

WESTCHESTER

The Westchester County Association Celebrates New Clean Energy Portal

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CEO and President Michael Romita discusses the WCA's recent partnership with the Pace University Energy and Climate Center.

As one of the leading economic development and business advocacy organizations in the county, the Westchester County Association (WCA) recently partnered with the Pace University Energy and Climate Center to launch a Clean Energy Portal.

The WCA describes the portal as a dynamic and searchable guide to available clean energy programs and incentives for businesses in Westchester and the surrounding region. Businesses can access a range of programs and resources available to help transition their operations and buildings to a low carbon footprint. The portal can be accessed on the WCA website at <https://www.westchester.org/clean-energy-guide/>

We sat down with Michael Romita, the President and CEO of the WCA, to discuss the portal and its importance.

Why is clean energy a part of WCA's agenda? Is clean energy and sustainability good business? Why is this a personal matter for you?

I have spent my entire career at the intersection of business, economic development, and energy policy. My first conceptual brush with sustainability management was when I was pursuing my masters in energy policy. As students, we debated the definitional clarity required just to accept the notion in economic terms. Since then, the discussion has shifted considerably. Today, except for the most strident climate deniers, sustainability in business is recognized as a formal discipline. It is not some feel good corporate notion with rainbows and puppies. It is a hard-nosed construct that essentially approaches corporate strategy through the lens of environmentalism and social responsibility. And, if properly applied in the business context, it sets you up for long-term financial success. I applied it effectively when I ran a business of my own and I am carrying that work through to my responsibilities leading our business community here at the Westchester County Association.

New York's 2019 Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act stands as one of the most ambitious climate change laws in the world. It sets aggressive targets to nearly eliminate statewide greenhouse gas emissions over the next several decades. New York's evolving energy policy will impact the economy in fundamental ways and the Westchester County Association is poised to play a pivotal role. The WCA has adopted energy and sustainability as one of its foundational pillars of economic growth. We are

advancing policies and developing tools to actively assist our members prepare for the new energy economy. Our businesses will need the practical knowledge and incentives to adapt.

What is the goal of WCA's Clean Energy Program Portal?

There are a dizzying array of clean energy incentives currently available to businesses who want to transition to a low carbon future. Some are sponsored by the utilities, some by state agencies, and others supported through the state and federal tax codes. For businesses in New York, it is difficult to know where to start exploring these incentives and determining whether or not they apply to your operation. The first of its kind, WCA's Clean Energy Portal was developed in partnership with the Pace University Energy and Climate Center. It is a curated online navigator that comprehensively aggregates and annotates the many separate public programs and incentives available for our businesses in a dynamic and easily searchable manner. We want to help businesses access these programs and financial incentives and use them to both improve their operations and transition us to a stronger and more sustainable economy.

Why is now a good time for the Clean Energy Program Portal?

New York now has legally codified climate goals. While a clean energy transition obviously requires immense government intervention, it will also require private sector commitment. If we are to advance a climate agenda beyond the political, the private sector will need to get on board. It will need to reconsider traditional notions that link energy demand with economic growth or short-termism with progress. Moreover, shifting generational attitudes strongly favor environmentalism and sustainability in business. Millennials want to buy from, work for, and invest in businesses and brands that embrace these values.

Are people using the portal? Will it evolve?

Since its recent launch, hundreds of businesses have already found their way to the portal. While that alone indicates some early success, we want to encourage users to explore the various programs and financial incentives underpinning its strength. It is meant to be a launching point. Once we see how it plays out, we will sit with the folks at Pace to come up with ideas to improve the user experience and expand its application. It's not a static effort. Here is a link to the current portal: [Clean Energy Program Portal – Westchester Business Development, Public Policy Issues & Reform | Westchester County Association.](#)

The WCA has focused on issues including healthcare, affordable housing, and sustainability. Where does benevolence fit into the goals of the WCA?

The WCA is the region's professional roundtable. Our mission is to foster economic development and to advocate for programs and policies that improve our regional economy for our member businesses and the community at large. We take a studied and strategic approach to these issues. So, if you look at communities that enjoy vibrant economies you see clear commonalities – quality affordable and accessible healthcare, a spectrum of housing options for the working class, opportunities for workforce

advancement, digital connectivity and broadband access, strong educational institutions, quality of life, and, where possible, a regulatory light touch where possible. That's what we focus on. Our economy should not be zero sum where we need to make an election between being pro-business and being high-minded. The two can and should be symbiotic. That's smart growth.

You started in the WCA president/CEO position in March 2020. How did the pandemic affect your objectives?

For me, this is a job of service. I was fortunate to bring to my position some strong professional relationships as well as the experience of having run a large Westchester-based company. The pandemic certainly created some tactical adjustments. But it also gave us an opportunity to focus the business and nonprofit community on distilling Westchester's most essential challenges and opportunities. A crisis concentrates the mind. That exercise led to our strategic report, *Towards a Stronger Future*, linked here: [WCA-PPWGR-V-FINAL-091420.pdf \(westchester.org\)](#), and the initiatives flowing therefrom.

The pandemic has made our work here at the WCA more important than ever.