

# A Plan for Progress: Developing Community and Improving Health in Port Jervis

## **Pattern for Progress Fellows Program, 2018-2019**

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## Executive Summary

During the fall of 2018, our team was tasked by Pattern for Progress and Westchester Medical Center (WMC) to evaluate WMC's position in Port Jervis at Bon Secours Community Hospital in order to recommend ways in which it could become greater integrated into the community. At first, the team was given a list of vacant parcels in the city which we could in theory utilize for WMC's and the mayor's greater community development goals. Following a day of site visits around the city, the team quickly realized the "vacant" parcels were either presently being used by neighbors, or could not be found. The team became inspired while driving around the City's 4<sup>th</sup> ward and discovered a small park in the heart of the neighborhood which was begging for transformation and activation. Our project developed from this point forward and became what we present in this report. We believe WMC is poised to assume its role as a true anchor institution in Port Jervis and has the power to affect positive change in the greater community through our recommendations.

## I. Community Overview

Port Jervis is situated at the junction of several geographic and political boundaries, including New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, the Delaware and Neversink Rivers, and the Appalachian Plateau and Shawangunk Mountain range. Incorporated as a village in 1853 and as a city in 1907, Port Jervis has long served as an epicenter of transportation in the Northeast. In its early days, the area once known as Mahackmeck was a stop for Native Americans traveling on the Delaware River. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans settled the area due to the fertile farmlands and access to the major waterways.<sup>1</sup> Following the War of 1812, the Delaware & Hudson (D&H) Canal was built to transport domestic coal from Pennsylvania to Kingston, NY.<sup>2</sup> Port Jervis was the first New York stop and a repair station along the D&H Canal, which served as a catalyst for the area's growth in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The area was named Port Jervis in 1827 for the Canal's chief engineer, John B. Jervis. In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Port Jervis became a stop for several major railroads, including the New York & Erie Railroad, and the Port Jervis & Monticello Railroad (later the New York, Ontario, & Western Railroad).<sup>3</sup> Though the canal and O&W railroad are no longer active, Port Jervis is traversed by several major routes, including Interstate 84, Route 97 (the Upper Delaware Scenic Byway), Routes 6 and 209, and is also the final stop on the Port Jervis Line on the Metro-North Railroad.



Figure 1. Roadside historical marker in Port Jervis.

<sup>1</sup> "History," *City of Port Jervis*, <https://www.portjervisny.org/about/history/>.

<sup>2</sup> "History," *The D&H Canal Historical Society*, <http://www.canalmuseum.org/history>.

<sup>3</sup> "History," *City of Port Jervis*.

## II. Definition of Need

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), childhood obesity continues to be a serious problem in the United States putting children and adolescents at risk for poor health. Obesity prevalence among children and adolescents is still too high. As reported in the Prevalence of Obesity Among Adults and Youth: United States, 2015–2016 report, the prevalence of obesity for children and adolescents aged 2-19 years was 18.5% and affected about 13.7 million children and adolescents.

Furthermore, the percentage of children in Port Jervis School District who are overweight or obese is 40.3% compared to 36.2% in all of Orange County (Student Weight Category Status 2016-2018). Obesity prevalence was 13.9% among 2- to 5-year-olds, 18.4% among 6- to 11-year-olds, and 20.6% among 12- to 19-year-olds.<sup>4</sup>

Many studies show that children who are physically active every day are less likely to develop chronic diseases as adults, including obesity. Physical activity helps improve overall health and fitness. Amongst youth, the CDC recommends children under the age of 18 be involved in one or more hours of physical activity per day, including aerobic, muscle strengthening, and bone strengthening. In a study conducted by the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz in Orange County in 2016, it was reported that only 56% of youth in Orange County reported daily engagement of at least one hour of physical activity.

Stakeholders, community partners and leaders need to start addressing the obesity epidemic. Experts suggest that efforts should focus on supporting healthy eating and active living in multiple settings, including schools, hospitals and within the community (CDC, 2017). There are many different types of strategies to increase physical activity in the community. They may also include efforts to increase the places where people can be active, such as opening school facilities to public use and creating walking trails. Some strategies may involve community design changes.

When the team visited the 4th Ward, the need for the improvement of the existing park in this underserved community could not have been more apparent. As local community members reported, there currently isn't an adequate safe space for children who visit and reside in Ward 4 to utilize for recreation and exercise. For children to access the one and only playground in their community, they must safely (and illegally) cross the railroad track to get to the nearest park on the other side of town. In this report, we are strongly recommending investing in the building and remodeling of the available space in Ward 4, and in return revitalizing the neighborhood, by creating a safe accessible space for everyone, especially young people to use.

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<sup>4</sup> Obesity is defined as a body mass index (BMI) at or above the 95th percentile of the CDC sex-specific BMI-for-age growth charts.

### III. Research Methodology

This section describes the method that this study will adopt for the project.

#### A. Describing the Problem

Childhood obesity rates in Orange County compared to other counties in New York State was reported. According to Orange County Department of Health, there is an increase in the childhood obesity rate in Port Jervis.

#### B. Data Sources

As part of the process of gathering data for the project, members of the group visited Port Jervis on several occasions. The first visit was to meet with City officials, the Mayor, and those who could provide information needed for the project. The second visit was to the site of the project. The site visit was to provide the team with some visuals of the site and how the proposed project will help in combating childhood obesity in Port Jervis by putting structures in place to enhance and encourage community members to participate in outdoor events.

On a different level, some group members visited Orange County Department of Health regarding data for obesity rate in the county. Hence the data for this study comes from Orange County Department of Health. With assistance from the Department of Health for information on County-wide data on childhood obesity rates reported was obtained.

Orange County Department of Health obesity rates among communities in the county are compared to that of Port Jervis and subsequently with data from the state and possibly in the nation.

## **IV. Research Findings**

### **Asset Building as a Catalyst for Revitalization**

Transforming our neighborhoods into healthy and vibrant places to live and work with “Placemaking” initiatives, to provide the necessary investments to support a vibrant local economy. Placemaking is defined as a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces which capitalizes on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, with the intention of creating public spaces that promote people's health, happiness, and well-being.<sup>5</sup>

### **Port Jervis in an Era of Unprecedented Investment**

Current investments include: \$40 million WMC Health/Bon Secours Charity Health System Medical Village campus transformative project at Bon Secours Community Hospital, \$19.7 million Neversink Bridge replacement and “Gateway” initiative , \$1 million Pike Plaza Project which added a supermarket and retail Stores, \$1.9 million Watershed Protection Initiative along with the Municipal Solar Panel and Forestry Management Project, the opening of the SUNY Orange Sarfatti Education Center, the completion of the Port Jervis Downtown Promenade and Pedestrian Mall projects, the completed Point Peter Hiking and Biking Trail project, and initiatives on the horizon such as: the Port Jervis Whitewater park, the recent sale of key downtown property for hotel development and annexation of adjacent land from the Town of Deerpark for additional development.

The City of Port Jervis features a recently transformed, vibrant and walkable downtown business district with many new businesses such as: retail, art and exhibition spaces, a craft brewery, yoga and fitness studios, several additional restaurants including a vegetarian café and bakery. Strategically situated between the revitalized downtown business district and Bon Secours Community Hospital, the City's Fourth Ward neighborhood features a housing stock including many well-built, single-family homes which have been converted into multiple housing units with few community assets and other related concerns.

### **Hospitals as Anchor Institutions: Reinvesting in the Communities They Serve**

In order to fully capitalize on the recent investment and growth opportunities in Port Jervis, WMC Health and Bon Secours Charity Health System has a unique interest in addressing health and housing disparities as they continue to grow to meet changing healthcare needs. Many Fourth Ward properties are currently owned by absentee landlords, with additional properties acquired by the city for code and tax-related deficiencies. Addressing an undeveloped park may

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<sup>5</sup> “Placemaking,” *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Placemaking>.

seem to be a small scale investment; however it is a jumping off point toward a broader, more comprehensive neighborhood revitalization project. This effort will immediately help to improve the negatively trending obesity rates of city of Port Jervis school children, and serve as a catalyst for a long-term strategy of creating partnerships which provide a path to home ownership in a revitalized Fourth Ward.

*“A shadow of that Port Jervis lingers, but 2019 should whisk away remnants of a sad yesteryear.” –Kelly Decker, Mayor of Port Jervis*

## V. Description of Pilot Program

Developing the existing park at the corner of Hammond and Church Streets will have several phases. These steps can then be replicated at additional parks in the city or in other cities to improve various outdoor community resources.

**Phase 1 - Structural Improvements:** Structural improvements to the area needed to make it more inviting and interesting to the residents. Firstly, there will be “hardware” improvements. The park is fairly small so finding equipment that attracts older, school-aged children while still offering safe options for small toddlers and pre-school children may be difficult. The US Consumer Products Safety Commission Publication #325-10 “Public Playground Safety Handbook” provides suggestions for age groups as well as a wide variety of other tips for playground planning and development.

An additional “hardware” improvement, although not necessary may be significant to the final aesthetics to the park would be 6” fencing around the 2 sides of the park that are abutting houses. The fencing does not have to be opaque/solid but it will provide a barrier to prevent inadvertent trespassing or damage in the case of a stray ball etc.

The second structural improvement would be in the area of “software”. A Small perennial garden located on an edge or corner of the garden that is planted with items that provide brightness through the seasons. Testing of soil types and evaluation of sun hours should be completed to pick the right collection of species for a successful planting. There are several trees that provide necessary shade for visitors but, in turn, limit planting potential. The garden and current trees could be well labeled with plant types and provide a small horticulture educational opportunity for visitors. Plantings should ebb the last of the structural changes to occur so that equipment moving and heightened activity over the installation of “hardware” does not damage the new planting.

*Funding for Structural Improvements:*

Cost - \$50,000 for play equipment, horticultural improvements and fencing.

Sources of funding: We recommend a community outreach from such service organizations and Kiwanis, Lions, Rotary, Tri-State Chamber etc. be encouraged to sponsor the improvements. Additionally, grants from DOH under Healthy Orange and The Community Foundation of Orange & Sullivan are both very viable sources of funding for this project.

**Phase 2 - Marketing the Park Improvements:** Of course, the closest of residents will be well aware of the changes. However, spreading the word of the improvements can come in a variety of ways from standard advertising on the City website to printed publications to fliers sent home with school children. Information should be made available to the agencies that

work with the low-income population such as DOH/WIC office to improve the targets for the Healthy Children, Healthy Communities Grant which will be coming to a close soon.

**Phase 3** - Function in/near the Park: The Park's 2-block distance from Front St. makes it a great location to help move visitors and vendors on a scheduled or occasional basis. Using the park as a back-drop for a function such as a featured location during the Fall Foliage Festival or any extension, a hot truck location, a vendor-of-the-week program or other retail opportunity will draw attention to the park and make it a hub for a variety of community members.

## VI. Anticipated Program Outcomes

If you build it, they will come. Giving children in the community a place to run around and play will help make the children healthy again in the Port Jervis community. Having a beautiful and safe place that is welcoming to all will help get the kids out of the streets and increase their overall health.

### Outcome #1- Community Health

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that renovated parks are used 61% more than the parks that were not renovated. Youth who participate more in daily activity are less likely to develop chronic diseases as adults. Children in the park interact more with the other kids which in turn helps their social and mental skills. In today's society children are on computers more and tend to be sedentary. More reasons why we need to provide the community children with a place to be more active and social.

### Outcome #2- Benefit to the Hospital

Youth who participate more in daily activity are less likely to develop chronic diseases as adults. Adults that have less diseases visit the hospital less frequently. If they have less patients they can provide better care and services. They can be more active in the community and provide services that will help to improve the overall health.

### Outcome #3- Community Beautification

Having a park that has nice benches, flowers and play equipment in the fourth ward will give the community a better atmosphere instead of an empty lot with mismatched benches. The renovated park will make the community want to get out and get fresh air and be more involved. Beautification projects show community pride. ... Beautification is a key aspect of community development, and it can be an easy way to bring people together.

### Outcome #4- Child Safety

Having a small park in the fourth ward will help prevent some of the children from crossing the railroad tracks to get to the bigger park. Crossing railroad tracks is very dangerous to our youth and can cause injury.