

Governing Philmont

Nancy Brousseau



Philmont, with a history now spanning over 150 years, began with three ingredients necessary for the start of a successful village. One was the availability of falling water from the Agawamick Creek to power the many mills that eventually were constructed here. Another was the completion of the New York Central Railroad, Harlem Division, only seven years after the first small mills opened their doors. Lastly, there was apparently a willing population of workers, led by ambitious mill owners and businessmen, who encouraged not only the expansion of local industry, but also all the services that came with being a part of a prosperous community.

The railroad and local roads provided transportation to larger commercial centers. In September 1853 a postmaster was appointed for the Philmont, Columbia County area. Mail was originally distributed from a house on Main Street. A school district was formed, a schoolhouse built and a library established by 1860.

Philmont men served with the Union Army during the Civil War. A resident of this area was on the Monitor, an innovative ironclad ship used during the War Between the States. The mills, among them knitting mills, paper mills, and a feed mill provided employment to over 700 citizens.

The early 1890's saw the Village incorporated with a president, three trustees, and a village clerk. A three-story wooden Village Hall was purchased and renovated in 1899. Assessors were named, taxes collected, sidewalks built, water and sewer projects initiated, police and fire protection provided; though almost twenty years elapsed before a concrete road was laid on Main Street.

General Governance

The Village of Philmont is governed by New York State Village law. Accordingly, much of its organization and many of its procedures are not within its control. The timing of its elections (March of each year) and fiscal year (starting June 1), for example are part of State law.

Elected Offices

Village elections are held in March of each year. Traditionally, the county's political parties (Republican, Democrat, Liberal, and Conservative) have not fielded candidates; local ad-hoc parties have emerged. Vacancies between elections are filled by appointment by the Village Board.

Mayor The mayor is elected for a two-year term in odd-numbered years.

Village Trustees Four trustees are elected for two-year terms, with two elected each year.

Village Justice The judge is elected for a four-year term in even-numbered years.

Appointed Bodies

The Village Board appoints three boards, each of which functions independently under State law. Other boards—such as the Comprehensive Plan Board—can be appointed as needed.

Zoning Board of Appeals The Zoning Board of Appeals is appointed by the Village Board in accordance with NY State law. There are five members. The Chairperson is designated by the Village Board. Terms are for five years each, and they are staggered.

Planning Board The Planning Board also consists of five appointed members with a designated chair. Both boards' members are appointed for five year terms on a staggered basis. Both boards require a secretary, which is a paid position.

Library Board The Library Board is appointed by the Village Board. Its five members serve five year staggered terms; they elect their own officers. The Library budget is prepared and overseen by the Library Board which then passes it on to the Village Board. The relationship between the Library and Village Boards are governed by State law.

Appointed Offices

Zoning Enforcement Officer There is also a village code enforcement officer. This position is also paid and governed by the Village Board.

Attorney A Village attorney is retained to represent and advise the Village officials.

Other Appointments

The Village Board appoints members of the Fire Department.

Designations

A local newspaper is designated as the official paper for the Village. All public notices—such as of meetings or bids—are placed in that newspaper.

Fire Company

The Fire Company was incorporated in 1896 as Philmont Volunteer Fire Company No. 1, Inc. It drew its members from the Village or the Philmont Fire Protection District. Residency is not always a requirement nowadays. Application is made to the Company and after approval by the membership the candidate is also approved by the Village Board. Funding for the Fire Company is provided by the Village.

RECOMMENDATION Continue community and Village support for the vital service provided by the Fire Company.

Rescue Squad

The Philmont Rescue Squad, Inc. is an organization that provides emergency medical and health services to the area. The Mayor and the Board of Trustees provide continued support to this vital group. Currently one of the Rescue Squad ambulances is housed in the Village Hall Fire Company area and a second is housed in a Village-owned building on Canal Street. Funding sources include public donations. It is a non-profit organization.

RECOMMENDATION Continue community and Village support for the vital service provided by the Rescue Squad.

Budget

The Village budget is adopted in late spring to take effect at the beginning of the fiscal year on June 1.

The format of the budget is determined in large part by the New York State Department of Audit and Control which regularly reviews the Village's bookkeeping at approximately two-year intervals.

There are four sections of the Village budget:

1. General fund
2. Water fund
3. Sewer fund
4. Library fund

In addition, significant revenues are received from the rents (usage fees) charged to residents for the use of Village water and sewers.

General Fund

The largest part of the Village budget (\$613,600 in 2002) consists of the General fund. This fund contains the appropriations for the cost of running the Village. Salaries, street maintenance, recreation, zoning enforcement, and refuse collection are funded through this fund.

The fund is supported by revenues from fees (zoning, garbage removal), fines in the Village court, county tax revenues, and state aid. The difference between revenues and expenses is made up by the Village tax. In 2002, a total of \$263,000 was raised from Village taxes.

Water Fund

The Water fund (\$126,200 in 2002) is used to support the water plant. Its revenues consist primarily of water rents from users (\$106,663 in 2002).

Sewer Fund

The Sewer fund (\$247,800 in 2002) supports the waste water treatment plant and the maintenance of sewers. Its revenues come primarily from sewer rents. Note that while almost all Village residents pay both water and sewer rents, some out-of-Village users receive Village water and pay water rents; these users do not pay sewer rents and do not use the Village's sewer system. That is the reason there are two separate funds.

Library Fund

The Library fund (\$20,900 in 2002) supports the Library. The appropriations are split primarily between personnel and equipment (book) charges.

Revenues for the Library fund come from a variety of sources including the Village (\$7,000), the State (\$1,500), the County (\$5,000), and the Town of Claverack (\$5,500).

Water and Sewer Rents

Usage fees are charged for water and sewer users. Most Village residents pay both. Out-of-Village water users (primarily along Martindale Road) pay only water rents. The Martindale Road users were accommodated when Forest Lake was used as a water supply. The water main passed by their homes and they were allowed to connect to it.

With the switch to Preusser Road wells, changes were made so that they would still receive water.

Some people feel that the water and sewer rents are excessive. Accordingly, we examined the rates in other localities. The water rents are comparable to those in other communities. The sewer rents vary widely by municipality; they chiefly reflect the age of the sewer system. In Hudson, for example, sewer rents are lower than they are in Philmont, since their sewers were installed many years ago. (Philmont's sewers were installed in the 1970s.) Newer systems have higher rates, and it is expected that communities that are only now installing sewer systems will have rates that are even higher.

It is difficult to make exact comparisons since there are a number of different ways of charging. Table 1 shows a basic comparison for water using the quarterly minimum fees.

Table 1: Comparison of Water Rents

COMMUNITY	QUARTERLY MINIMUM
Philmont	\$25.00
Valatie	\$20.25
Kinderhook	\$9-\$20 plus usage
Chatham Village	\$22.26
Hudson	\$23.00
Catskill	\$25.00

In Philmont, the sewer rents are calculated by multiplying the water rents by a factor of 3. A variation on this process is common in many communities.

Village Personnel

The Village has 24 full- and part-time employees. In general their responsibilities have increased and become more complex over time.

RECOMMENDATION The Village should budget for continuing training and education for its employees.

Office Staff

There is a clerk-treasurer and a deputy clerk-treasurer. These are permanent appointments by the Mayor with Board approval. The positions are defined as non-competitive class.

RECOMMENDATION Modernization of record-keeping is advised

RECOMMENDATION Increasing access of Village services to the people needs consideration.

RECOMMENDATION Explore additional space options for the Village office.

Library Staff

The Library has a director and part-time assistants and substitutes as needed. Funding is included in the Village budget.

RECOMMENDATION Explore additional space options for the Village library.

The Library was one of the highest-rated Village services.

Court

The Village justice is an elected official whose salary is paid by the Village. The justice has a court clerk.

Police

The Village Police Department has several part-time police officers and owns one police vehicle. That vehicle is housed in the warehouse off Canal Street, along with the second rescue vehicle and sometimes other pieces of village equipment. A Village trustee oversees the department and reports to the Village. The County Sheriff's Department also is available.

Comments on some surveys indicate that some people do not understand the scope of the responsibilities of the Village police or have questions about their actions.

RECOMMENDATION Clarify the role of the Village police.

RECOMMENDATION Publicize the mechanism for complaints, suggestions, praise.

Fire Company

The Village of Philmont provides funding for the Philmont Fire Company and also garaging for the vehicles on the lower level of the Village

Hall building. This large area has four bays with three used by the fire company for their equipment and one bay used by the Rescue Squad. Both groups are manned by volunteers, although a county financed medical technician is currently available during limited hours to Philmont residents. A second Rescue Squad vehicle is housed in a village-owned building called the warehouse off Canal Street. A trustee is assigned as liaison with the Fire Company. Both groups are strong assets to the community.

RECOMMENDATION Space needs are obvious.

The Fire Company was among the highest rated Village services.

Village-Owned Real Estate

Parks, Memorials and Playgrounds

All of the following are overseen by the DPW which reports on their condition to the Village Board. Maintenance, expenses, etc., are the responsibility of the Village.

RECOMMENDATION Village-wide playground programs and a multi-generational playground including picnic areas, tables and benches, to encourage family use.

World War II Memorial / Playground. Accessible off Lower Main Street; has 80 feet of frontage and 90 foot depth.

RECOMMENDATION Improve the playground area at the World War II Memorial. Increase lighting to protect area after dark.

Memorial Field. Ball Diamond/playground/cement block building. Accessible off Church Street. Has lighting poles for night time ball games, play areas, food service capability, bleachers and a fenced ball diamond area.

RECOMMENDATION Clarify how to use and reserve the Memorial Field Baseball Diamond. The public parking area needs improvement.

Main Street Memorial and Pocket Park. Has a monument listing the Village residents involved in the World War of 1917–1918. The second monument is in honor of all residents in all wars. It is on the corner of Main and Canal Streets. This is the site of Memorial Day observances and holiday lighting in December. Also, there was a Time Capsule buried during the Village centennial celebration in 1992 to be opened in 2092.

RECOMMENDATION Remember to open the Time Capsule in 2092.

Play park, basketball court, picnic area, gazebo and site of proposed communi-

ty center. Accessible on Lakeside Drive and from Ellsworth Street. Cement block building, playground equipment and picnic table shown in Figure 1.

RECOMMENDATION Maintain the playground equipment on Lakeside Drive.

Figure 1: Community Center (under construction)



Across from the recreational beach area and boat launch site on the Philmont Reservoir is the new community center.

RECOMMENDATION Improve the playground and all the facilities in area including the boat launch, beach, and shore line access. Complete the community center on the site.

RECOMMENDATION Investigate restoring the swimming area at the reservoir.

Sidewalks

Most Village streets have standard or wide sidewalks.

RECOMMENDATION Create a schedule of maintenance. Implement a better (or enforceable) law for snow removal.

Other Village Properties

Former Dump Former solid waste/village dump area off road known by the two following designations: Carpenter Road and Knapp Road. It's a gated area of 15.5 acres, sometimes used for disposal of nontoxic natural materials such as brush, leaves, trees, etc. At one time it was the official village all-inclusive trash repository. It was finally closed as an all-purpose dump in the 1980s according to NY State mandates on disposal of all trash.

RECOMMENDATION Continue or increase current bimonthly schedule for disposal of recyclables and newspapers at the site.

RECOMMENDATION Investigate expanding the availability of the site for annual or semi-annual village clean-up days.

Old Village Hall

RECOMMENDATION Explore the use of the Old Village Hall site for a Village information center.

Canal Street Parking Lot

RECOMMENDATION Improve the parking lot with new signage and striping of parking areas.

RECOMMENDATION Reserve for possible future use. Suggestions have included quarters for the rescue squad, or for municipal parking. Parking would include more visible signage and lined parking areas.

Other Village Properties

RECOMMENDATION Catalog all village properties, including tax map number, size, exact address, accessibility, current use (i.e., right-of-way for water/sewage lines, buildings, vacant, etc.) and approximate value.

Village Hall

After several other locations were outgrown, the current Village hall on Main Street was built in 1962. It shares frontage and space with the Village library. It also supports many other Village departments and activities. The Village Office houses the desks of the clerk-treasurer, the deputy clerk-treasurer, the files for the building inspector, the copier, the fax machine, as well as current files for the Department of Public Works, Water and Sewer files, Fire Company and Rescue Squad records, village budgets, minutes, laws, codes etc. The rear of the building houses the offices of the village justice, the police department, a large meeting hall, an adjoining kitchen and many file cabinets which line the walls.

A lot of space is taken up with files and storage of official Village documents. Funding is available through the State Archives Records Administration (SARA) for municipalities and school districts to undertake records management activities. More information is available at www.archives.nysed.gov. Records management would not only improve storage conditions but it could rescue needed space now taken up by file cabinets.

RECOMMENDATION Apply for State Archives Records Administration funding.

Directly below the hall area with access from Maple Avenue is the space for the fire company and rescue squad vehicle as well as their vehicles. There are three fire company trucks and rescue vehicles. A second emergency ambulance is in village-owned quarters in a warehouse on Canal Street. Back on Maple Avenue there is also a small meeting room on the lower level. There are two public restrooms on the upper level and one on the lower level. Upstairs, the library is truly needful of larger quarters for its collections and services for the community. The

Village Hall is listed in tax-exempt properties 113-9-2-52 frontage 60 feet, depth 122. It is listed separately from the parking lot on Maple Avenue.

RECOMMENDATION Space needs analysis for all Village functions.

RECOMMENDATION Provide information to the public for reserving the Village Hall for functions. This should include reservation and rental requirements as well as a clear description of what groups and uses are permitted.

Library

The Philmont Public Library was officially incorporated in 1898. It currently adjoins the Village Hill and stores approximately 18,000 items in a slightly over one thousand square foot area. It serves area residents of all ages.

Included in available collections are videos, DVDs, CDs, CD-ROMs, two encyclopedias in software format and two general encyclopedias on the shelves. There are two public access computers and several other services available with your library card. Residents enjoy the walk-in accessibility.

Although the library serves all ages, it is disproportionately used by children and by senior citizens. Since the Village's population is now quite young, and in view of the survey results indicating a need for improvement in Youth Services, improvement in Library services would likely be a significant benefit to the Village.

Like school funding, library funding in New York state is a combination of state, county, and local funding. At the state level, the Division of Library Development has divided the State into chartered service areas. Much of the State's population can thus be assigned to an individual library, and per capita funding from the State is sent to that library.

In "unserved" areas, the per capita funding goes not to a library (there being none designated) but to the library system that covers that area (in this case, Mid-Hudson Library System). Residents of "unserved" areas are indeed served by local libraries, but a variety of funding mechanisms are employed. In some cases—such as the Town of Ghent outside the Chatham School District, residents pay no town-level taxes to their own library. Many of the Town of Ghent "unserved" residents use the Philmont Public Library. (Other nearby "unserved" areas include the towns of Copake, Ancram, and Taghkanic.)

RECOMMENDATION Space limitations curtail the implementation of some programs that would meet community needs, especially children's programs. Space needs are a priority.

RECOMMENDATION In the short term, request funding from the Town of Gh-

ent to cover technically “unserved” residents of Ghent (outside the Chatham School District) who use the Philmont Public Library.

RECOMMENDATION Longer term, explore a Section 259 initiative in conjunction with the libraries in Claverack and Hillsdale. This would tie common library funding to Taconic Hills Central School district property taxes and would formalize town-level funding for “unserved” areas.

Department of Public Works

The Department of Public Works (DPW) has two full-time employees and one part-time. They belong to the United Public Employee Service Union. The DPW garage is situated on 18 Eagle Street; it is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: DPW Garage



It is a cinder block building with a wooden addition. There are four bays to house village maintenance equipment. The Village owns several large vehicles, including two trucks for snowplowing, another for sanding, a specially designed truck for trash collection, a street sweeper and a smaller one ton pickup truck.

Figure 3: Garbage Truck



The building appears to be old but adequate, albeit unattractive and nearly an eyesore. Responsibilities of the DPW include street and side-

walk maintenance, water pipe and sewer pipe repairs and maintenance, trash collection, snowplowing, leaf removal, street cleaning, street sign monitoring, painting of all non-parking curbs and maybe a baker's dozen of other responsibilities. The DPW building area also stores the sand/salt mix for the winter roads on its lot that is 130 feet of frontage and 212 feet deep, tax map 113-9-3-17. One Village trustee is responsible for overseeing the DPW.

RECOMMENDATION Fix up the DPW building for safety, looks, and efficiency.

RECOMMENDATION Need covered storage for salt/sand.

Waste Water Treatment Plant

The Philmont Waste Water Treatment Plant is located in the hamlet of Mellenville off Route 217, west of the village. It has currently two certified employees and one part-time. It is a facility that has been improved and updated as needed. The access road is off Route 217. There is also another right of way at the rear of the property. Part of the plant is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Waste Water Treatment Plant



The facility takes in an average volume of 120,000 gallons of waste water daily and holds a permit that allows up to 250,000 gallons a day. Theoretically, the facility could manage twice the current use. (It is interesting to note that, like pipe organs in great cathedrals, waste water treatment plants are generally custom built, and each one has its own idiosyncrasies.)

The staff is also responsible for overseeing and maintenance of fire hydrants in the Village. These are flushed every spring and fall and needed repairs are done.

The State of New York Department of Health conducts yearly inspections (water) or has come randomly to sample. The Department does monthly testing of the facilities.

A village trustee also oversees this department and reports directly to the Village Board.

Additional water-related facilities owned and operated by the Village include a water storage tower on upper Summit Street. This structure is between Village-owned wells and pumps out on Martindale Road and the water users and helps to maintain the pressure necessary to service the water supply. The water is treated (chlorinated) on that property. The village trustee for the Water/Sewage Plant has the responsibility for monitoring these operations.

RECOMMENDATION The recommendation suggested by the supervisor was for a “pressure reducer” for the lower end of the Village. This would make repairs of broken water mains easier and less costly for the Village.

Water Resources

The importance of the bodies of water in the Village cannot be overstated. Public awareness of these resources should be maintained to include protecting public water consumption, increased recreational opportunities, and protecting the environment as a natural habitat for wildlife.

RECOMMENDATION An overall recommendation is the continued judicious use of all water resources.

The Reservoir

One, within the Village boundaries, is a 24 acre reservoir bordering Lakeside Drive. Extensive repairs in the year 2001 brought the very picturesque dam at the south end of the lake up to state standards. The Philmont Fire Company maintains two dry hydrants on the lake shore for potential use in emergency situations. The lake area also has great potential for recreational or expanded services for residents.

RECOMMENDATION Promote the reservoir as a recreational and tourist attraction to the Village in general and the Mill District in particular.

Forest Lake

The second lake is Forest Lake, situated off Route 23 in the Martindale area. It consists of 47.5 acres of lake and over 50 acres of woodland, and is not currently being used as a source of water. State regulations several years ago excluded surface water, i.e., ponds and lakes unless a filtration plant was installed. Although the expense of such a plant made it not feasible for current water needs, the prospect of future water needs must be kept in mind.

Both bodies of water support a wide range of fish and wildlife. Deer, fox, turkey and small animals find water, food and shelter in the woods and on the shores. Resident water birds such as Canada geese, swans and ducks are joined by herons, songbirds and hawks. Migrating birds join the others.

RECOMMENDATION Provide information to facilitate public access to Forest Lake.

Gravel Bank (Wells)

A third Village-owned water source is known as the Gravel Bank and is the site of the Village water wells and pumping station. There are 40 acres on the west side of Preusser Road and 88.4 acres on the east side. This is the site and source of all the water used by Village residents today.

RECOMMENDATION A Rural Water Study, completed recently about the Gravel Bank area should be acted on by the Village Board. A cooperative agreement with the Town of Claverack to protect the watershed at the Gravel Bank should be a priority.

High Falls and Agawamuck Creek

A fourth area in the Village, known as High Falls, and historically significant as the original source of the water power that enabled the many early mills to function begins at the east end of the Village at the Summit Reservoir dam. The stream is known as the Agawamuck (or Ockawamick) Creek. It flows through Mellenville and Claverack and eventually into the Hudson River.

RECOMMENDATION The actual access to the High Falls area, the acreage and ownership, should be clarified. There is a potential for recreational use or tourism.

Main Street Committee

In 1998, the Village formed a Main Street Committee to look into conditions on Main Street and to economic development. It adopted a mission statement:

The Main Street Committee is a catalyst for positive change, encouraging economic development and community revitalization appropriate to the scale and resources of Philmont.

The Main Street Committee has met monthly since that time and has undertaken a variety of projects including

- “Welcome to Philmont” banners
- Hanging planters made by students at Taconic Hills Central School
- The initial work on this comprehensive plan
- The House and Garden Walking Tour
- An inventory of public space in Philmont (still in process)
- Creation of the Main Street Collection, a unique resource of books on new urbanism, rural economic development, and sustainable growth. The collection is housed at the Philmont Public Library; it was initially funded by a grant from the Hudson River Bank & Trust Company Foundation.
- Public lecture by James Howard Kunstler (1999)
- Obtaining funding from Columbia Hudson Partnership for summer plantings on Main Street

Membership is informal, and all are welcome. The chair of the Main Street Committee is appointed by the Village Board.

RECOMMENDATION Continue to support the Main Street Committee.