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A Call to Action for New Yorkers

Jeffrey Gracer and Michael Mahoney, New York Law Journal

June 7, 2017

President Donald Trump's announcement last week that he will begin the process of withdrawing the United States from the Paris Climate Change Agreement is a deeply disappointing decision, one that jeopardizes the future of the planet and cedes U.S. leadership on international climate action.

However, the announcement also is catalyzing action across the country. If the federal government will not take steps to transition to a low carbon economy and create good clean-energy jobs in our communities, it is up to America's state and local governments, corporations, nongovernmental organizations and citizens to make it happen. That work begins right here in New York.

After President Trump's announcement last week, Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced that New York State will join California and a newly formed coalition of other states that are working to meet the Paris commitments. Mayor De Blasio signed an executive order reaffirming New York City's continued commitment to climate action, and is working with a coalition of cities around the country and the world to support the Paris process and achieve promised emissions reductions without the Trump administration's support.

These efforts build on existing plans to reduce New York's greenhouse gas emissions 80 percent by 2050. New York City's 80x50 plan focuses on increasing the use of renewable energy (including rooftop solar), improving energy efficiency in over one million buildings, promoting a modal shift to greener transportation (including building the infrastructure to encourage electric vehicle use) and reducing the amount of solid waste sent to landfills (thereby reducing methane emissions). New York State's comprehensive energy strategy, Reforming the Energy Vision (REV), focuses on promoting renewable energy across the state (including wind and solar) and creating tax and other incentives for electric vehicles. Recently, New York state announced important new steps to control methane emissions from natural gas facilities.

All indications are that climate-smart changes can be made in New York without compromising our business-friendly environment. We are seeing exciting innovations from businesses in the clean energy and energy efficiency sectors, and existing businesses have realized savings from reducing their consumption of fossil fuels. In other words, New Yorkers can do more than endure a reduction of our carbon footprints; we can thrive in this new clean energy economy. In so doing, we can inspire others to follow our lead.

To be successful, these efforts will need the collective support of individual New Yorkers as well as that of New York's great institutions and organizations. At the New York City Bar Association, we have organized an 80x50 Task Force to rally New Yorkers and facilitate the joint process of reaching New York City's carbon reduction target. In March 2016, we held a conference to examine how the association and other sectors of society could form a civic coalition to support climate change action,

and have been working ever since to identify institutions, organizations and individuals in New York City interested in joining this effort.

As lawyers based in New York City, our initial focus has been on working with different sectors in New York City to identify obstacles to greater adoption of climate change mitigation efforts where we live and work. With generous pro bono assistance from the Burns Group, a New York City advertising agency, we are developing a public awareness campaign to encourage all New Yorkers—including our businesses, institutions, NGOs and citizens—to join together to achieve New York City's carbon reduction goals. The President's recent announcement gives us even greater reason to work harder than ever to ensure that all of us do our part in showing the rest of the world that climate action is not only possible, but profitable. Together, as New Yorkers, we will create new green jobs and work to protect our great city from sea-level rise, destructive superstorms and the many public health impacts of climate change.

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