

One year in, Westchester Power pushes a new era of clean energy

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New York's Clean Energy Standard mandates the state power itself with 50 percent renewable energy by 2030. Dan Welsh, the program director for Westchester Power, thinks Westchester can do even better.

"We want to move much faster than that," Welsh told the Business Journal from the nonprofit's office in Mount Kisco. "We just need a nice, catchy, 'Something by Something' title."

Helping push Westchester's power supply toward increased use of renewable, locally produced energy is the next part of the mission for Westchester Power, according to the energy consortium's leaders.

The group was launched in March 2016 by Sustainable Westchester Inc., a nonprofit organization that includes more than 40 municipalities in the county, including now the county itself. Westchester Power started as the state's first community choice aggregation (CCA) program. CCA programs allow municipalities to band together to negotiate directly with energy suppliers on a fixed, bulk discount rate.



Dan Welsh, program director at Westchester Power

Westchester Power includes 20 municipalities in the county. Last year, the group considered bids to supply electricity to residents in its consortium and awarded two contracts. ConEdison Solutions, a subsidiary of Consolidated Edison Inc., will supply the 90,000 homes and businesses in ConEd service territory with

electricity at a fixed rate over a two-year period. A parallel deal with Constellation Energy Group, a division of Exelon Corp., supplies fixed-rate electricity to 20,000 homes in the northern part of the county, which is served by New York State Electric and Gas Corp.

Welsh, who has a background in information tech-

nology and most recently worked as a database manager for the Harrison Central School District, was hired to direct Westchester Power in September. He heads up a small staff with two other full-time employees, two part-timers and three consultants that help guide the group.

While similar programs exist in states such as California, Illinois and Massachusetts, Westchester Power is the pilot program for community choice aggregation in New York.

"We're still here after a year, right?" Welsh said. "All the basics have worked."

There were bumps along the way – such as customer confusion and low NYSEG rates that cut into savings – but Welsh described Westchester Power as an organization past its "infancy stage" and ready to expand its reach. "We're just scratching the surface right now," he said.

The group has a tagline for its next effort: "emPowering Green Energy." With Sustainable Westchester's backing, Westchester Power will attempt to position itself as a leader for a range of efforts to boost renewable energy production in the county.

With a team of self-professed "energy geeks," Welsh

said Westchester Power can help introduce communities to energy technologies that may be too complicated for people to pursue on their own. "Part of our role is to go out there, vet these technologies and facilitate ways for people to get in without having to go through all that struggle," he said.

Westchester Power has contracted with a company to help it build a platform that will handle customer data and create an interface that offers customers a range of options for renewable energy and efficiency projects to potentially participate in.

The group sees community solar as an especially promising option for the county. That refers to solar installations that don't have a single user. Instead, multiple customers can pay to subscribe to the energy credits from the solar array's power production, offsetting their individual bills. The projects open up solar power to people who can't develop such systems of their own, including renters or homeowners with rooftops not suited for panels. The concept is still new to New York. The state's first project launched last year in Tompkins County.

Westchester Power can act

as a go-between for landowners and solar developers to help facilitate projects in the county while also offering its wide customer base as possible subscribers to new community solar developments.

Customers in Westchester Power already have the option to pay slightly more for a 100-percent renewable energy supply. Of Westchester Power's 20 member communities, 14 opted to offer the renewable option.

Westchester Power thinks it can facilitate increased renewable energy production within the county. That supply could then be used to replace energy the consortium currently receives through its two aggregation contracts, Welsh said.

"There's a whole lot of entrepreneurial energy," he said of the renewable energy sector in Westchester. "So we want to release that and go 100 percent local and 100 percent green here."

Community outreach is part of the "emPowering" program. The group plans to meet with municipal boards, sustainability committees and environmental groups to organize green initiatives. That includes workshops and

lectures on sustainable energy and the environment.

The group will also work on expanding the county's demand response technology, energy storage capacity and constructing more electric vehicle charging stations.

"As we go do our community outreach, we'll have all these different offerings for people to participate in," Welsh said. "This is what we are starting to think of as the new energy ecosystem for Westchester."

Meanwhile, community choice aggregation is cleared to expand beyond Westchester. The Public Service Commission approved the programs for municipalities statewide in April 2016, one month after Westchester Power officially launched.

Brad Tito, a program manager for the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, said NYSERDA has found more than 100 communities that expressed varying levels of interest in developing a CCA program during the agency's outreach efforts.

Westchester Power is still the only active program in the state, however. Launching a community choice aggregation program takes time.

They require new local laws, a fully developed plan from the municipalities and approval from the Public Service Commission.

Tito said that while a negotiated fixed electric rate can help customers in a CCA program save money, there are benefits beyond the potential savings. "What we are hearing (communities) are very much interested in is, 'How do we use a CCA to help develop local renewable projects?'" .

Welsh noted that Westchester Power's renewable energy push comes at an interesting time for the county. The planned 2021 closure of the Indian Point Energy Center in Buchanan has created anxiety about how the power produced by the 2,000-megawatt nuclear plant can be replaced.

Welsh said anytime more people are thinking about how they get their energy, it creates an opportunity to spread awareness about Westchester Power.

"We want people to feel good about the fact that there is an active effort here. There is a group with a cutting-edge, groundbreaking program making great strides. And we intend to chip a big piece off that concern."