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Sustainability priorities can usher in new business opportunities, strategies

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In the private sector, corporate sustainability is no longer a peripheral interest to be addressed with platitudes or tertiary pilot projects. Organizations that continue to ignore the impacts of climate change and other aspects of social responsibility in their core strategic planning increasingly do so at their own peril.

For one, shifting generational attitudes strongly favor environmentalism and sustainability in business. According to surveys published by leading global consulting firms, millennials want to work for, buy from and invest in businesses and brands that understand and embrace social impact.

But it's not just next-gen leaders. Powerful and well-established Wall Street firms such as BlackRock, Vanguard and Fidelity are also flexing their muscles, as the environmental, social and governance (ESG) investment sector has emerged as the fastest-growing asset class. These investment funds recently joined with big retirement systems to vote in an activist slate of sustainability-focused directors at none other than Exxon Mobil. Share prices jumped on the announcement.

As other major asset managers and influential shareholders push the issue, companies will have to move beyond fancy rhetoric to action. It could prove to be a watershed moment for sustainability in the boardroom.

The federal government is considering regulations to further push the financial community to act on sustainability. President Joe Biden issued an executive order in May encouraging financial regulators to assess climate-related financial risk in business oversight. As a result, formal climate disclosures may soon find their way into standard corporate filings.

Consumer preferences, corporate governance and financial risk mitigation are paramount to running a successful enterprise. So is being poised to exploit opportunity. The Biden administration's strategy to combat climate change so far has been to invest in future sustainable growth.

The recent \$1 trillion infrastructure bill invests heavily in clean and advanced energy research and development, transmission infrastructure, public transportation, water infrastructure and other sectors that support sustainable development. These are opportunities for U.S. businesses and communities

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alike. With an even more expansive follow-on infrastructure bill under negotiation, businesses positioned to support sustainable infrastructure are enjoying unprecedented levels of support.

The Westchester County Association and Pace University's Energy and Climate Center have created a Clean Energy Program Portal, available at www.westchester.org. The portal is a searchable and dynamic navigation tool to help businesses and buildings find government-sponsored programs and initiatives that will help them transition to a low-carbon future. There are many, from NYSERDA's new construction and housing programs, to Con Edison's clean heat and energy efficiency programs, to federal tax programs incentivizing renewable energy retrofits or electric vehicles, just to name a few.

This material is now aggregated and curated in one place complete with informative annotations, qualifying information and direct links to the primary program sites. It is the first place to look to see what's out there for your facility or business.

If we are to get serious about our energy and climate challenges, the next several years will be pivotal for Westchester. We will need to integrate environmental policy with economic development, capital investment and job creation. Past is prologue; sustainability as corporate strategy is here now, and businesses should take note.

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