



A blueprint for success: Westchester County Association's economic initiative

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The deepest recession in decades has caused market disruptions everywhere, but Westchester is not taking it lying down. A little over a year ago, the Westchester County Association, (WCA) the county's premier business group, launched The Blueprint for Westchester, a dynamic, ambitious, economic initiative to turn the tide. At the time, the county was plagued by 6 million s/f of unoccupied commercial office space, brought on by the recession and the disappearance of several multi-national corporations to other locales.

In 12 months, The Blueprint has created incredible momentum, and an unprecedented level of collaboration with its stakeholders including the real estate, legal, financial, and business communities, as well as Westchester's cities, young professionals, and institutions of higher education. And 1 million s/f has been removed from available inventory.

A stunning list of accomplishment has others elsewhere in the country scratching their heads in amazement.

First, the Blueprint strongly encouraged repurposing aging facilities to meet the demands of new market sectors, and reforming local and state regulations with respect to New York State's mandates and environmental laws. Already, several municipalities are rezoning for mixed-use development. Not only will this ultimately attract new business, it also will transform the real estate market by creating more reasonably-priced residential space for thousands of young professionals who want to live near their jobs. Keeping and retaining young talent is the priority of any business enterprise.

Second, it created the revolutionary Blueprint Accelerator Network to spur entrepreneurial growth and create the business giants of tomorrow. In the process, the Blueprint attracted \$200 million in seed financing, top professional services, office space and mentors. The Accelerator will not only be the place where Westchester's entrepreneurial ventures can take root, but it will attract the best and the brightest-both in terms of people and ideas-from other regions.

Third, the Blueprint has embarked on a series of "City Showcases" to highlight opportunities for development and investment. The first such event for the city of White Plains last April was hugely successful, attracting over 150 developers, brokers, and investors from far and wide. A second showcase is planned for the city of New Rochelle in September, 2012. White Plains reported a surge of interest in their city following their Showcase.

With Westchester's infrastructure in need of modernization, the Blueprint's Infrastructure Group set to work on enhancing wireless/broadband infrastructure throughout the county, as well as exploring new and creative sources of energy. The high cost of energy in this region is also on the table.

Several other initiatives are also underway: fourteen institutions of higher education in Westchester reached a memorandum of understanding to work on economic development with the Blueprint; the

Blueprint's SEQRA reform committee went on record with New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation to raise objections to certain aspects of the new Environmental Assessment Forms that needlessly hinder progress; and WCA's Young Professionals Group is in partnership with Project for Public Spaces-global leaders in "placemaking"-to transform some of the tired and antiquated office parks into magnets for a younger, more diverse workforce.

It's a big job, but the Blueprint for Westchester can do the heavy lifting.

Marissa Brett is the executive director of economic development of the Westchester County Association, White Plains, N.Y.

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540