



Westchester County Association forms group for post-pandemic recovery

By [Peter Katz](#)

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Although there still is no definitive time line for the reopening of Westchester County businesses, an effort to help lay the groundwork for economic recovery has been launched by the Westchester County Association (WCA).

The Post-Pandemic Working Group (PPWG) is a committee of business, nonprofit and academic leaders. Among the initial members are representatives of Nonprofit Westchester, BCM Corp., Bleakley Platt & Schmidt, CBRE, Cuddy & Feder LLP, Entergy, Mercy College, Simone Healthcare Development, Sterling National Bank, Wells Fargo Bank N.A., Rand Commercial, Suburban Hospital Alliance of New York State and White Plains Hospital.

Michael Romita, president and CEO of the WCA, told the Business Journal that preliminary discussions have already taken place with members.



Michael Romita Photo by Peter Katz

“Everybody is hyper-focused on the next week, two weeks, three months just trying to survive what’s going on right now. But once we get through the worst of the current situation with the pandemic and people start slowly getting back to work that’s going to be the end of it; that’s going to be the end of the beginning,” Romita said.

“And, from there, we’re going to have a regional economy where the businesses have been shuttered, the health care system has been strained and our public budgets are stretched thin, not to mention what’s happening to our educational institutions and our nonprofits.”

Romita said the business, nonprofit and educational communities need to start thinking now about how to advance the recovery and maintain it over the coming months and years.

“There are going to be some challenges, but there probably are going to be some opportunities as well as we kind of rethink and reevaluate the projects and priorities that are going to be important for the county and the region to try and rebuild the economy and make it more resilient,” Romita said.

“Even when the governor says it’s OK to get back to work that doesn’t necessarily mean people are going to show up. There’s a consumer confidence element here, making people feel safe about when they make their own personal decisions about their safety and their own well-being and the safety of their families.”

Romita said the PPWG will be looking at what the development priorities are going to be for Westchester and the things for which businesses, nonprofits and educational institutions will need to advocate to make sure the economy can bounce back. He identified one issue that the pandemic has highlighted as something the WCA had focused on long before the virus appeared: the need for countywide ultra-high-speed internet service.

“Telecommuting is becoming more important and there is a lot of remote learning going on and that’s placing underprivileged or areas of the county where you don’t have this kind of digital technology at a tremendous disadvantage,” Romita said. “It not only disadvantages the folks at home but disadvantages the local business community.”

Romita said with the PPWG effort the WCA is trying to bring a large group of stakeholders together.

“It’s not just the business community that has a say in this but the nonprofit community that has a big role to play as well, so we want to include all of these folks from the beginning,” Romita said.

He said that the PPWG should be able to do more than just paint in broad conceptual brush strokes and come up with practical ways to help businesses and organizations enter the post-pandemic world.

“If you think about how the general project structure might work, you’d have an advocacy agenda piece, you’d have a piece that deals with developmental priorities and then you’d have a communications strategy which includes messaging but also stakeholder engagement,” Romita said.

“There will be a bunch of ideas that will be developed about what best practices are for getting these places up and running again. The folks that we’re working with on the real estate side have already started developing these things for their clients. We can package and share this information and hopefully work with the politicians to try and get these businesses back up on their feet as quickly as possible.”

Romita hopes that the PPWG will grow to reflect a complete cross-section of the WCA’s membership.

“We’re very fortunate at the WCA to have very high-profile influential people involved. Everybody who we have listed has already participated in scoping meetings and I’ve had personal discussions with them. But that’s just the start. We’ve got to reach out beyond just that core group and involve as many stakeholders as is practically possible.”

Romita said that would involve setting up various working groups as part of a stakeholder-involvement strategy.

“The pandemic has really hijacked prior discussions of what’s happening with business in the county and this is now in the front of the queue of things that we have to deal with,” Romita said. “I think that in the next several weeks we will start to coalesce around strategies and ideas and start rolling out a stakeholder engagement strategy for getting other people involved.”

Romita said that based on discussions he had with WCA members, people are holding their collective breath in anticipating what might happen next.

“I think it’s pretty bad. I think that there’s on the one hand a little bit of magical thinking to think that things just get back to normal in a couple of weeks, and on the other hand you’ve got folks who are very concerned not just about getting through the summer but also surviving the summer, but also what’s going to be the complexion of their businesses for the foreseeable future,” Romita said.

He said he has heard anecdotes regarding the frustration people have experienced trying to obtain aid from the Small Business Administration.

“It’s particularly hard on small businesses. It’s particularly hard on the hospitality industry, on restaurants, on movie theaters, so there is concern about some of these establishments being unable to bounce back. But I don’t sense depression. I sense people trying to do what they have to do to just get through the next several months and then very much looking forward to getting back to some semblance of normalcy, whatever that may be,” Romita said.