

Making of the Philmont Waterfront

Focus Group Meetings

January 13, 2015

Summary

On Tuesday, January 13, 2015 members of the Elan Team facilitated a series of Focus Group meetings and one-on-one interviews. Elan Team members included Lisa Nagle, Rob Holzman, Eric Hansen and Kelli Rose Pearson. A Co-Chairman and one member of the Executive Committee also sat in on a few of the meetings. Focus Groups included: Housing; Existing Businesses/Economic Development; Community Organizations; and Recreation & Environment. In total, we had 36 local and regional interests participate in the focus group meetings and interviews. All meetings were held at the Philmont Library in the Karen Garafalo Cultural Center.

The goal of the meetings was three-fold. First, and foremost, we were there to listen to participants identification of today's issues and opportunities in Philmont. As a team, we all felt that we were able to gain some valuable insights throughout the day. It also seems evident that the groups we met with have a positive sense of momentum and possibility for Philmont's future. Next, we had hoped these meetings would establish a foundation for continued conversation among the various participants. It seems that the Existing Businesses/Economic Development Focus Group, in particular, benefited by all coming together and sharing thoughts and ideas; many agreed that they need to come together again in a similar manner. Finally, we asked participants to take the message back to their friends and colleagues about what we are doing and to encourage them to participate in the February Community Open House. It seems that this goal, too, has been a success: Columbia Opportunities, Inc. will be sending meeting invitations to people with Philmont zip codes. Others during the meetings also agreed to spread the word.

On the following pages you will find bulleted lists of comments and statements we recorded during the meetings. Some common themes that emerged:

- While many were positive about the future of Philmont, there was a consistent theme that Philmont is perceived to be 'out of the way'. Likewise, it was noted that Philmont had to offer more to make it a 'destination' to attract visitors while providing for the needs of the local population. Some ideas included improved signage along the Taconic Parkway and a broad marketing campaign to people both within the community and potential visitors.
- Renewal will not be an easy endeavor, yet the Village and the region have significant assets to grow. There appears to be an opportunity to blend the growing local craftsman and artist population with the growing small-scale farming operations in the region. Combined, these two distinct populations can become anchors for the local economy. The artisan population can have creative methods of re-purposing places that often become draws for a visitor population, thereby making Philmont a destination. The region's growing small-scale farming operations can create new employment opportunities for existing residents while keeping revenues within the local economy and strengthening the social fabric. Further, studies have shown where small-scale farms dominate the landscape, that there are more local businesses, higher-quality infrastructure such as roads and sidewalks, and more beneficial community resources such as public parks than in similar areas without a local agriculture presence. The blending of the craftsman/artist population and the small-scale agricultural operations appears to hold significant potential.

Housing

Primary Facilitators: Lisa Nagle, Rob Holzman

Participants (10): Karen Davala (Davala Real Estate); Tina Sharp (Columbia Opportunities); Stanley Koloski (Philmont Code Enforcement Officer); Joe Haley (Landlord); Michelle Rosien (Landlord); Jurgen Schnackenberg (Landlord); Steve Benson (Philmont Zoning Board of Appeals); Kate Martino (Co-founder PBI, Landlord); John Lmee (Chair, Town of Claverack Economic Development Council); Thomas Paino (Exec. Steering Committee).

1. What do you feel the advantages of living in Philmont compared to other surrounding communities?
 - Architecture
 - Proximity to Hudson
 - NYC – Boston travelers
 - Places for visitors: restaurants, inns
 - Availability of public services: sewer/water
 - Outdoor activity
 - Connection to local agriculture
 - Geographic center of county
 - Access to Taconic Parkway
 - International visitors - because of Hawthorn opportunities
 - Extensive education opportunities from Waldorf, Hawthorn Valley Assoc., Free Columbia
 - Student and teacher programs
 - Brings diversity of local population
 - Strong Arts Community
 - Farmer's Market
 - Local 111
 - Family needs can meet a variety of income levels
 - Omi International Arts Center – Ghent
 - Alternative medicine opportunities
 - Taconic Hills CSD
 - Rents are more affordable
 - Summit Reservoir & waterfront area

2. What are some of the disadvantages to living in Philmont?
 - DSS (Department of Social Services) should have a presence (on Main Street, maybe where Greenport Rescue used to be)
 - Lack transportation to get to services and jobs – especially to Hudson
 - Need more opportunity for lower income to grow into better jobs
 - Out of town housing owners are not taking care of buildings
 - Tenants are not taking enough care of houses they are living in
 - Lost rescue squad
 - Rod & Gun club located within Village – target shootings Tuesday afternoons, Sunday mornings makes a lot of noise

3. Philmont has a high proportion of rental units to owner-occupied dwellings. How does this fact relate to the advantages or disadvantages of living in Philmont, particularly within the study area?
 - Out of town building owners are not taking care of properties
 - Too many rental occupants are not taking care of buildings they are in
 - Rents in Hudson are going up; more renters are moving into Philmont
 - Need to make Main Street more active
 - Need for more affordable, quality housing in Philmont
 - Perception that if take care of property, then taxes will go up

4. What role can the waterfront and vacant industrial buildings play in improving opportunities in Philmont?
 - Mills: crafters and artists cabinet makers – issue would be parking
 - Can make Philmont a destination – not on a main road
 - People need to look too hard to find these places
 - Concern about asbestos in older buildings
 - Asbestos in some of the old houses - limits redevelopment opportunities
 - Need to clean up the lake for sailing and canoes
 - Summit Reservoir can stimulate new housing investments
 - Look at Town of Beacon – Beacon Mill Village – requires artists to live in space

Existing Businesses/Economic Development

Primary Facilitators: Eric Hansen and Kelli Rose-Pearson

Participants (12): Karen Garafalo (Director, Philmont Library); John Lee (Chair, Claverack ED Council); Nancy Myersmythe (Owner/Operator, McNans Variety Foods); Michael Myersmythe (Owner/Chef, McNans Variety Foods); Elizabeth Angello (Owner, Main Street Public House); Josephine Proul (Owner/Chef, Local 111); Abby Laufer (Board Member, Philmont Market Co-op); Bob Mansfield (owner Vanderbilt Hotel); Barbara Sagal (Village Trustee, Co-chair Exec. Steering Committee); Matthew Herman (owner, Main Street Public House); Michael Lapoint (Administrator, socialsefl.org); Nathaniel Williams (Co-Director, Free Columbia).

Assets:

- Sewer availability
- Affordability
- Beauty: particularly High Falls area
- Located at the geographic center of the County
- Surrounding agriculture
- Local officials are supportive of local growth (Planning Board; Mayor; Building Inspector)
- Being located on a State highway makes it easier to bring products into Village
- Coop
- Hawthorne Valley Farmscape Ecology Program

Issues/Needs:

- Need improved signage along the Taconic Parkway
- Need public transit that connects with Hudson
- Seasonality of business makes off-season extremely difficult
- Village needs to be made a destination
- How do we convince others that Philmont is a viable place to do business and offer their products?
- Utility costs are high
- Overshadowed by Hudson
- People like it when they get here, but many seem to leave after being here for a couple of years
- Need to provide more within Village to keep local population from buying outside of the village
- Need to get the word out that “we’re here” to both local population and outsiders (problem with too many local people either not knowing that a particular business exists or have a perception that the business is too expensive for them to patronize)
- Local business owners need to work together more
- Need more artist exhibition space

Ideas:

- Should educate local business owners how to participate in energy audits
- Promote Philmont as a sustainable community in order to attract new businesses
- Explore options to generate local energy
- Create a Philmont marketing program

Community Organizations

Primary Facilitators: Lisa Nagle, Rob Holzman

Participants (8): Nathaniel Williams (Co-Director, Free Columbia); Rain Whittaker (Philmont Library Board); Michael Lapoint (Administrator, socialself.org); Laura Summer (Co-Director, Free Columbia); Barbara Sagal, (Village Trustee, Co-chair Exec. Steering Committee); Kim Keil (Valley Energy); Faith Benson (Secretary, Philmont Public Library Board & member Co-op Collaboration Team); Sheri Bolevice (Co-op member, & member Co-op Collaboration Team); Claudia Vispo. Hawthorne Farmscape Ecology).

Given the smaller size of participants, the discussion was kept wide open and we did not follow the scripted questions.

Assets:

- Philmont is ‘facilities rich’: meaning that the Village is low cost, with high quality infrastructure
- “It’s a good little Village”
- Opportunity to promote Philmont as a wedding destination
- Four good restaurants that are largely supported by the local population
- Consider remaking Mills modeled after the Basilica in Hudson

Issues/Needs:

- Philmont is out of the way; need to make Philmont a destination
- Need sidewalks from Pinehaven to downtown
- Need grocery store for local population

- Need laundromat

Other buildings in the Village that are redevelopment opportunities:

- American Legion Hall

Recreation & Environment

Primary Facilitators: Lisa Nagle, Rob Holzman

Participants (9): Faith Benson (Secretary, Philmont Library Board); Lenny Collins (Harlem Valley Rail Trail Association); Claudia Vispo (Hawthorne Valley Farmscape Ecology); Fran Martino (Greater Stockport Watershed Alliance); Cathy Zises (farmer); Joe Haley; Kate Martino (Co-founder PBI, Landlord); Sebastian McCabe (PBI /Farmers Market Manager); Nicole (young friend with Sebastian).

1. What are the environmental and recreational assets that make Philmont and the study area a special place?
 - Community Center
 - Used to:
 - provide ice skating
 - have a concession stand
 - have swimming
 - Creeks; Lake/Reservoir; High Falls
 - Good fishing
 - Lake: bass, perch (lots of turtles)
 - Creeks: trout
 - Route for a lot of road cyclists
 - Rod & Gun Club – trail system; connects to old rail bed
 - Need social membership to access property for trail use
 - High Falls trail network
 - Top of High Falls (accessed via Canal St. and behind Summit Mill)
 - Trail off Overlook Ct. – put in by boy scout; takes people down to Summit Reservoir
 - Claverack Park
 - Philmont's water supply
 - Sidewalk network

5. What are the limitations to protecting and strengthening the environmental and recreational assets in Philmont?
 - Noise from Rod & Gun Club when target shooting
 - Money for rail trail
 - Bus garage @ edge of Summit Reservoir
 - Blocks key view
 - Parking lot failing along edge and falling into reservoir

- Runoff going into water
 - Beavers damming upper reservoir area
 - Mining operation @ western edge of reservoir (outside town)
 - Summit Heights Development – fear that it will come back
 - Philmont has the largest percent of population without cars in county
 - Need laundromat for local people
 - Need grocery store for locals
6. Are there opportunities to strengthen and showcase the environmental aspects of Philmont?
- Rail Trail – connect to CLC, Mills, downtown
 - Maintain southwestern edge of reservoir as forever wild with trail network
 - Restore reservoir as a local asset and destination
 - Swimming, picnicking, roof-top boating, basketball, ice-skating
 - Build sidewalks to Claverack Park
 - Community walkability is a key asset
 - Development of Coop – people can walk for fresh food
 - A great community gathering space when open
 - The people who are here are a great community asset– promoting sustainability and local food production/education, art – painting and photography
 - Opportunity for eco-tourism
 - Library – constantly bringing people together (researching, points for walking, free internet)
7. As individuals involved in local and regional initiatives, do you see new opportunities for recreational development in Philmont? (i.e. tournaments, trail races, fishing, interpretive signage, etc.)
- Rod & Gun Club: does fishing derby
 - Community Day: Main Street – car show, fishing derby, other community activities
 - Kayak/canoe rentals (depth too shallow at Lake – needs to be dredged)
 - Need stronger local community participation for implementation
 - Food in Philmont weekend
 - Bring in regional CSAs
 - Food, arts, restaurants, farmers
 - “Restaurant Crawl”
 - Pedestrian connection from Pine Haven to the Reservoir by creating an entrance off Martindale Rd
 - Trail connecting High Falls conservation area with Summit Reservoir
 - consider developing trail with material that allows for elders using golf carts to access

Interview: Ken Flood; David Colby; Joe Haley; Kathy Zises

Participants: Ken Flood (Commissioner Columbia County Economic Development, & Ex. Director, Columbia Economic Development Corp); David Colby (President, Columbia County

Chamber); Joe Haley; Cathy Zises; Lisa Nagle; Eric Hansen; Kelli Rose Pearson; John Delconti (PBI intern, Amherst College).

- Limited rental space available in Hudson
- People are talking that Philmont is the “next place” in Columbia County
- Etsy – employees having difficulty finding affordable, quality housing
 - County preparing survey to ascertain housing needs and expectations of Etsy employees
- Pine Haven Nursing and Rehab Center will likely be privatized. Could also mean opportunity for additional senior housing.
- Questar recently received grant to train long-term unemployed for health care positions
- County recently completed a County Farmland Protection Plan
- County will be releasing an RFP for a County-wide broadband/telecommunications strategy.
 - Columbia County is ranked 2nd worst broadband/telecommunications availability in NYS
- Buzz is that people want to be in Philmont
- Economic development relies on bringing new people in while keeping existing
- Hudson Valley Creamery, a cheese processing plant that intends to use goat milk from herds in the region as part of their ten year plan. County working with Creamery to help grow the regional goat population – The Goat Study in progress.

Interview: Tom Taylor

Participants: Tom Taylor (representing Eleanor Ambos, owner, Summit Mill); Tom Paino; Lisa Nagle; Rob Holzman; Eric Hansen; Kelli Rose Pearson; John Delconti

- Philmont has not been as business friendly as Hudson
- Building was recently given a permit to continue with restoration. Can “Condemned” come down? Concern that the sign sends the wrong message to the community and almost invites vandalism.
- Eleanor wants to make the building a part of the community with uses that support and encourage community development
- A husband/wife couple, both architects, have recently purchased a lot on the reservoir and are building a new house and expressed interest in developing programs that could take place in the Mill.
- Land across the creek is part of the Mill facility. Tom said that the property could be used for trail development.
- Eleanor recently purchased the Agawamuck School on Rt. 217
- A structural report of the Summit Mill was completed as part of the building permit process recently completed.
- Tom has expressed a desire to work collaboratively with the Village to put the building back productive use.
- Tom expressed that they would like to continue to talk as our project continues to come together.
- Tom stated that the rail right of way near the American Legion could be made accessible to the community, if somebody were to ask.