

Day One: Michael Romita takes over Westchester County Association

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Michael N. Romita, the new President and CEO of the Westchester County Associations spoke with Journal News/lohud reporter Peter Kramer March 2, 2020. Rockland/Westchester Journal News

Michael Romita settles into a chair on Day One at the helm of the Westchester County Association, ready to talk about priorities and concerns, from the digital divide to the coronavirus to the shutting of Indian Point and housing in Westchester.

There is work to be done, he said, after heaping praise on his predecessor, Bill Mooney, who led the county's business advocacy group for 15 years.

"I've got a lot of help around me," Romita said. "I'm not walking into this a man alone."

A lawyer by training, Romita, 54, polished and fit, has been a regulator and among the regulated, recently advising clients in telecom and energy.

Those perspectives, he said, will help him lead the county's business advocacy group, where he'll push for business-friendly programs, projects and legislation for groups ranging from Fortune 100 to mom-and-pops.



Michael N. Romita of Harrison is the new president and CEO of the Westchester County Association. Romita, photographed March 2, 2020, is a former oil executive and trial attorney with the U.S. Justice Department. (Photo: Seth Harrison/The Journal News)

Regulator, regulated

Romita was an environmental enforcement lawyer for the U.S. Justice Department, bringing Superfund, clean air and clean water cases.

"Basically, my job was to sue big corporate polluters on behalf of the United States," he said. His next job was at his family's oil business, Castle Oil Corporation.

"I went from pursuing corporate polluters to being a member of the regulated community," he said. "But if you run a company of any kind or energy company, you can still run it responsibly and in full compliance and be part of the economic fabric."

For the past five years, Romita worked at Washington, D.C.-based Mercury Strategies, founded by a classmate at University of Michigan Law School, advising clients in the telecom and energy industries.

Pelham roots, Harrison address

Romita lives in Harrison with his wife of 20 years, Melissa, an IT consultant whom he "met-cute" on a double blind date at the University of Michigan where he was in law school and she was an undergrad.

They have a 14-year-old daughter, Izzy, who attends Rye Country Day School.

"My world revolves around my 14-year-old," he said with a smile.

Growing up in Pelham, "a stone's throw from the Long Island Sound," Romita said he was drawn to earth sciences. Even though his college, Tufts, wasn't known for that course of study, he earned a geology degree, hoping to go into energy policy and environmental law. After law school at Michigan, he earned a master's in environmental law.



Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio discuss the state and city's preparedness for the spread of the coronavirus, Monday, March 2, 2020, in New York. (Photo: Mark Lennihan, AP)

Coronavirus 'trickle down'

As Romita was beginning his first day, Gov. Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio were holding a joint news conference on the coronavirus.

WCA has a role to play now, Romita said, if only to point out the best sources for information: The [CDC](#), [state](#) and [county](#) websites. But the group's members could see a larger impact, and the group a larger role, if the outbreak deepens and drags on, he said.

"The longer this continues, the more disruption you'll see to supply chains, to the ability of businesses to invest and the availability of credit," Romita said. "Eventually you should expect that that's going to trickle down to the county and local level."

That has yet to happen.

"What our health-care members have told us is that for now, the hospitals are well-staffed. They have all of the supplies that they need to meet the expected challenge," he said.

Romita said the situation is fluid and things will continue to change.

"If there is social distancing — people not going out to theaters, the movies, out to eat — at that point, it could start to have an impact negatively on the business of Westchester County," he said.

WCA represents hundreds of businesses, "from Fortune 100 companies that call Westchester home to small mom-and-pop operations," Romita said. Some are the building blocks of the county's economy, in health care and bio sciences, real estate, banking, accounting and law.



The loss of 2,000 megawatts of power produced by Indian Point Nuclear Plant in Buchanan is still one of the great unknowns facing Westchester and its business community. Michael Romita, the new president and CEO of the business group Westchester County Association, said: "It remains to be seen how this problem is going to be solved." (Photo: Peter Carr/The Journal News file photo)

Indian Point is 'everybody's problem'

Romita didn't shy away from what he sees as the great unknown: The loss of Indian Point Nuclear Plant in Buchanan, which has been generating power since the '70s.

The first of Indian Point's two working reactors, Unit 2, powers down in April, followed by Unit 3 in 2021. The shutdown will create a loss of nearly 2,000 megawatts of power on the state's energy grid, a gap that will in the short term be filled by natural gas, according to an analysis by the New York State Independent System Operator.

Indian Point owner Entergy says the plant produces about 25% of the electricity used in Westchester County and New York City and at full capacity provides power to 2 million homes.

After the initial shutdown phase, state officials anticipate that a mix of renewables — solar, wind and hydro power — will pick up the slack as the Cuomo Administration pushes ahead with its goal of having renewables contribute nearly 70% of New York's energy needs over the next decade.

"I think the state has a looming problem in delivering energy to the Hudson Valley and Westchester in particular," Romita said. "It remains to be seen how this problem is going to be solved. The state is making a big push towards clean energy, and that's something that we'd like to see the business community get behind.

"But we also want to make sure that the plans are realistic and that we can do this in a way that will not disrupt what we have going on here," he said.

How worried is Romita about the loss of all those megawatts on Westchester's business community?

"I think it's an ongoing issue and I think that we need a real open dialogue between the government and the business community, as well as the environmental groups to try and solve the problem," he said. "It's everybody's problem."

Advocacy vs. lobbying

Romita sees his role as an advocate whose job is to take the pulse of a multitude of stakeholders, from his executive board to individual members to government, local community groups and labor.

His job might find him in Westchester or Albany or Washington, D.C.

"I think we have to see where the advocacy leads us," he said, noting the difference between lobbying and advocacy.

"Lobbying is necessarily either supporting or trying to defeat a particular piece of legislation or a regulatory thrust," he said. "Advocacy is more about building alliances and looking for ways that are win-wins for a wide variety of stakeholders. It's more taking the long view."

Gigabit internet

In 2017, with much fanfare, [WCA launched a \\$750-million drive for ultra-fast gigabit internet service](#) in Westchester. A 15-person committee was announced, a collaboration of the WCA and Westchester's four largest cities.

"I think that the goals of the 5G stuff was bang-on," Romita said. "This is incredibly important to a number of pockets in Westchester, the underserved or underprivileged pockets, closing the digital divide, making sure that students have access to online learning, making sure that businesses have access to the ability to telecommute."

Westchester County Executive George Latimer included the rollout of 5G technology in his recently unveiled economic development plan, Romita said, adding "I hope that we can continue to be a part of that conversation."

A role in housing

Romita said Latimer has reported that the county needs 13,000 more units of housing for workers.

"His approach is to bring this information to the various towns and villages and, without pointing fingers, to say: 'This is what the county needs, this is where you guys are within your town or village, please come up with some plans to help us solve this problem.' The business community should be an integral part of that."

A downturn in one sector could prove a solution in another, Romita said.

The group has put out a "housing playbook" that could take "hundreds of thousands or millions of square feet of office space that had been unusable because of what's happening in the office sector and reposition that so it could be built into various types of housing."

Staff writer Thomas C. Zambito contributed to this report.