



THOUGHT LEADERS

WITH DANIEL MONTANTE, WHITNEY SKEANS AND KIMBERLY MINKEL

ELECTRIC VEHICLES ARE COMING. WILL BUFFALO-NIAGARA BE READY?

Panel of experts discussed the complexity of supporting the EV industry



GETTY IMAGES

BY DAN MINER
dminer@bizjournals.com

Electric vehicles remain a relative rarity in Western New York.

There's a lot of work to be done locally to keep pace with the changes ahead.

About 4,200 people in Erie and Niagara counties are registered electric vehicle drivers, which is about 2% of the overall number of drivers,

said Whitney Skeans, National Grid's senior program manager for electric vehicles in New York.

Increasing that number to keep pace with broader changes in the transportation industry will require a series of interconnected moves – from the electrical grid itself to vehicle inventory to the proliferation of charging stations.

"It's a chicken or the egg question – do you have the infrastructure first or the drivers first?" Skeans said.

Skeans was speaking during an Oct. 21 Thought Leaders panel discussion, presented by Hodgson Russ LLP. She was joined by Hodgson Russ attorneys Daniel Spitzer, partner who co-leads the firm's renewable energy practice, and associate Raquel Parks; Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority executive director Kimberly Minkel and Montante Solar president Daniel Montante.

Montante has been the owner of a Tesla vehicle since 2017 and has also

positioned his firm to take advantage of the growth in the electric vehicle industry. Montante Solar is mostly known for its solar installations, but it also installs vehicle charging infrastructure for a variety of clients ranging from private businesses to apartment buildings to local governments.

He said that consumers choose electric vehicles because of their superior performance, environmental footprint and the lower lifetime costs in terms of energy and



“EV drivers have different habits and it’s an opportunity for business owners to recognize what those habits are. If you are a hotel, it’s a business opportunity. If you are running a workplace, it’s an amenity that your associates and employees will want you to have.”

DANIEL MONTANTE, president and co-founder, Montante Solar



“Consumer confidence needs to pick up to support the purchases that are going to create the demand for charging infrastructure. That will create the enthusiasm for business owners to say, ‘Yes, I want to put in an EV charging station.’”

WHITNEY SKEANS, senior program manager for electric vehicles in New York, National Grid



“We’ve been on a mission to try to reduce the emissions on our equipment throughout the metro system, the shuttle busses at the airport, the tugs that we have that bring your bags and throughout the airport. We’ve really been trying to convert our fleets to lower emissions vehicles.”

KIMBERLY MINKEL, executive director, Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority

maintenance.

He noted that a variety of major automakers have committed to electrifying their entire fleets.

“The writing is on the wall in terms of a gradual and then very quick adoption of electric vehicle in the marketplace,” he said.

Montante said that his behaviors as an electric vehicle driver are entirely different than someone with a gas-powered car. From hotels and airports to where he shops, his

decisions are made with the idea of charging stations in mind.

The more charging stations, the more Western New Yorkers will feel confidence in major buying decisions.

“There needs to be further adoption of EV infrastructure, particularly in areas where EVs aren’t being purchased,” he said.

Minkel – who pointed out the light rail Metro Rail System is powered by low-cost electricity from the

Niagara Power Project – said the NFTA is awaiting the arrival of 10 fully electric buses, which will hit the road next year.

Each bus cost about \$1 million – compared to about \$550,000 for a new gas-powered bus – and the NFTA had to retrofit a facility for efficient charging. But she said the relative maintenance cost of electric powertrains should make up the difference in future years.

“The differential in ongoing maintenance is really important to help offset those costs going forward,” she said.

Spitzer pointed out that electric vehicle adoption is tied up in the broader evolution toward renewable energy. New York state has an aggressive set of goals regarding electric vehicle adoption and general energy generation, but the rollout has been hampered by the enormously difficult process of siting large solar and wind developments and developing enough storage and resiliency to rely on them.

Within each of these broad issues are a million convoluted challenges, but Spitzer said it’s time for the state to start solving them if it truly wants to be a progressive energy leader.

“We need less press releases and more action,” he said.

Skeans oversees a statewide program that seeks to reduce “range anxiety” by offering incentives for businesses to install electric vehicle charging stations.

The program offers incentives of 50%, 90% or 100% of the infrastructure cost to prepare the underground infrastructure for a charging station. The level of incentive depends on the location and accessibility of the station, but Skeans said most projects come in at the 90% level. Almost any National Grid customer, besides residential accounts, are eligible to apply.

Beyond the incentives, though, is the effort to convince business owners that it is an investment worth making. She put it this way: if an electric vehicle driver is choosing between Walmart or Target, they’ll choose whichever one promises a charging station.

“We know the business opportunities are very compelling,” Skeans said. “For retail stores, they stay longer and spend more money.”

“An EV charging station,” she continued, “is a physical representation of your sustainability commitment.”

HODGSON’S TAKE



“There are a lot of areas where (municipal leaders) like the idea of adding renewable energy; they just don’t want it in their backyard. They’d rather have it booted to the next town. So it’s a question of showing them how they are going to benefit and how their community is going to benefit.”

RAQUEL PARKS, associate, Hodgson Russ LLP



“Those of us who live in Buffalo will remember the studies that show the impact of internal combustion on asthma rates in children. This is an opportunity not only to address one of the key problems of our time, and of our children and their children’s time. It is a public health issue in Buffalo.”

DANIEL SPITZER, partner, Hodgson Russ LLP

CLOSER LOOK AT THOUGHT LEADERS

Thought Leaders is an ongoing series of discussions with Western New York business leaders and attorneys at Hodgson Russ LLP.

Ten times a year, leaders in diverse industries meet for a roundtable discussion moderated by Business First journalists.

The conversations are usually held in the law firm’s Pearl Street offices in Buffalo, but have shifted to a virtual format during the Covid-19 crisis.