

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim. Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

I recently traveled to Miami Beach for the Aspen Ideas: Climate conference, a gathering of global, federal, and local policymakers, corporate leaders, and scientists brought together by the Aspen Institute to discuss solutions to the impacts of climate change. There I met members of Climate Mayors, a coalition of more than 750 mayors from 48 states representing more than 60 million Americans. Climate Mayors lays out its mission as supporting sustainable infrastructure projects that bolster resilience to extreme weather and climate change, and modernize the electric grid, advancing environmental justice, and creating an abundance of clean energy jobs in their communities. Mayor Justin Bibb of Cleveland, the chair of the group, sat down with me at the conference to discuss those goals and how the mayors are working to achieve results for the people they serve. Mayor Bibb and I started out by discussing his own city.

So you're here at the Aspen Ideas: Climate to talk about how cities are implementing and creating climate resilient cities. So tell me what you are doing in Cleveland.

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Well, we are doing a lot in Cleveland to address climate and environmental justice. Many folks may not know this, but Cleveland has a storied history in this movement. Then, the first black mayor elected of a major American city, Carl B. Stokes, was elected, and in 1969, our river caught on fire. And I'm sure this was an issue he did not campaign on, but he met the moment, did a nationwide pollution tour, which led to the Clean Water Act, which then led to the creation of the EPA. And so I have some big shoes to fill in my role as mayor, but we're doing several things to really make sure that we are a city that prioritizes climate and environmental justice.

Everything from making sure as we think about the new electric vehicle movement that we are prioritizing those new charging stations and historically marginalized, underserved communities of color to ensuring that from a municipal operation standpoint, we're lowering our carbon footprint and leading the way as a city. But this is also about making sure that all of our residents can see the real, tangible benefits of the green economy. That's why I'm so excited that we spent \$10 million of American Rescue Plan funds all focused on creating jobs to address the built environment. Everything from training folks to weatherize homes with solar to working with the building trades to lay down new fiber in every part of our city. This is what that transition looks like, and we want to make Cleveland a national model for America.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So I think what I keep hearing here at the conference is the message is hard to get out to the citizens. They don't understand what it really means. But you said something on this stage during your session about its clean water and it's clean air. Is that resonating?

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

It is. And let me tell you why this is so important for me. I never expected I would be a climate mayor when I ran for office in 2021, but I remember knocking on doors in the southeast side of Cleveland and a single mom talking to me about the fact that her son had asthma because that part of the city had some

of the lowest rates of air quality in the city of Cleveland. You know why? Because we didn't have a robust tree canopy in that part of our city.

That's when the dots were connected for me. On the environmental justice front, the lead paint poisoning crisis has been a crisis we've been plagued with in Cleveland for decades, and that's why I'm so excited that we spent nearly \$16 million of American Rescue Plan funds to support a non-profit organization called the LED Safe Coalition in Cleveland to fully fund their endowment fund to ensure we have the tools and the resources that we need to eradicate lead paint in our homes.

This is what this movement is all about. This is about safety, and this is about jobs, and this is about community vitality. And when we talk about it in those terms, our residents understand as mayors, we don't have the luxury of always talking in Congressional bill speak. We got to tell it in plain English. And that's a big part of the challenge we have right now across the country, I believe.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So we have the clean air, clean water; what you're trying to do there. What kind of jobs are you creating and how are you signaling that to the community?

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Well, as I said before, we want to create high-paying, good-quality jobs, particularly in the building trades, for a lot of the work we need to do to address the built environment. We're also really focused on leveraging our roots in advanced manufacturing, and this new growing movement, and sustainable manufacturing. The new reshoring trend that we're seeing coming out of the pandemic is going to bode well for the nation and bode really well for Cleveland and Northeast Ohio.

And I'm excited that we're building things in America again because of President Biden and not only ARPA, and the Inflation Reduction Act, and the bipartisan infrastructure bill, but the CHIPS Act too. You combine all those federal programs together, this is a game-changer for cities like Cleveland. And so this is all about high-paying jobs that can put people to work, to really do a better job of closing the income gap that we see in cities like Cleveland across the country.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

For people who are not familiar with Cleveland, other than knowing the name, because we all know the name Cleveland.

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Yes. And they say Cleveland Rocks.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Cleveland rocks, yeah. I have yet to be at that museum and I really want to go there.

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Open invitation anytime.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I may take you up on that because it looks fantastic. What kind of industry, what's your industry's at the heart of your economy there?

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Most folks may not realize this, but Cleveland was once considered American Silicon Valley because Standard Oil was started in Cleveland, Ohio.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Did not know that.

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

By the world's first billionaire, John D. Rockefeller; got a start in Cleveland. And we helped fuel America's First Industrial Revolution, and then we know how the story goes. You have globalization, industrialization, jobs being shipped overseas, the hollowing out of American industry and American manufacturing, and Cleveland was a symptom of these global economic trends that we didn't have a plan for to address and get ahead of. But as I think about the future, we are laser-focused in Cleveland on being an Eds and Meds hub for the world. I often say that we take care of the sickest people in the world in Cleveland at institutions like the Cleveland Clinic, university hospitals, and MetroHealth. We have some great research institutions like the Case Western Reserve University, who does amazing research in engineering and in science and medicine. And then great companies like Sherwin-Williams, who paints the world, and Cleveland-Cliffs, who's leading the world in green steel and sustainable steel manufacturing. And so we have some great industries that I think will propel our economy for this next chapter of America's great economic story.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think something that people don't understand as well in general, when they talk about green jobs and now you've listed all these economies or all these industries that you have there and all these businesses, they don't understand that most jobs can be made green. It's a transferable skill that you may be in manufacturing already. If you just have a little training on maybe some new equipment, you can do it. We've done a lot of reporting on that at WorkingNation. So are you getting those businesses to change the way they're doing their business?

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Absolutely. We have to because, as you know, government can't do it alone. We need a robust, proactive partnership with the private sector. And that's why I'm so excited. We have a really good partnership with our Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Cleveland Partnership, who this past year again did their second annual summit on sustainability, convening all the large corporations across Northeast, Ohio to make sure that they are thinking about this green movement and how it affects their bottom line. Because I believe this is an issue where you can do well and do good at the same time, and those things are mutually exclusive. The other thing that's happening in Cleveland, I just met with a group of union activists from SEIU, and they're now training janitors on sustainable cleaning as they clean large buildings in Cleveland. Another example of the green jobs movement happening in our city. And so I think we must be creative in terms of how we think about decarbonization, how we think about sustainability, and how we ensure that we're maximizing every opportunity we can to accelerate the green jobs movement.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You mentioned earlier the woman that you spoke to whose son had asthma. You have a city that is predominantly black. A lot of the communities that are most impacted by environmental issues are the underrepresented, the black communities, or Hispanic communities in a lot of the urban areas. How do you bring them into this as well? How do you make sure that they're benefiting from not only the good environment that you're creating, but also the jobs?

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

This work is about equity and justice for me. I believe it's the role of government to ensure every policy, or program, or initiative we design we do it in a way that we take into consideration the lived experiences of our residents. And so when we're thinking about, for example, zoning policy, how does a new zoning code like Form Based Code, how would that impact a single mom looking for a good quality job in her neighborhood? Well, we have a zoning code that encourages and incentivizes companies to come back to the city. It's going to help that single mom. How do we encourage responsible economic development?

So, for example, we have eliminated parking minimums in high-frequency transit corridors to lower the cost to build good-quality, affordable, and workforce housing, again, is designing and building with equity and justice in mind. And so I think it's important that we ground it in the lived experiences of all our residents. I would also say continuous community engagement is a big part of our governing philosophy under my administration. I meet quarterly with activists in the Environmental and Climate Justice movement to make sure that we are holding ourselves accountable, and getting good feedback, and making sure they always have a seat at the table as we tackle this hard work in Cleveland.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And how are you working with the local businesses themselves? Because part of, I think what I'm hearing around the country is public-private partnerships are key to making this work. You can't do it by yourself.

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

This is all about ensuring that there's just alignment and synergy with the private sector. Everything from what parts of the city we're investing in, how do we tackle and get more than our fair share from the federal government? How do we ensure that we're being creative in terms of how we finance the green economy revolution in Cleveland? But partnering and co-designing, I think, is a big part of our private sector engagement philosophy.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And you are now the Chair of Climate Mayors.

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Yes.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Tell me about the organization. How are you working with these other communities?

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Well, Climate Mayors is a fantastic organization. Started several years ago. It's a group of Republican, and Democratic, and independent mayors, over 300 mayors across the country, all focused on addressing our nation's climate change issues. And this group is important because when then President Donald Trump got out of the Paris Climate Accords, it was America's mayor, she said, "You know what? We're going to lead the way." And I think if the world took note of what many of America's mayors are doing to address climate change, I think we'd be a lot better off and would have more progress in achieving our goals. But we're really focused on a couple of things right now. Number one, robust federal engagement and partnership. This president, President Joe Biden, has done what no other president in modern history has done in the world, the largest investment a country has ever made to address climate change.

And we're at the front lines of making sure we take this historic federal investment and have real solutions, real models of best practices in cities, from Madison to Cleveland to LA to New York City. The second part of our work is ensuring that cities have the capacity and technical assistance they need to navigate the labyrinth of federal guidelines and regulations to navigate this funding. And that's where that robust federal engagement and partnership is so important. But the last part of our work that I think is critical is just telling the story.

As you've seen in many media reports over the last several months, most Americans don't know about all the great work that this president has done in terms of helping address some of our legacy issues, from climate change to rebooting American industry with the CHIPS bill. We have to ground it and talk about it in a way that residents understand, and that narrative change work is something that we're really focused on at Climate Mayors, giving our mayors the tools they need to tell the story, to spread the gospel, and to make sure that their residents feel connected and seen in this work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I have a couple of questions about you yourself.

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Yes.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Are you a Cleveland native?

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Born and raised in the great city of Cleveland, Ohio in the southeast side.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And what motivated you? What was the fire that made you want to be the mayor?

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Well, I always had a passion for public service. My late father was a firefighter and a police officer, one of the first black cops and firefighters in a suburb of Cleveland. And my mom is a social worker. And my late grandmother was a community activist. She was often known as the chief of police on our block because she kept the block safe when crime was rampant in my neighborhood. And so I always had this passion to go into public service.

And for me, it was really accelerated during the pandemic and after the tragic murder of George Floyd that I felt a deep desire to do what Dr. King called us to do, step up and be the change we want to see in the world because we can't wait. And so we built a campaign on this idea that Cleveland couldn't wait, that it was time for bold, new, dynamic, visionary leadership. And we beat a slate of over seven candidates as a first-time candidate for public office. And we shocked the political world in Cleveland, and now we're fueling Cleveland's comeback in a way that I think the next generation will be proud of.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And finally, when people hear the name Cleveland, what do you want them to think?

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Hope, promise, resilience, opportunity. We've been a city that has been tough on ourselves for a long time. We know how to rebound in a way that I think is an embodiment of the Great American can-do spirit. And in many ways, Cleveland is America, and America is Cleveland from the legacy issues we've had around race, and disinvestment, and segregation and how globalization impacted our city's economy. And if we can see an equitable, prosperous, inclusive comeback in Cleveland, and I think it shows the nation that if it can be done in Cleveland, it can be done anywhere.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you, Mayor Bibb.

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb & Climate Mayors chair:

Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was my conversation with Justin Bibb, the mayor of Cleveland and the Chair of Climate Mayors, recorded at the Aspen Ideas: Climate conference in Miami Beach. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.