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PHILMONT BEAUTIFICATION: REVITALIZING A COLUMBIA COUNTY COMMUNITY

Revitalizing a community can start with the simplest of gestures. In the Columbia County village of Philmont, it began with picking up trash.

As Sally Baker, co-founder and executive director of **Philmont Beautification, Inc. (PBI)** recounts, “There was so much trash that the town used to be known as *Filthmont*.” In 2001, Sally, four friends, and a youth group organized by stonemason Timothy Smith started thinking about ways to improve the town’s image and build connections between residents. They decided to organize community trash pickup days.

That small step began a larger renaissance for Philmont, one that will get its latest boost in the form of the Philmont Market Co-op, a commercial kitchen and community space. The Co-op, funded by a variety of sources including a 2015 grant from LEP, will open its doors in a renovated Stewart’s Shops convenience store later this year.

Founded as a milling town, Philmont sits alongside a 21-acre reservoir built in the 1800s to serve its large paper and textile mills. In 1838 the town acquired its own railroad stop, and by the time the Village of Philmont was incorporated in 1891 it had become the industrial center of Columbia County with a population of 3,000 – more than two times what it is today.

In the 20th century, beginning with the stock market crash and the Great Depression, the fortunes of the

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town began to shift. In 1938, the Great New England Hurricane washed away much of the town's main thoroughfares. Twenty years later the railroad was abandoned, and in 1963 the last mill closed its doors. In a county where agriculture had increasingly become the cornerstone of the economy, industrial Philmont found itself isolated, with its industrial buildings falling to neglect.



LEP team members visit with Sally Baker of PBI (second from right) at the Philmont Co-op Curbside Cafe

Today, it is agriculture that is energizing Philmont's rebirth. Responding to priorities identified by Philmont's residents in a comprehensive plan, PBI opened the Philmont Farmers Market in 2009, creating a community space where over 150 local residents come together each week.

The connections with local farmers formed through the farmers market were the inspiration behind the Philmont Market Co-op, a commercial kitchen conceived as a producer/consumer cooperative that marks the next step in Philmont's recovery. When it opens, the kitchen will provide a work space for local farmers, chefs, bakers, food producers, and new food businesses while also serving as a venue for educational programming for children and families.

The project's imaginative design will allow the space to adapt seasonally to the community's needs. In the summer, the Co-op Curbside Café will operate out of a food truck in the parking lot while the kitchen will be available for value-added processing by local small-scale farmers looking to augment their CSAs and

conserve surplus produce. During the winter, the Curbside Café will relocate indoors to operate during morning hours. In the afternoons, PBI will offer business and farm planning assistance to local food entrepreneurs. Plans also include Sunday programs for families with an expansion of PBI's already established "Kids Grow and Cook" program which includes a kitchen garden and visits to local farms.

Today a visitor to Philmont is struck not by its neglect but by its care and pride. Not only are the streets clean, but large planter barrels overflowing with flowers line Main Street. Over the past ten years, more than 21 facades of commercial buildings and affordable housing located along Main Street have been renovated by PBI in collaboration with the New York State Main Street Program. Just across the street from the future site of the Market Co-op is "Local 111," an award-winning farm-to-table restaurant located in a renovated auto repair shop. The market and the restaurant, once a gas station and a garage, are now anchors of a growing local agriculture movement that, together with an energized community, is building a vibrant future for the Village of Philmont.

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