

MID-HUDSON PATTERN FOR PROGRESS URBAN ACTION AGENDA



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“Millennial” Marketing Plan for the Town of Fishkill

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“MILLENNIAL” MARKETING PLAN FOR THE TOWN OF FISHKILL

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INTRODUCTION

Project Description

Our 8-member team was asked to develop a strategy for the Town of Fishkill to attract and retain residents aged 18-34, the so-called “millennial” generation. This focus was chosen to address the aging population of the nine-county region that Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress investigates. Our broad approach to understanding the Town included looking at history and growth; analyzing census, housing, and other publically available economic and demographic data; assessing current assets; and reviewing challenges. In our research stage we met with Town Board member Ori Bachman, who joined us on a subsequent driving tour with Town Supervisor Bob LaColla. With the assistance of the Town, our team was able to conduct an online survey of Town residents and held several in-person interviews to understand how residents perceive the municipality.

Summary Findings and Recommendations:

- The Town has the opportunity to develop a strong identity while establishing strategic directions.
- Location is a strong asset – accessibility to local and regional destinations should be embraced.
- A comprehensive survey of existing housing stock will facilitate future planning.
- The Town should maintain a small-town feel with smart, targeted, sustainable growth and zoning.
- The Town’s recently strengthened fiscal position is a strong selling point for existing and potential residents.
- The Town leadership should better engage the population to explain current activities and discuss plans for the future.
- School re-districting has caused significant disturbance and demonstrates the need for Town leaders to have a voice in district decision-making.

Background

The Town of Fishkill, located in the southwest corner of Dutchess County, NY comprises roughly 32 square miles and has a population of approximately 23,000. The Town's population and development growth from a small community of 7,000 residents in 1960 tracked with the rise of IBM and its major operations in nearby East Fishkill and Poughkeepsie. Thus, the considerable and continuing decline of IBM over the past two decades throughout the greater Mid-Hudson Valley is an inescapable factor bearing on the Town's future. Under different circumstances many of today's millennials would be the new generation of IBMers, or entrepreneurs and employees whose local businesses benefited from the IBM ripple effect. IBM jobs brought and kept many individuals and families here. The continuing reduction in the number of jobs by the former anchor employer continues to impact many aspects of economic life in Fishkill and surrounding municipalities. In many ways, Fishkill has adjusted and responded to the changing economic and fiscal climates following the reduction in employment by IBM and the 2008-9 recession. Fishkill's median family income is 33% above New York State's and 56% above national levels, while the County unemployment rate of 4.7% is below both State and national levels.

Perhaps the most significant achievement of the Town in the recent past has been the reversal of the Town's fiscal position. By accepting and successfully acting upon the recommendations of the New York Office of the State Comptroller's 2013 Fiscal Stress Report, the Town recently received a bond rating upgrade based primarily on a positive economic outlook, forward-looking debt service expenses of under 9% of operating expenditures, and a swing to financial liquidity at the close of 2014.

The Town now finds itself at a decision point: an opportunity for Fishkill to rethink, clarify, and in some ways redirect the course of its community.



CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Considerations

Although the stated goal of this project was to target millennials as an aspect of future planning for the Town, the premise raised two immediate challenges for the team.

First: which portions of the millennial generation can the Town most successfully attract and retain given its existing assets and current position? The only true commonality of 'millennials' is that they are early in their adulthood and working lives. Demographically they are as diverse as any other age group: from

ethnic background to education level, and from marital and family status to income level. As with any broad demographic grouping, millennials have wide-ranging interests and needs that affect where they live and work. A relatively small and suburbanized community like Fishkill can't completely satisfy the entire generation. Because Fishkill can't "do it all," we have concentrated our analysis on existing resources and proximity to regional assets to provide a broad package of ideas.

Second: there was a strong feeling among the team that before Fishkill can properly begin to market itself, it needs to define what direction, level and type of growth it envisions in the medium-to-long term. To quote one resident's response to our survey: "The town needs to pick what it wants to be. Do we want to be like a Long Island town with miles of box stores? Are we God's waiting room [referring to an aging population]? Or are we a cute country town with a proud history?"

RESEARCH RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our team noted that the **Town lacks a strong identity**. Without its own identifiable center, recognizable neighborhoods, or clear borders, the Town is sometimes hard to geographically contextualize. Chain stores on Route 9 diminish the "small town feel" that, according to our survey, many residents value. As Fishkill works to **define its strategic direction, an identity will begin to form**. The team believes that the strategic direction provides an opportunity to develop an identity within existing constructs, whether these are commercial zones, residential neighborhoods, or activity hubs such as the Town Recreational Center.

The Town's location is a recognized asset. Location was the most popular first response to our survey question, "What do you like most about living in the Town of Fishkill?" Many of Fishkill's most appealing identifiable assets are not actually within its borders, even though it is Fishkill's close proximity to these assets that appeal to current and prospective residents. These assets include the walkable, downtown amenities of the Village of Fishkill; the brimming cultural life, entertainment and commercial opportunities of Main Street in Beacon; and the wide range of outdoor recreational opportunities including the Hudson Highlands State Park. The team believes that in any consideration of strategic direction, growth, or marketing, **the Town should embrace its proximity and access to local assets, including those outside the Town borders.**

Any strategic direction planning by Fishkill must consider the impact of the recent recession. For example, the perceived cost of living is critical to millennials because this generation has entered the job market, or were early in it, during the heart of the economic downturn. Many have had their earning and purchasing power set back, and have a well-documented financial weariness resulting in a heightened need for good affordable housing, whether as a renter or a first-time home buyer. It would therefore make sense for Fishkill to **provide and promote entry-level housing** options to this group. **Undertaking a comprehensive survey of housing stock** (or updating such a survey, if one exists) is a crucial step for the Town in order to inform how it markets itself to millennials or other prospective residents. We consider this data invaluable when the Town seeks and assesses proposals for new housing development.

Fishkill remains a relatively small community. The fundamental question of what ‘growth’ actually means for tomorrow’s Fishkill must be addressed. We feel it is crucial for the Town to recognize and embrace its limits and **plan to grow in a smart, targeted, sustainable way** that attracts residents and businesses without undermining Fishkill’s advantage of feeling small. The primary opportunity for such growth should focus on engaging new business activity in existing commercial sites that are either underutilized or abandoned. Our tour revealed several major sites that provide the Town with an opportunity to “think different” about these properties (as the famous Apple Computer ad campaign celebrated).

“Fishkill has the potential to offer a high quality of life while maintaining proximity to conveniences (such as train station, shopping).”

Survey Respondent

THINK DIFFERENT: CONCEPTUAL RE-USE OF DUTCHESS MALL (see image below)

CONCEPT: *Re-invent the Dutchess Mall site as a live-work-play community hub targeting entrepreneurs, start-ups, and small business services.*

FEATURES:

- (1) Highly-wired, open, and flexible work spaces for start-ups and emerging small businesses to customize for their particular needs, including shared meeting spaces and services.*
- (2) Affordable live/work apartments to add a community-building element -- especially for younger entrepreneurs. Amenities could grow to include ZipCar, dry cleaning, a gym, and dining facilities.*

SECONDARY TARGET: *Complementary small business service companies can be recruited to operate at the site. By adding further value to the redevelopment in these ways, the project would not only provide more incentives for entrepreneurs to locate at the hub, but would also draw business from the surrounding area.*

EXISTING ASSETS: *The abandoned mall site is cleared and largely unused. ● The Fishkill golf course is directly behind the site, providing open space and entertainment opportunities. ● Not far beyond is considerable green space highlighted by Clove Creek. ● Existing community uses can be expanded, including the market operating in one of the abandoned parking lots, and weekend food trucks.*

INSPIRATION: This idea was inspired by municipalities such as Peekskill that have developed (or are developing) housing for artists. These initiatives infuse a new dynamic into their communities, and are doing so through the adaptive re-use of vacant commercial properties. [Peekskill's 28 units date back to 2002, and Hudson River Housing's Poughkeepsie Underwear Factory project will include 15 such units.] This idea also grew from our group's discussion of what we termed "millennial housing" -- an approach that a new Northeastern University report has actually recommended on a much larger scale for Boston. To explain the concept, a Boston Globe columnist recently wrote (3/24/15), "buildings where younger workers can live in close quarters and share living space and other amenities... [for example an] apartment building where six individual units have their own bathrooms and study areas but use the same living room and kitchen. Space for gyms and arts performances, he hopes, would make the facilities seem less like apartments and more like communities."

The strengthened fiscal position of the Town is a strong selling point. We believe that prudent financial management by the Town can actually serve as an influential marketing tool. Efforts by the current leadership to create a new financial discipline and new priorities for spending -- such as attention to neglected infrastructure -- could be a major selling point for prospective residents who will view the Town's sound economic footing as an indication of long-term stability.

Among the important "soft" assets we believe Fishkill has working in its favor is **a trustworthy and focused leadership**. The number of responses to our survey also suggests that residents will favorably respond to outreach efforts by Town officials. We encourage Fishkill officials to further strengthen their relationship with current residents. We believe that as a result, they will increase the Town's appeal to prospective residents and business owners -- millennials and others -- who would value living and investing in a community led by proactive officials and a consulted and involved population, with a communal interest in paths of future growth. We suggest that Town officials create a new level of local engagement by **launching a discussion campaign** with residents and business owners in neighborhood-by-neighborhood meetings. The process of seeking greater input and new ideas will not only inform more effective municipal decision-making, but also increase citizen buy-in of those decisions.

School re-districting was flagged as a significant area of concern for residents. To the extent possible, the Town leadership should more closely engage the school districts that serve Fishkill's residents and more closely consider the role they play in future growth scenarios. The Town is in a challenging position with resident children attending two separate districts -- Beacon and Wappingers. Our survey found that many current residents are dismayed by recent redistricting decisions that moved children to new schools as well as to schools sometimes much further from home. One resident replied, "We have been mostly happy with the schools, although the recent redistricting combined with the apparent lack of communication between the planning boards and the schools boards is concerning as it pertains to population growth."

"The Board of Ed[ucation] and Town Board need to be connected in some way because the Town cannot accommodate all of the new bedrooms being built in the area."

"...too much building by Toll Brothers and not enough schools to handle the incoming population."

Survey Respondents



The Dutchess Mall site, adjacent to I-84, Route 9, the Fishkill golf course and Clove Creek.

INTERIM CONCLUSIONS

Over the past months, our team has had the opportunity to explore a town about which we knew very little. With the support of Paul Hesse and Jonathan Drapkin at Pattern for Progress, and the immediate welcome and engagement of Town Supervisor Bob LaColla and Town Board Member Ori Bachman, we have had the privilege to engage in quite an unusual project, the results of which we hope will inform the work of others.

Our team has come to the suggestions above understanding that we have limited insight into the politics and daily challenges of running the Town of Fishkill, and without an intimate understanding of what makes the Town tick. We have however, developed a consensus that: were the Town leaders, in consultation with interested residents and business owners, to establish a strategic direction that incorporates existing assets and has a clear target for development, the Town can establish itself as a key regional residential and business destination.

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

A. IDENTIFIED PRIMARY ASSETS

1. **Location:** The Town benefits from its proximity to “roads, river, and rail”: Route 9 and Interstate 84; the Beacon, New Hamburg, and Cold Spring Metro North stations; and the Hudson River. Many residents also choose to live in Fishkill because of its proximity to the Village of Fishkill, the City of Beacon, and other destinations in the Hudson Valley. This location has unique logistical benefits that many nascent companies, or existing large businesses, would find ideal for workforce and distribution.
2. **Opportunity Sites:** Our tour of Fishkill revealed several major sites for potential redevelopment including the former Texaco research site, the Southern Sand and Gravel site, the Beacon Correctional Facility, and Chelsea Industrial Park. Some ideas for redevelopment include an educational facility, commercial/residential mixed-use area, working farm, and multi-family residential area.
3. **Recreation/Entertainment:** Fishkill maintains a Town recreation center and is close to several areas for biking, hiking, fishing, and boating, including the Hudson River, Breakneck Ridge, Sugarloaf Mountain, and Mt. Beacon. Splashdown Beach and the Fishkill Golf Course are popular attractions. Dutchess Stadium is the home of the Hudson Valley Renegades minor league baseball team as well as a venue for major concerts and community events.
4. **Housing Options:** Fishkill contains a range of single-family homes, townhouses, condos, and other housing types for a variety of incomes, as well as several 55+ housing developments and assisted living facilities such as *Wingate at Dutchess*.
5. **City of Beacon/Village of Fishkill:** The City of Beacon and Village of Fishkill provide entertainment and social activities including restaurants, music, arts/culture, theater, and community events such as parades and festivals.

B. CHALLENGES

According to our survey, Fishkill residents would most like to see improvements in the following areas:

1. **Local jobs:** This was the most common response to our survey question “What would you like to see change in the Town?” Demographic research shows that millennials in particular prefer to live close to where they work.
2. **Local shopping/restaurants/entertainment:** Respondents would like to shop at local businesses, not national chains. There is also little nighttime entertainment in the Town.
3. **Public schools:** While many residents cited schools as one of the best things about Fishkill, many others have concerns related to overcrowding and re-districting.
4. **Transportation:** Residents expressed desire for sidewalks, bicycle accommodations, congestion relief, and safety improvements. The County bus system provides limited service to the City of Beacon and Village of Fishkill, primarily along the Route 9 and Route 52 corridors. Dial-A-Ride is only available to residents once a week, and must be reserved 3 days in advance. Most shopping and medical services are located on Route 9, which is often congested. Main Street in the Village of Fishkill is also congested.
5. **Taxes:** Many survey respondents said they moved to Fishkill for lower taxes, particularly compared to New York City and its suburbs. However, when asked whether they would remain, many shared dismay with how high much local taxes have risen.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

a) **Strategic Direction**

The current fiscal recovery, if sustained, puts the Town in a position to consider directions and targets for future growth that will help govern decision-making and planning.

b) **Jobs/Economic Development**

1. **Prepare underutilized sites for businesses:** Fishkill is the only Dutchess County town that contains Interstate 84, Route 9, and a Metro-North station. It has potential as a highly connected site for start-up and relocating businesses.
2. **Attract companies developing emerging technologies, green building and industry.** Update the comprehensive plan to prioritize this type of development, rezone as necessary, and invest in infrastructure (such as development-wide wireless broadband access). Expansive commercial space can be re-purposed into an industrial park for these business types. Seek the assistance of Dutchess County's Economic Development office and the Industrial Development Agency to prepare a plan to market to such companies, especially higher-paying manufacturers.
3. **Partner with local manufacturers to address staffing gaps.** Develop training programs to address the gaps, so students get hands-on training and businesses benefit from lower-cost payroll while the trainee gains experience.

c) **Housing**

1. **Millennial housing.** As new housing is considered or proposed, the amenities, location and cost should be considered within the context of attracting targeted populations within the millennial demographic. This should include consideration of the housing characteristics that appeal to millennials, including: entry-level house prices and rental stock; walkable proximity to retail and entertainment; service clustering; and a sense of neighborhood/community.
2. **Housing mix.** Critical to planning future growth is a survey of existing housing stock, noting type of housing, vacancy rates, and affordability. From this survey, a desired list of new housing types can be developed.

d) **Community Engagement** (See earlier discussions regarding residents, business owners, and school districts.)

e) **Leverage proximity to the City of Beacon and Village of Fishkill**

1. **Improve public transit service.** Work with Dutchess County to develop a bus route that connects the Town to the Village of Fishkill and Beacon, including the Beacon train station. Service could be extended to the business and millennial housing sites described above.
2. **Pursue shared services and other coordination with Beacon and the Village of Fishkill.**
3. **Promote proximity** to local assets, even if not within the Town's borders.

D. SURVEY RESPONSES

The survey was posted on the Town's website, and team members promoted the survey through personal networks and the media. Through May 26 we received 135 responses. The questions we asked and responses we received are summarized below:

- **“How long have you lived in the Town?”** Over half of respondents have lived in the Town for ten or more years. About 29% have lived in the Town for 0-5 years, and 20% have lived in the Town for 5-10 years.
- **“Why did you choose to move to the Town?”** [open-ended] Many residents cited the schools, location, housing prices, quality of life, and proximity to family (see word cloud image below).
- When asked **“Would you move here for the same reasons today?”** about 70% said yes. However, some expressed dissatisfaction with rising taxes and other costs, congestion, over-development, and school re-districting.
- When asked **“Do you plan to stay in the Town?”** 79% said yes. Positive comments mentioned loving their home, the community, and the amenities, and wanting to keep their children in the local schools. Negative comments emphasized the cost of living and taxes, the lack of good jobs, and overcrowding.
- **“What do you like best about living in the Town?”** Most popular response was location, then schools and safety (tied), access to recreation, and access to jobs (see chart below).
- **“What would you like to see change in the Town?”** Most prominent was more local jobs, followed by better services, better schools, more local shopping/restaurants/entertainment, and improved transportation (see chart below and word cloud image for ‘other’ responses).
- **“What age group is the Town most appealing to?”** “Families with children” was indicated by 64% of respondents, followed by “middle-aged people” (15%). Young professionals and retirees/seniors were each selected by only 6% of respondents.
- **Respondent Demographics:**
 - 80% are from zip 12524, with a few from 12533, 12508, and 12590.
 - 62% are aged 35-50, and 20% are aged 50-65. Only 12% are 18-35 and 4% are over 65.
 - Two-thirds are female.
 - 85% own their home.
 - Almost 70% are married with children.
 - 65% are employed full-time.
- **Other comments** noted concerns about taxes, overbuilding, and the school board; requested more recreation options and more good jobs; and suggested how to have smart growth and combine services with neighboring municipalities.

Note: Complete survey data is provided as a separate file.



