

Introduction

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Jesse Feiler, Chair
Nancy Brousseau, Vice-Chair
Robin Andrews
Carol Friedman
Tom Hotalen
Hattie Johnson

Village Board Liaison:
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Consultant:
F. Steven Kirk, DBS Planning

Secretary:
Peggy Alt



In July 2000, the Philmont Village Board launched the process of preparing a comprehensive plan. This document summarizes that process.

Initially, a committee was established to oversee the process. Late in 2000, the Village Board reconstituted that committee as a special board under New York State law.

With grants from the Governor's Office for Small Cities and the Hudson River Valley Greenway, the Comprehensive Plan Board hired F. Steven Kirk of DBS Planning as a consultant to assist in the process. Those grants also provided funding for a series of public meetings, newsletters sent to all Philmont residents, and the preparation of this document.

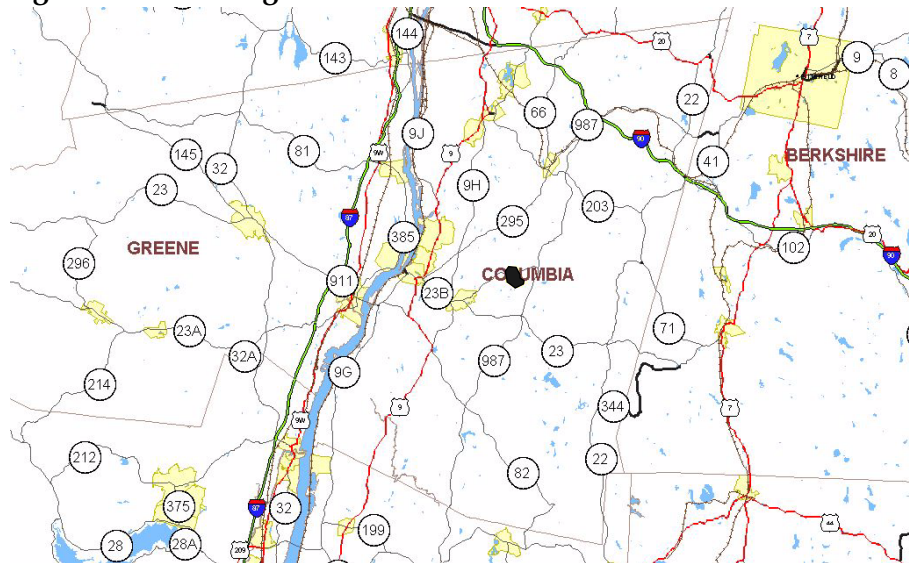
Introduction to Philmont

This document provides a detailed look at the Village of Philmont as it is today, as it was in the past, and as it could be in the future. Here is a very brief overview: it will be elaborated on throughout this document.

Location

Philmont is located in the center of Columbia County; it is an incorporated village in the Town of Claverack. Its Main Street is State Highway 217; other major streets lead out in the direction of Martindale and Hillsdale (Summit Street) and towards Chatham and Ghent (Maple Avenue).

Figure 1: The Village of Philmont



History

Philmont was first settled in the early 19th century. Known then as Factory Hill, the falls of the Ockawamick Creek powered many mills. Early on, the Village attracted attention—not all of it positive.

Mid-Nineteenth Century In 1842, Charles Dickens passed through and wrote in his *American Notes*¹:

The country through which the road meandered, was rich and beautiful; the weather very fine; and for many miles the Katskill mountains, where Rip Van Winkle and the ghastly Dutchmen played at ninepins one memorable gusty afternoon, towered in the blue distance, like stately clouds. At one point, as we ascended a steep hill, athwart whose base a railroad, yet constructing, took its course, we came upon an Irish colony. With means at hand of building decent cabins, it was wonderful to see how clumsy, rough, and wretched, its hovels were. The best were poor protection from the weather; the worst let in the wind and rain through wide breaches in the roofs of sodden grass, and in the walls of mud; some had neither door nor window; some had nearly fallen down, and were imperfectly propped up by stakes and poles; all were ruinous and filthy. Hideously ugly old women and very buxom young ones, pigs, dogs, men, children, babies, pots, kettles, dunghills, vile refuse, rank straw, and standing water, all wallowing together in an inseparable heap, composed the furniture of every dark and dirty hut.

The railroad that Dickens described was the Harlem Railroad which, in 1852, linked Philmont and its mills to markets throughout the country (and later abroad). Philmont prospered, and its mills hummed day and night.

Early Twentieth Century Philmont was similar to many small northeastern manufacturing centers: its mills were originally powered by waterfalls, and they attracted immigrants and rural residents to work in them. Railroads linked the mills to commercial centers. Unfinished goods came in, and finished goods went out. Salesmen travelled back and forth. Among Philmont's amenities were no fewer than three hotels; centrally located, Richardson's Hotel on Main Street was one of these. Figure 2 shows Richardson's Hotel in the 1930s.

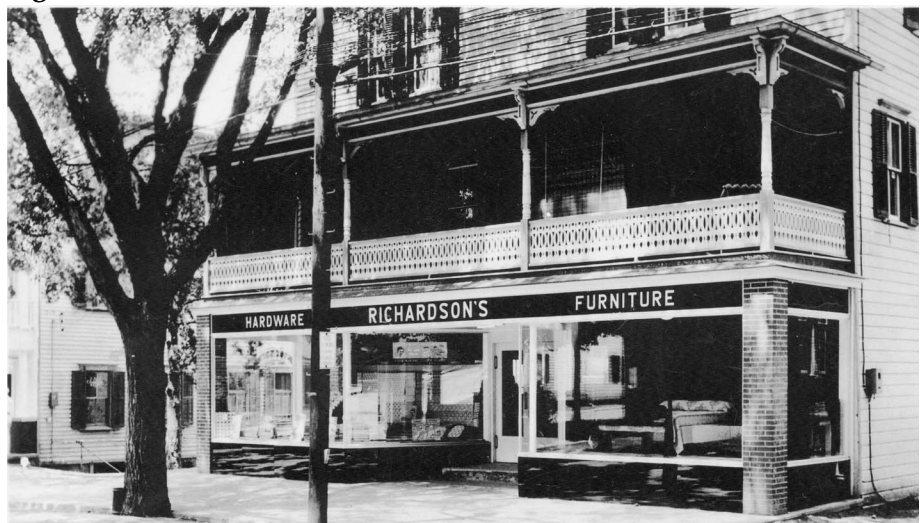
1. *American Notes for General Circulation*, Charles Dickens. Penguin Books, 1972, page 256. Although not identified by name in the book (Philmont as yet had no formal name), the description of the location matches that of Philmont and no other community in the area between Hudson and New Lebanon (between which Dickens was traveling).

Figure 2: Richardson's Hotel in the 1930s



Next door, a hardware and furniture store was also owned by Richardson. It is shown in Figure 3, also in a photo from the 1930s.

Figure 3: Richardson's Store in the 1930s



This prosperity continued well into the 20th century. However, as with many other communities, some ominous clouds were on the horizon. The conversion of manufacturing from water power to electricity decreased the value of a location near a waterfall; that, in turn, allowed mills to be built near sources of cheaper labor. And, the railroads that were so essential for commerce also allowed outward mobility.

Late Twentieth Century In a relatively brief period of time after World War II, the mills in Philmont (and many other northeastern communities) closed. Richardson's Hotel closed, as did the store. Many people

left the Village for other opportunities. Dickens’s words seemed once again to describe the Village.

Whether or not Philmont had deteriorated too far to recover was an open question. Figure 4 shows Richardson’s Hotel in 1997.

Figure 4: Richardson’s Hotel in 1997



Next door, the store had closed. Figure 5 shows the building in 1997.

Figure 5: Richardson’s Store in 1997



Nevertheless, Philmont’s central location in the county, its proximity to the Taconic State Parkway and to Amtrak in Hudson, its infrastructure (water, sewer, street lights, library, garbage collection, and so forth), its small town atmosphere, and its buildings that were ripe for repair and renovation kept many residents in the Village and attracted newcomers.

A variety of people bought and fixed up fine Victorian homes. Housing Resources of Columbia County sponsored the conversion of an old mill on Rock Street into apartments and a Head Start center, and by the renovation of the Richardson properties into Richardson Hall—24 units of subsidized senior citizen housing. Richardson Hall is shown in Figures 6 and 7 as it was in 2001.

Figure 6: Richardson Hall in 2001/Former Hotel



Figure 7: Richardson Hall in 2001/Former Store



Twenty-First Century The changes in the Village are noticeable to even the most casual observer. At such a time in its history, the development of a comprehensive plan for future growth is more essential than ever.

What Is a Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan is developed by a local government to set guidelines for the growth and development of the community. Its components are suggested by New York State law. These components include

general guidelines and objectives for growth and development as well as specific steps that can be taken to implement the plan. Zoning laws and other municipal ordinances must conform to the comprehensive plan.

A comprehensive plan is designed to be updated on a periodic basis as circumstances change. Once adopted, however, its guidelines and recommendations remain in force until such a change occurs.

Members of the Comprehensive Plan Board

Jesse Feiler, Chair

Jesse Feiler moved to the Village in 1989. He is a software developer and author of a number of books on technology. His clients have included New York State Department of Health, Apple Computer, Prodigy, and the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. In the Village, he is founder of the Main Street Committee, and he has been a member of the Library Board and is a member of the Zoning Board of Appeals.

Nancy Brousseau, Vice-Chair

Nancy Brousseau moved to the Village from New Hampshire in the mid 1960s. A distinguished teacher, she also has been involved in many Village activities. Her husband, Al, and their now-grown children continue to participate in local civic, church, and school activities. The family tradition of raising sheep is still being carried on by some of their grandchildren. Nancy is a member of the Philmont Fire Company Auxiliary and is currently chair of the Zoning Board of Appeals.

Robin Andrews

Robin Andrews works out of her Philmont home as a consultant helping individuals and organizations meet their business and financial objectives. She moved to Philmont in 1999. She is Chair of the Philmont Main Street Committee, on the board of the Lively Arts at Christ Church as Treasurer, a Philmont library volunteer and a member of the choir at Christ Church Episcopal in Hudson.

Carol Friedman

I have considered Philmont my home since 1992. I have served on the Philmont Planning Board for 8 years. I work for the State of New York

licensing homes for mentally disabled people. I live with my husband, William Mazzali. Since I grew up around New York City, I didn't really understand how great living in a small village could be.

Tom Hotalen

Born Wellsboro, PA. Graduate of Mansfield University of PA (then Mansfield State College) with a B.S. in Secondary Education in Mathematics. Graduate of Bucknell University with an M.S. in theoretical mathematics. Additional graduate study at SUNY Plattsburgh, Colgate University, University of Hartford, and Manhattan College. Taught high school mathematics for 32 years in the Taconic Hills Central School District, retiring after 32 years of instruction.

Past associations: Taconic Hills PTA (treasurer, 2 years), Philmont Public Library (trustee and treasurer, 11 years), Hudson Valley Choral Society (treasurer, 6 years, grants writer and executor, 2 years). Present associations: Reformed Dutch Church of Claverack (20 years, sing baritone with the church choir), Association of Mathematics Teachers of New York State, Philmont Comprehensive Board member. Resident of Philmont since 1973. Married 33 years, one son.

Hattie Johnson

I was born in Copake, NY and moved to Philmont when I was 2 years old. I have been a resident of Philmont and Mellenville for 83 years where I raised three sons: Ronald, who is deceased, and Ralph and John. I have been a member of the Methodist Church for 76 years, and a member of the Philmont Fire Auxiliary for 46 years, more than 25 years as president.

Other memberships include Community Day for 3 years, Republican Club for over 10 years, the Town of Claverack Senior Citizens since 1972 (as group leader for trips for 20 years+), Chairperson for the United Methodist Church Fair and Auction for at least 10 years, Co-chairperson for the 100 Years of the Village Store for the Centennial, President of the United Methodist Women for over 20 years, and currently on the Philmont Comprehensive Planning Board. I also attended Philmont Union School and obtained my GED diploma when I was 65 years of age.

Other Comprehensive Plan Board Participants

Brian T. Johnson

A life-long resident of Columbia Avenue, Philmont. A member of the Philmont Village Board. A former member of the Philmont Planning Board. Liaison between Comprehensive Plan Board and the Village Board. A 19 year member of the Philmont Rod and Gun Club. I am a proud resident of Philmont and plan to raise my family in the Village. I am looking forward to contributing to the future growth of the Village.

F. Steven Kirk

F. Steven Kirk was born and raised in Plattsburgh, New York. After graduation from Plattsburgh High School, Mr. Kirk attended the University of Buffalo, graduating with a bachelors degree in Environmental Design and Planning in 1981. Mr. Kirk began his planning career as a City Planner for the City of Utica. In 1994, Mr. Kirk moved to the private sector, taking a position with Kestner Engineers of Troy, New York as the Director of the Division of Planning Community Development.

In 1987, Mr. Kirk incorporated DBS Planning Consultants, Inc., a community development consulting firm. Mr. Kirk still serves as president of the corporation. Mr. Kirk currently resides in Valley Falls, New York with his wife Mavis and two children, Bryce and Mackenzie.

Peggy Alt

I was born and raised in Brooklyn, lived in Philmont since 1984. I have worked in the family planning field on and off for 20 years, and am now Director of the Philmont Public Library. My family consists of two teenagers, Zac and Jess Cropper-Alt; spouse Doug Cropper, a high school technology teacher; and four unemployed cats.

The Public

Members of the public participated in the development of the Comprehensive Plan by attending a number of meetings over a period of two years and by completing the surveys that form the basis of much of the opinion research in this document.

Major Findings

The primary sources for the data we used in the planning process have been the 2000 Census and a building condition survey conducted by DBS Planning. In addition, information about business registrations has been collected from various sources. Finally, the Comprehensive Plan Board conducted a survey of Philmont residents to get their opinions about the community.

Census 2000

The 2000 Census provides a great deal of demographic and housing data for Philmont. In addition, data with regard to economic, social, and housing characteristics that was collected during the census is currently being tabulated.

Population The population of Philmont is 1,480. This is a decline of 10% from 1990, and it represents a very substantial decline from some periods in the past.

Buildings The number of buildings in the Village has remained relatively stable over time, and it is likely that the decline in population is attributable largely to the decline in family size (fewer people living in the same number of houses).

Age The population is young, with approximately 30% under the age of 18, and a median age of 34.7. (This is substantially younger than surrounding areas.)

Home Ownership Households are almost exactly divided between owners and renters. This is in sharp contrast to the county as a whole in which 70% of households are owners.

Households Residents live in a total of 576 households, with an average of 2.55 people per household. (This is almost exactly the national average.)

36.8% of households have children under 18; 27.3% have people 65 and over. Furthermore, there are 170 (29.5%) households consisting of one individual. (This last is higher than the national average.)

Households are bigger on average than in the county or the country as a whole; at the same time, there are more single-person households in Philmont. Taken together, the statistics suggest a village with many families containing young children as well as many older people living

alone. This is typical of small communities like Philmont: it is suburban areas that tend to have the most homogeneous types of households.

Building Condition Survey

The building condition survey, conducted by DBS Planning as part of this project, examined every building in the Village according to standard criteria used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The standards and their definitions are:

Dilapidated These buildings do not provide safe and adequate shelter. They are uninhabitable.

Severely Substandard This category includes buildings that are not dilapidated but do not have heat, electricity, or plumbing.

Substandard Buildings with one or more structural defects that can be repaired for a reasonable amount.

Standard This category includes buildings that are “decent, safe, sanitary, and in good repair” according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. They may need improvement and maintenance, and some may be in better condition than other.

The results are shown in Table 1. Overall, the condition of the buildings in Philmont is good. The building-by-building survey indicates that there are some sections of the Village with clusters of substandard buildings.

Table 1: Building Conditions

LOCATION	NUMBER
Dilapidated	4
Severely Substandard	1
Substandard	85
Standard	364
TOTAL	454

Thanks in part to the recent HUD grant obtained by Housing Resources of Columbia County (\$400,000), a number of buildings in the Village have recently been improved.

There is a fairly widespread impression that the buildings in Philmont are in poor condition. However, it is not backed up by the data.

Businesses in Philmont

To date, we have identified over 90 businesses in Philmont. They are split roughly into three equal-sized groups when looked at by location as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Location of Businesses in Philmont

LOCATION	NUMBER
Main Street (Route 217)	29
Off Main Street	21
Home-Based	41
TOTAL	91

There is a wide variety of types of businesses in Philmont, as is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Types of Businesses

TYPE	NUMBER
Professional Services	12
Arts & Crafts	11
Contractors	10
Public Service	8
Auto & Transportation	7
Agriculture	5
Personal Services	5
Religious Organizations	5
Restaurant/Bar	5
Social Services	5
Performing Arts	4
Utilities	3
Elder Care/Housing	2
Food/Liquor Stores	2
Gas/Convenience	2
Health Services	2
Social Club	2

Table 3: Types of Businesses (Continued)

TYPE	NUMBER
Manufacturing	1
Retail	0
TOTAL	91

Opinion Surveys

The Comprehensive Plan Board met many times to discuss the survey that was mailed out to all Village residents in July. Our goal was to collect the most useful set of data available to find out what people think about life in Philmont. We deliberately omitted questions that we thought would discourage people from responding (income, for example).

Surveys were mailed to all Philmont post office box holders. In addition, representatives of DBS Planning as well as a number of surveyors hired by the Comprehensive Plan Board attempted to knock on each door in the Village to make certain that the survey had been completed and, if not, to complete it.

The results exceeded our expectations. Just under 200 surveys were returned. Compared to other communities, this is an extremely high return rate.

We would like to thank everyone who has taken the time to provide us with survey information.

Who Participated Although we did not ask detailed demographic data questions, we can compare some of the Census 2000 data to the demographic questions that were on our survey.

Our 200 surveys accounted for 564 people (based on the responses to the question about how many people live in a household). This suggests that over a third of the Village's residents are covered.

The most serious discrepancy is in the owners and renters: 130 of our survey respondents were owners, and 52 were renters. Since the breakdown is approximately 50/50 in the Village, this means that renters were under-represented in our survey.

Long-time residents comprised the largest group—111.

Consensus Opinions About Philmont The opinions expressed on the surveys were remarkably clear. While there are certainly many questions

about which people have mixed opinions, on other questions, there is strong agreement.

Businesses Philmont Needs On the question of whether Philmont has enough or needs more of various types of businesses, here's what we found.

- Convenience stores. 89% of people surveyed said there were enough convenience stores in the Village, while only 11% said we needed more.
- Other retail. 79% thought we needed more other types of retail stores, and 21% thought we had enough.
- Smaller but still significant proportions suggested we needed more food and restaurants (67%/33%) and more manufacturing (65%/35%).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Philmont When it comes to advantages and disadvantages of Philmont, there also are clear opinions in some areas. The most significant advantages were

- Ease of getting to Philmont (92%)
- Small town life (91%)
- Ease of getting around Philmont (90%)
- Schools (89%)
- Friendliness (85%)
- Convenience (82%)

Disadvantages were less sharply marked:

- Choice of shopping/ services (66%)
- Appearance (53%)
- Cleanliness (50%)
- Parking (50%)

Village Services It is interesting—and encouraging—that the positive aspects of Philmont are so much more strongly appreciated than negative ones. This pattern recurs in the ratings of Village services. The ones at the top of the list are rated Good by large numbers of people:

- Fire Protection/Rescue (89%)
- Library (89%)

At the bottom of the list, those rated Fair or Poor (combined) are:

- Reservoir/Lake (75%)
- Youth programs (87%)

Improving Philmont When it comes to improving Philmont, there also was a wide diversity. The top four suggestions were

- Increasing personal service businesses (81%)
- Rehabilitate storefronts (74%)
- Increase the number of smaller, speciality shops (64%)
- Increase recreational opportunities (63%)

Concerns of Property Owners In the questions addressed to property owners, we also saw patterns.

- Water/sewer costs were seen more as a problem than as a benefit (65%/35%).
- Insurance costs were seen more as a benefit than a problem (69%/31%).
- The condition of surrounding buildings was seen as a problem more than as a benefit (70%/30%).

Perhaps the most interesting statistic of all regarded plans for the property over the next year. 93% do not intend to sell their property, and only 1 out of 120 property owners intends to change its use. But 57% of respondents said they intend to improve their property in the next year.

Basic Conclusions

The findings outlined in the previous section—along with informal anecdotal reports and observations—suggest three basic conclusions:

1. Most people in Philmont like the Village
2. There are severe misperceptions about the Village—both within the Village and outside it.
3. Most home owners expect to stay in the Village. When asked how it could be improved, their suggestions indicate that they do believe improvement is possible.

People Like Philmont

Positive rankings (advantage vs. disadvantage, for instance) are uniformly higher than negative rankings.

Perceptions Don't Match Research Gathered

This is the common theme that runs through everything that we've found. Partly for this reason, we have included much of our background research in this document even if it does not lead to specific recommendations.

Building Conditions A large number of property owners, for example, believe that the condition of surrounding buildings is a problem (70% / 30%). Further, the appearance of the Village in general was seen as an advantage by only 47% vs. 53% who saw it as a disadvantage.

Yet, the building condition survey shows remarkably good condition of the buildings in Philmont. This suggests two underlying issues:

1. The condition of many buildings in Philmont may be structurally sound, but they can benefit from improvements that are relatively easy to make.
2. Some of the buildings in Philmont don't look good. If you combine the information that small town life is attractive, that we have enough convenience stores, and that we need more smaller, specialty stores, perhaps the look of some of the Main Street stores with big blacktopped parking lots in front is troubling to people. (This result has been found in many other communities.)

Fortunately, both of these issues are amenable to relatively easy changes.

What the Village Can and Can't Do The expectations of what the Village can do are often at odds with reality. This is true on both sides: people sometimes think the Village can do things that it cannot, yet the Board sometimes does not understand what people expect of it.

People Want to Stay in and Improve Philmont

People want access to the reservoir; they want new personal service and smaller specialty stores; and they want more manufacturing. In our research into businesses in Philmont, we have discovered a large number of crafts/light manufacturing businesses that are relatively unknown.

Chief Recommendations

Recommendations are found throughout this document. Three overarching recommendations are presented here.

Update and Implement the Plan

A Comprehensive Plan needs continual review and revision to adjust to changing conditions. In addition, there needs to be a continuing assessment of compliance with the Plan and with its implementation.

Accordingly, the Comprehensive Plan Board makes two recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION Each year, one of the sections of the Comprehensive Plan should be reviewed by a committee appointed by the Village Board. It is not necessary that each section be reviewed in turn: some sections will require more frequent review than others.

RECOMMENDATION The Village Board should issue an annual report at its annual organizational meeting on its compliance with the Comprehensive Plan and indicate the steps it intends to take during that year to implement aspects of the Plan.

Improve Communication

Throughout the process of developing the Comprehensive Plan it became clear that many misperceptions about the Village abound. Communication in the Village demonstrates the advantages—and disadvantages—of small town life (one of the widely acknowledged benefits of living in Philmont).

Communication in the Village can be swift and effective—and also inaccurate. Many people work in the Village, but many others do not. The population of the Village is quite young—and that means that many people are involved not only with jobs but also with raising children. In short, keeping up with what's going on can be difficult. This is one reason why there is a sense (from anecdotal reports) of a core of old timers who are separate from the newcomers. Indeed, many old timers and senior citizens are far more tuned into Village events than are people who are working and raising families.

One step that can be taken to improve communication is embodied in the following recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION Open the Village office one evening or Saturday morning each week.

RECOMMENDATION Provide email addresses for the Village office, and all

elected officials. In that way people can communicate with them at any convenient time.

RECOMMENDATION Post meeting schedules, important documents, meeting minutes, and forms on the Internet. This has been started with the Zoning ordinance which is available at philmont.org

Monitoring email and updating a Web site with information will require a certain amount of time. However, the improvement in communication will be well worth it. Many organizations have discovered that after an initial increase in work during a transition to a more electronic communications mode there is a subsequent decrease in work as mail and telephone communications decrease.

Focus on the Mill District

The Mill District, including Summit Mill, the Reservoir, and the area between Main Street and the Reservoir/Ockawamick Creek includes natural resources, interesting architecture, and buildings that are amenable to multiple uses. This district demonstrates many of the features of Philmont that were rated most positively in the surveys, and it should be enhanced and promoted.

RECOMMENDATION Preserve and promote the Mill District which contains many of the features people like most about Philmont today—and remember fondly from its past.

How the Plan Was Developed

After the formation of the Comprehensive Plan Board in late 2000, the survey was developed during that winter. At the same time, a week of public hearings was held (5 in all) to let people know what the process would be and to gather initial input.

The surveys were completed during the summer of 2001 along with the building condition survey.

Initial results were tabulated, and another week of public hearings was held in December 2001 (3 meetings).

The first draft of the Comprehensive Plan was completed in January 2002, and another series of public hearings (4 in all) was held.

Acknowledgments

Grants

This project was funded by grants from the Governor's Office for Small Cities and by the Hudson River Valley Greenway.

Organizations

Support from the Village of Philmont, particularly Eilene Morris and Kimberly Simmons in the Village office and Michael Schuller at the Waste Water Treatment Plant was critical in producing this report. In addition, Columbia Hudson Partnership, Bernadina Torrey, and Todd Erling made major contributions to the economic development sections.

Individuals

- Joan Harder
- Leo Maisenbacher
- Emilie Haag
- Angela Potts
- Mary Ellen Burger
- Brandon Graziano
- DBS Planning

Production

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