

The Walkway Over the Hudson's Impact on Quality of Life



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Introduction

The Walkway Over the Hudson State Historic Park (WOTH) is a visual icon of the region. It is the world's longest elevated pedestrian bridge, spanning 1.28 miles over and 212 feet above the Hudson River. With around half a million visitors per year, the Walkway has attracted over 4 million visitors since its opening in October 2009. The Walkway attracts locals and visitors from all 50 states and at least 42 countries.

The focus of this report is to analyze how the Walkway Over the Hudson has impacted the quality of life of the surrounding communities and businesses. Several prior studies focused on the Walkway's ability to attract visitors to the area, while this study draws more on the impact and meaning the Walkway has in its local environment.

The approach to the analysis was to define the local geographic area that was the focus of the analysis, followed by defining quality of life for individuals and businesses and consider which components to examine and which could be feasibly measured. The Project Team combined both statistical data analysis, secondary research, and primary research through surveys of both individual residents and businesses within the geographic area on both sides of the Walkway.

The questions the Project Team looked to address were important both for the current state and future of the WOTH. Did the WOTH become a destination, a community hub and a sense of pride for area residents and businesses? Has the WOTH become woven into the fabric of the community-a place to gather, host events, bring visitors, a way to maintain health, and an accessible activity for the whole family over the nearly decade of its existence?

History of the Walkway

In 1889 the bridge now known as the Walkway Over the Hudson opened as the Poughkeepsie-Highland Railroad Bridge which spanned the Hudson River between Poughkeepsie, New York, on the east bank and Highland, New York, on the west bank. It took three years to build for an estimated \$3.6 million and at the time, was the longest bridge in the world, and the first bridge to span the Hudson River between Albany and New York City. This steel cantilever double track railroad bridge was used to transport both raw materials in freight trains and accommodated passenger trains connecting Boston, New York, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington. Nearly 3,500 rail cars utilized the bridge daily at its peak.

The bridge was in operation for 85 years until a fire destroyed its tracks in 1974. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. Thereafter the bridge generally fell into disrepair. In 1992, the Poughkeepsie-Highland Railroad Bridge Co organization (now known as Walkway Over the Hudson) was formed. In 1998, the bridge was deeded to Walkway Over the Hudson nonprofit organization. The construction of the present-day pedestrian bridge was completed in 17 months through a private public partnership. In October 2009 it re-opened as the Walkway Over the Hudson State Historic Park.

Walkway in Present Day

Today, the Walkway is operated and owned by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and the New York State Bridge Authority. It is open year-round, sunrise to sunset, and offers visitors the chance to walk, run or bike with the whole family; including family members of the four-legged variety.

In summer 2014, an elevator connecting Upper Landing Park in Poughkeepsie to the Walkway was opened which allowed easier access to the Poughkeepsie waterfront area, the Mid-Hudson Children's Museum and the Metro North train station not to mention making it more accessible to people of all abilities.

The walkway continues to maintain its reputation as a connector. The Walkway is part of the Hudson Valley Rail Trail Network and was inducted into the Rail-Trail Hall of Fame in 2016. It connects Ulster County's Hudson Valley Rail Trail to the William R. Steinhaus Dutchess Rail Trail. It will be a gateway entrance and important hub on Governor Cuomo's Empire State Trail. The Walkway hosts hundreds of formal and informal events throughout the year including hosting the first certified green marathon in New York State. These events attract both residents and visitors alike from all over.

Methodology

The project methodology takes into account the findings of prior Walkway-related studies and extends the scope to assessing the quality of life impact of the Walkway on local communities and businesses. Key takeaways from prior studies that informed the analysis were:

- Walkway Brand and Perception Drivers (Vox Inc, 2012):
 - The Walkway is the primary reason people will come to the area
 - The Walkway is a physical connector of the area
 - It is the experience of being on the Walkway that defines the brand
 - The Walkway is inclusive, it offers different kinds of people more options of things to do.

- Walkway Economic Impact (Camoin, 2007 and 2011):
 - The Walkway draws 500,000 annual visitors
 - 48% of visitors are non-Dutchess and Ulster county residents
 - Estimated spending per visitor is \$64.36, resulting in \$23.9 million in sales, 383 jobs, and \$9.4 million in wages

The project team decided that prior analysis was predominantly outward focused, i.e., on visitors and tourists from outside the local area. The current study instead focuses on the local community, i.e., the people in the surrounding communities and the business located in the area which represents the majority of Walkway users (52%).

The Walkway Corridor's businesses are predominantly in the Health Care and Social Assistance sector which employ 41,257 workers. The next-largest sectors in the region are Retail Trade (30,431 workers) and Educational Services (28,248). Similarly, the largest major occupation group in the Walkway Corridor is Office and Administrative Support occupations, Sales and Related occupations, and Food Preparation and Serving Related occupations. The business analysis focused on Retail, Food Services, and related businesses that fall within the 30-min drivetime radius and would be open and accessible to local and out-of town visitors during Walkway operating hours.

For the purposes of this analysis, "local" is defined as the geographic area within a 30 minute drivetime radius from the Walkway. As outlined in the table below, this 30 minute drivetime radius encompasses more than 625,000 residents of which the majority lives and works locally.

Summary of 30-min Drivetime Area (Source JobsEQ):

	ACS 2016	Study Relevance
Population (ACS)	625,561	Large catchment area
Median Household Income	\$68,788	Limited spending power of local population given also NYS 1.5x higher cost of living than the US average
Per Capita Income	\$33,494	
Poverty Level	11%	
Mean Commute Time	31min	High commuting times
<u>Commute via Public Transport</u>	4.5%	Public transport need
<u>With Disability, Age 18-64</u>	10.7%	Need for ADA accessible facilities

The project team combined the analysis focus under the common term “Quality of Life”:

- The project hypothesis is that the long-term success of a regional project depends and is driven by the local acceptance and support of a project.
- The further hypothesis is that the impact on the quality of life is an indicator for a projects long-term support and success.
- Ultimately, the future success of the Walkway depends on the alignment of the vision and expectation for quality of life for the surrounding communities with the Walkway.

To assess the quality of life, the project team designed surveys for each stakeholder group and conducted a random survey of residents (Appendix C) and business owners or representatives (Appendix A) in the communities adjacent to the Walkway - Highland, NY and

Poughkeepsie, NY on April 20, 2018. the results of these surveys are outlined on the following pages.

Quality of life for the purposes of this report is defined as follows for each of these stakeholder groups:

Quality of Life Domains	Applicability to Members of the Local Community	Applicability to Local Businesses
Material Well-Being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Income/Pay · Standard of living · Housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Revenue · Customer Mix (Type) · Commercial viability
Productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Employment · Activities available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Customer volume (traffic) · Spend per Customer
Sense of Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Identification with the area one lives in · Leisure/recreation activities · Services and facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Identification with the area one does business in · Business-friendly environment · Access to employees
Health & Emotional Well-Being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Personal health · Physical fitness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Business opportunities · Well-being of employees
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Privacy · Control over life · Secure from crime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Security of business · Control over business · Secure from crime

Table: Adapted from Source: Cummins (1996:309)

Measuring Impact - Business Sector

Sixteen businesses were randomly surveyed (Appendix B) surrounding the Walkway in both Highland (Ulster County) and Poughkeepsie (Dutchess County). The team spoke with the owner or manager, or long-term employee if management was unavailable. Of the businesses

interviewed, eight were open prior to the Walkway (four in Poughkeepsie and four in Highland), five were opened post 2009 (two in Poughkeepsie and three in Highland) and one in Poughkeepsie was open around the same time as the Walkway. Some overall findings from the surveys are as follows:

- Overall impact the Walkway has had on businesses:
 - The number of visitors has increased including bikers, foot traffic and the number of tourists from NYC.
 - An increase in foot traffic is directly correlated with good weather and events taking place on the Walkway. One survey found that Walkway customers make up approximately 1/8-1/16 of their business, on nice weather days.
- For businesses the most important characteristics of the WOTH in order of importance is:
 - 1. No Cost
 - 2. Variety of Events
 - 3. Promotion of Businesses and Towns
- Of all businesses surveyed, all but one responded that there has been a positive impact on the quality of life for local residents. The positive impacts include exercise, convenience, sense of connection for the community, more knowledge of the area, traffic from tourists, makes the area livelier and adds to the neighborhood, different scenery than walking in the neighborhood or going to the gym, and it helps the local businesses. One owner has seen many artists moving in and credits the rise in popularity of the city with the Walkway and train station.

The team received a comparison of sales tax and occupancy tax revenue from the Ulster County Commissioner of Finance from 2009 through 2017. Based on this analysis, actual sales

tax revenue has increased from \$90,966,778 to \$115,339,913. Occupancy tax revenue has increased as well, from \$961,509 in 2009 to \$1,530,160 in 2017. Although we cannot directly correlate the increase in sales and occupancy tax revenues to the Walkway itself, based on the interviews that we conducted with different local business owners in Ulster County, we can infer that a portion of this revenue is due to the Walkway Over the Hudson and the number of additional visitors to the county each year.

In reviewing the CHAR 500 and Financial Reports on the NYS Attorney General's Charities Bureau website, from inception through 2016 (2017 is not final yet), in comparing the Net Special Events Revenue, Merchandise Sales and Net Marathon Revenue, the revenue has increased by over \$200,000 from 2010. This is just Walkway Revenue and tells us that there were likely more events held and more visitors at the Walkway through the years. This confirms our assumption that the Walkway has increased revenue in at least Ulster County, which is the only county from which a response was received.

Measuring Impact on Residents

Twenty-one individuals were randomly surveyed. The vast majority were local residents of either Dutchess or Ulster counties. A majority of respondents were interviewed on the Walkway. Most either drove, walked or rode a bicycle to the Walkway. It was an even split of how often they visited the Walkway - for a few it was the first time, a few come monthly, a few three-four times per week.

Summary of key findings from the majority of respondents:

- People feel safe on the WOTH

- People come for recreational, social, and wellness activities as well as for special occasions like birthdays, including milestones such as a sweet sixteen party, engagements, and other celebratory life events
- People love bringing visitors there
- People are comfortable going alone or in a group
- It is a great place for families to gather and is pet-friendly

Direct feedback about the WOTH:

- Attracts local residents as well as people from out of town
- Enhances local businesses by bringing in patrons
- Available to all seeking it
- Free, and accessible to people of many abilities
- Utilized for public events and awareness raising events with such subjects as: Mental Health, Domestic Violence, Suicide Awareness, etc.
- Allows access to/from two counties without having to drive a vehicle to both. This further enhances accessibility to those who do not own vehicles.

Interviews/Testimonials

Throughout the teams' visit to the Walkway and surrounding businesses, a number of great personal stories about the Walkway were revealed. Its impact on the lives of local residents and the successes felt by businesses were discussed. The team found that most people were outwardly passionate about the community they live and work in and they were often eager to provide suggestions for possible improvements that can be made. These improvements were often small, yet would yield a great impact.

Many individuals interviewed spoke of considering the Walkway for special events or to celebrate special occasions; such as a wedding proposal, a birthday, or a graduation. Celebrating these events by spending time on the Walkway with friends and family made the event even more special. One particular comment was "Such a beautiful attraction only enhances anyone's visit to Highland. It put Highland on the map. Before the Walkway, Highland was just a sleepy town that no one visited."

A particular theme that stood out was the need to provide direction to/from the walkway and the surrounding attractions. One team member was approached by four individuals that overheard an interview with a business located at the train station. These four arrived from NYC with the intent to go to the Walkway. Each of them originated from different parts of the country and found themselves connected socially within the past year after each moving to NYC. Their ages ranged from 24 to 38. They had long spoken of visiting the Walkway, and they made the spur of the moment decision to visit due to the break in the cold weather that day. Upon arrival to Poughkeepsie, they discovered they had no real idea how to get to the Walkway and needed to ask questions. After wandering aimlessly for several minutes to try to find signage, they were happy to overhear a team member discussing the impact of the Walkway and found a source of information.

Many of the businesses that were visited were either active for more than a decade or owned and operated by lifelong residents of Dutchess and/or Ulster county. One such business owner shared a meaningful story of how the WOTH has always been a part of her life. She described being in grade school and watching the trains go by through the window. Later, her fire fighter husband experienced his first emergency as one of the first responders to the fire that ultimately took the railroad bridge out of service in 1974.

One particular story from Hello Dolly Realty in Highland resonated with the team. “There was a man in NYC who was looking for a kilt maker to make him a kilt for his wedding. He did not know how to get to the Kilt Makers Apprentice which is in Highland center. So he took the subway to Grand Central Station and then a train to Poughkeepsie, and finally walked across the Walkway Over the Hudson and made his way to the Kilt Makers Apprentice. The kilt maker created him a special kilt for his wedding.” This story illustrates how the Walkway brings people together for both personal and business reasons. This story, as well as the interview as a whole, truly inspired the team and fostered a true feeling of community and connectedness.

Conclusion

The beauty and availability of the WOTH has had widespread positive impacts on the quality of life of residents and tourists, as well as beneficial impacts to local businesses and other tourist attractions. These impacts range from restoring a sense of pride in the community, health and fitness benefits, a place to go to celebrate a milestone or show solidarity for a cause, and having an accessible place to enjoy the beauty and tranquility of the region. Residents and businesses alike enjoy the many events that are organized and held on the WOTH, and the efforts of the Friends of the Walkway group are far reaching.

Opportunities exist that can further strengthen the impacts that the WOTH has on surrounding communities. The team overwhelmingly heard feedback of the need for more direct advertising opportunities for local businesses and more opportunities to foster a greater sense of connection between the Walkway, its visitors, and the local businesses on both sides of the Hudson River. Ideas offered by local businesses specifically include additional signage and advertising/brochures to be available inside each business, at the Walkway itself, and at the

Poughkeepsie train station for visitor use that include maps of the surrounding areas which direct you to specific businesses. Other strong desires among business owners and residents include:

- Shuttle services in both Highland and Poughkeepsie
- Increased elevator availability
- Testimonials of local businesses and residents within advertising materials to create a greater sense of community and connection
- Additional and ongoing ways for the Walkway to promote health
- Stronger connections between local schools and the Walkway which include more ongoing opportunities to engage with the WOTH
- More publicly available statistics

While the WOTH has had far-reaching positive impacts on the Hudson Valley over the past decade, it has much more potential to be used as a catalyst for creating a greater sense of community within the region. The efforts of the community, and the stakeholders involved in the operation and maintenance of the Walkway have an opportunity to target the community in a way that brings both sides of the Hudson together, building up ease of transportation and connection to/from surrounding businesses, and increasing media attention to further celebrate the Hudson Valley community as a whole.

Appendix A: Business Survey

Business name:

Business location:

1. Were you in business prior to the Walkway opening in 2009?

Yes / No

2. If Yes, what impact has the Walkway had on your business (over the past ten years)? Please share more details for your answer.

Increase revenue (revenue)

Increased customers volume (traffic)

Change in type of customer

Higher spend per customer

No impact

Negative impact

3. If No, what attracted you to open your business in this area? Did the Walkway's existence play any role in your decision making?

4. Can you share a story of how the Walkway impacted your business?

5. How could the Walkway benefit your business more?

6. Rank the following Characteristics of the Walkway in order of importance to you and your business:

No cost to business

Promotion of businesses and towns

Facilities and Amenities

Park proximity to business/town

Park proximity to public transport

Availability and Parking Access

Variety of Park Visitors

Variety of Events

Park condition and quality

Crime and safety

6. Do you believe that the Walkway has improved the quality of life for local residents? Explain.

Appendix B: Business Survey Respondents

Highland Businesses

- Hello Dolly
- El Paso Mexican Restaurant
- Brennies Pizza
- The Vintage Shop
- Hudson Ale Works
- Underground Coffee and Ale
- Elia's Meat Market
- Bike shop/Squidwrench

Poughkeepsie Businesses

- Nic L Inn
- Poughkeepsie Train Station Convenience Store
- The Coffee Bean Café
- Amici's
- Mahoney's Irish Pub
- La Deliciosa
- Palace Diner
- Caffè Aurora

Appendix C: Resident Survey

1. How do you get to the walkway?

Walk Bike Car Bus Taxi/Uber/Lyft

2. How often do you come to the walkway?

Never, 1-2 per year, 1-2 per month, 1-2 times per week, more than 3x per week, Daily

3. What are the reasons you go to the walkway? (select all that apply)

Recreation/Leisure Activity

Health & Wellness Group Activity

Family Activity

Social Activity

Bringing Visitors

Attend Event

Attend Other Community Activity

4. Rank the following characteristics of the Walkway in order of importance to you:

No Cost

ADA Accessibility

Family friendly

Personal safety

Facilities and Amenities

Park proximity to home/town

Park proximity to restaurants/shops

Park proximity to public transport

Availability and Parking Access

Variety of outdoor physical activities

Variety of Events

Park condition and quality

5. Can you share a story of how the Walkway personally impacted you in any way?

6. What, if anything, would make you want to use the Walkway more?

7. When you don't go to the Walkway, where do you go?

Parks Restaurant/Cafe Gym Retail Store

Historic Landmark

Tourist Destination Stay in my neighborhood

Demographics:

1. Where do you live (town, zipcode?) How long have you lived there?
2. How many people live in your household? How many of those people are 18 or under?
3. Gender?
4. What age group do you fall into?
0-18 19-30 31-50 51-64 65+
5. Location of interview?