and Brightest
Young
Superstars

WUNDERKINDS

2022

GOLF
guide

LOCAL BUSINESSES
GRAPPLE WITH
CLIMATE
CHANGE

A BRIGHT NEW
FUTURE FOR
PLAYLAND?

MAY/JUNE 2022 \$5.99
westchestermagazine.com



0 74820 08734

WEATHERING THE STORM

Westchester Grapples With Climate
Consequences and Solutions

914INC.

Extreme weather events, like Hurricane Ida, have local businesses apprehensive about the future — but they're not sitting idle.

BY KEVIN ZAWACKI

PHOTO BY ADOBE STOCK USER JOESAYHELLO

weck@914inc.com 61



When Hurricane Ida smashed into Mamaroneck in September 2021, businesses across the town faced some of the worst flooding in living memory.

"We had six feet of water in our two front buildings and four feet of water in our shop building," recalls Michael Murphy of Murphy Brothers Contracting, a 50-year-old, family-owned and Mamaroneck-based general contracting firm. "That storm was a monster."

Murphy Brothers had an advantage when recovering from the floods ("We are a construction company," Murphy says), but many other merchants didn't. Restaurants and shops dotting the downtown are still reeling, their livelihoods destroyed. "A lot of them are still trying to figure their lives out," Murphy says.

Even with their expertise and manpower, Murphy Brothers isn't taking any more chances going forward. They're in the approval process to knock down their current structures and build new, more resilient ones. "We have to build the new property up seven feet in the air, because that's where the flood line is," Murphy explains. "That's our preparation."

Jason Daniels of Half Time Beverage — a retail, distribution, and online beverage company in Mamaroneck — has a storefront nearby. After Ida hit, he woke up to a foreboding text message: "I'm so, so sorry."



"SUSTAINABLE WESTCHESTER WAS CREATED BY ELECTED OFFICIALS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCATES TO ACCELERATE RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND OTHER SUSTAINABILITY CONCERNS."

NINA ORVILLE, Executive Director of Sustainable Westchester

The storm had ravaged Half Time's 22,000-square-foot location. "It was a complete and utter disaster," Daniels says. "Pallets and heavy machinery that had been on one end of the building were now on the other."

"There was six feet of water in the building," Daniels recalled, and more than a half-million dollars of inventory was destroyed. "Very, very little was salvageable. I was devastated." It took a team of professionals eight days of 12-hour shifts just to clean up the wreckage.

For many in Westchester — especially those in waterfront areas, like Mamaroneck and Yonkers — Murphy's and Daniels' experiences are shocking but not surprising. With extreme weather events growing more common, and Westchester

geographically located in a watershed, monstrous storms and the consequent damage is no longer a rare experience. "These storms are not 100-year storms anymore," says Daniels. "They're once a decade, it looks like."

The experts agree.

"It isn't that we haven't had extreme weather events in the past," says Peter McCartt, Westchester County's director of energy and sustainability, "but they're coming with much more frequency, and they're coming in different ways."

"It's events that we just don't expect," he adds, like surprise floods or freezing weather in October that kills off trees in bloom.

Nina Orville, executive director of Sustainable Westchester, a nonprofit coalition of 45 municipalities in the county, offers something similar: "There have been significant extreme-weather-related events in Westchester County in [recent years]. And the summers are getting hotter, which has health and economic impacts."

Michael Romita, president and CEO of the Westchester County Association (WCA), is acutely aware of those economic impacts. "All of these things that are affected by climate change have had a dramatic effect on our businesses," he explains. "And if you look at the businesses that are poised for growth, they're all starting to factor this question into their analyses: *How are we going to operate given the context of climate change?*"

As a result, business owners in Westchester, along with governments and residents, find themselves facing a crisis. But they're not sitting idly by. "Most people really pivot to solutions," Orville says.

There's a diverse blend of emotions across the county when it comes to climate: apprehension about the impacts; the determination to get through it; and optimism that Westchester is ready and able to confront the challenge head on.

Policymakers across Westchester — like those fueling Sustainable Westchester — are some of those most bullish about addressing the problem. "Sustainable Westchester was created by elected officials and environmental advocates to accelerate response to climate change and other sustainability concerns," Orville explains.

"Each municipality has limited resources," she adds, "but when those resources are pooled, they are actually very significant." Those resources can help businesses and residents address the immediate consequences of climate change but can also help Westchester become more sustainable in the long term.

In 2022, one of the nonprofit's goals is helping local businesses capitalize on battery-storage technology. "It can have financial benefits for businesses but also give them the peace of mind of having energy stored on-site," Orville explains. Neighborhoods and downtowns across Westchester lost power throughout 2021



Businesses along Mamaroneck Avenue in the village of Mamaroneck have faced numerous challenges due to flood-water damage after recent storms.

— sometimes for several days. And battery power is a potent solution.

"We are focused as well on the resilience of our electricity grid and overall energy system in the county," Orville adds. One of the nonprofit's programs reduces demand on the grid during record summer temperatures by incentivizing people to use less electricity. "It actually pays people to use less electricity, in order to reduce strain on the grid," Orville explains.

"Periods of peak demand are when electricity generators fire up the very dirtiest power plants that they own," she adds. "And those dirty power plants are typically located in the lowest-income areas. So there's an environmental justice component to this issue."

Westchester County's government also has a spate of conservation and sustainability initiatives. In 2020, the county government — along with eight municipalities within it — received a \$100,000 grant from the New York State Regional Economic Development Council. The goal is to kick-start a working group that would inventory greenhouse gas emissions and then develop a strategy for emissions reductions.

"Westchester County and the municipalities

that it comprises take very seriously the impact climate change has on our present and future," noted County Executive George Latimer when the grant was first announced. "This grant will allow us to work together to find real solutions and serve as a model for other governments who aim to create a similar robust climate response plan."

Other initiatives include composting and sustainable transportation. Transportation makes up close to half of Westchester's total greenhouse gas emissions, according to county government, so more efficient vehicles can have an outsized impact. "We have a massive fleet of vehicles," says McCartt, referring to just the county's automobiles. "We have a total of about 1,400 vehicles."

In recent years, the county government has transitioned many of its vehicles to electric and hybrid models; set up electric vehicle charging hubs across the region; and even passed legislation mandating that charging stations are available in certain parking garages and lots. "We are way ahead, more than any other county in the state, in the electrification of our fleet," McCartt explains. As of January, the county had over 100 electric vehicles in its fleet, and it plans to add 40 more in 2022.

Another vital focus? "The area that makes me most concerned, but where we're doing a really good job, is hardening our infrastructures," McCartt says. The county is ensuring the wastewater treatment plants that line the Hudson and the Sound can withstand extreme weather. "Hazard preparedness is key."

It's not just government that's seeking solutions — the county's private sector is, too. A cadre of businesses focusing on sustainability efforts and technologies is unlocking short- and long-term solutions to climate change.

At the WCA, a business advocacy group, Romita and his team have launched the Clean Energy Portal, an inventory of incentives for local businesses. "Businesses can access a range of programs and resources to help transition their operations to a low-carbon future," Romita explains, "and there are a mind-spinning number of incentives." Climate is a space that is deeply familiar to Romita. He holds a master's degree in energy policy, practiced environmental law, and ran his family's energy company for 15 years.

The WCA has also linked arms with groups like Nonprofit Westchester and helped them with advocacy for federal funds for flood-prone municipalities. It's an initiative that recently paid off. In January 2022, \$88 million in federal funding was secured for flood prevention measures in Mamaroneck. "As New York continues to weather increasingly severe storms, the Mamaroneck and Sheldrake River

Flood Risk Management Project will save lives," noted U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand in a January press release.

"This is \$85 million worth of federal funding coming into Westchester to try and fix this pre-existing flooding problem and making sure we're prepared for climate change as the years go by," Romita says.

At the Rye Brook-based Business Council of Westchester, which represents more than 1,000 members, "weather events, sustainability, and the changing energy landscape that Westchester is facing have been our top priorities," explains John Ravitz, the council's executive vice president and chief operating officer.

Confronting climate change isn't a new notion for the council. They first launched their green business program 12 years ago, aimed at helping local merchants reduce their environmental impact. Now, in 2022, the council will partner with the Green Business Bureau "to engage businesses to become certified in sustainability," Ravitz explains.

And while Ravitz is concerned about storm damage ("No one can doubt climate change is here," he says), he's also thinking about energy. "With Indian Point closing and with the natural gas moratorium, we have to build a renewable-energy infrastructure," he stresses. "And we needed to build it yesterday."

"We don't want to see in Westchester what's happened in Texas and California, where there's been power outages," Ravitz adds.

There are several businesses in Westchester

focused on this effort. One of them is Mount Kisco-based Dandelion Energy. The company also has outposts in Latham and Peekskill, and its nondescript offices in Peekskill belie a deeply innovative mission: transitioning county residents — as well as people beyond Westchester's borders — to geothermal heating and cooling. Dandelion uses heat pumps and buried pipe systems to circulate more temperate air from beneath the ground. The company has also partnered with Robison Oil to offer geothermal energy options to local consumers.

Another business is the Armonk-based Brightcore, which provides clean energy options to commercial, industrial, and governmental clients. The company's expertise includes solar, LED, electric vehicle charging, and, like Dandelion, geothermal. Brightcore also has a recognizable face at the helm: The company's president is former New York Ranger goalie Mike Richter, a Stanley Cup champion and Olympic medalist. Richter also has over a decade of experience as a clean-energy entrepreneur.

Romita says businesses across Westchester — regardless of their focus — are rallying to the cause. "We want to chart a path that embraces corporate sustainability, clean energy, and social responsibility," he explains, citing New York State's Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act. Passed in 2019, the law requires the state to aggressively pursue carbon neutrality in the coming decades. "It's probably the strongest climate change act of its type anywhere in the country," Romita explains.

Storm damage has impacted numerous Westchester businesses in the Sound Shore villages, including these businesses (below and opposite) in Mamaroneck.





"BUSINESSES CAN ACCESS A RANGE OF PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES TO HELP TRANSITION THEIR OPERATIONS TO A LOW-CARBON FUTURE, AND THERE ARE A MIND-SPINNING NUMBER OF INCENTIVES."

MICHAEL ROMITA, President & CEO of the Westchester County Association



s Westchester policymakers and businesses confront this problem, there's no lack of reminders or urgency. Gene Lum, a Mamaroneck native and partner at local seafood joint Baby Duke's Kitchen, witnessed Hurricane Ida alongside fellow local business owners Murphy and Daniels. He describes Ida as "the worst I've ever seen, even compared to Sandy."

Baby Duke's was fortunate to avoid major damage ("just some leaks in the roof," Lum says) and soon after ran a "Chowder for a Cause" campaign to raise money for its hard-hit neighbors. Now, a cloudy forecast is "like PTSD" for some, Lum explains. He mentions a friend who lost her car and all her possessions in Hurricane Ida, and she now shudders at the sight of rain.

The silver lining in all of this is likely the action it galvanizes. "We've seen a real evolution in people's understanding and engagement with issues relating to climate change over the last years," says Sustainable Westchester's Orville. At Half Time Beverage, Daniels' spirit reflects just that: "Instead of being reactive to the floods, we're going to have to take a proactive approach."

"Everybody's got their part to play," adds Murphy. "It's going to involve the Army Corps of Engineers, the county government, all the way down to local government."

For those who doubt Westchester's resolve, Orville suggests looking at the numbers. New York State's Clean Energy Communities program encourages local governments to take "high-impact actions" related to clean energy. Seven Westchester municipalities sit among the top 10 in the state. "That's a testament to the level of commitment and engagement," she says.

"Westchester County is often looked to as a model by New York State," Orville adds. "There have been a lot of important programs that have been conceived and implemented first in Westchester." ●

Kevin Zawacki is a Westchester-based freelance writer and a frequent contributor to 914INC.

