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The Gorgeous Vortex: Agency, Trauma, and Hope in Poughkeepsie

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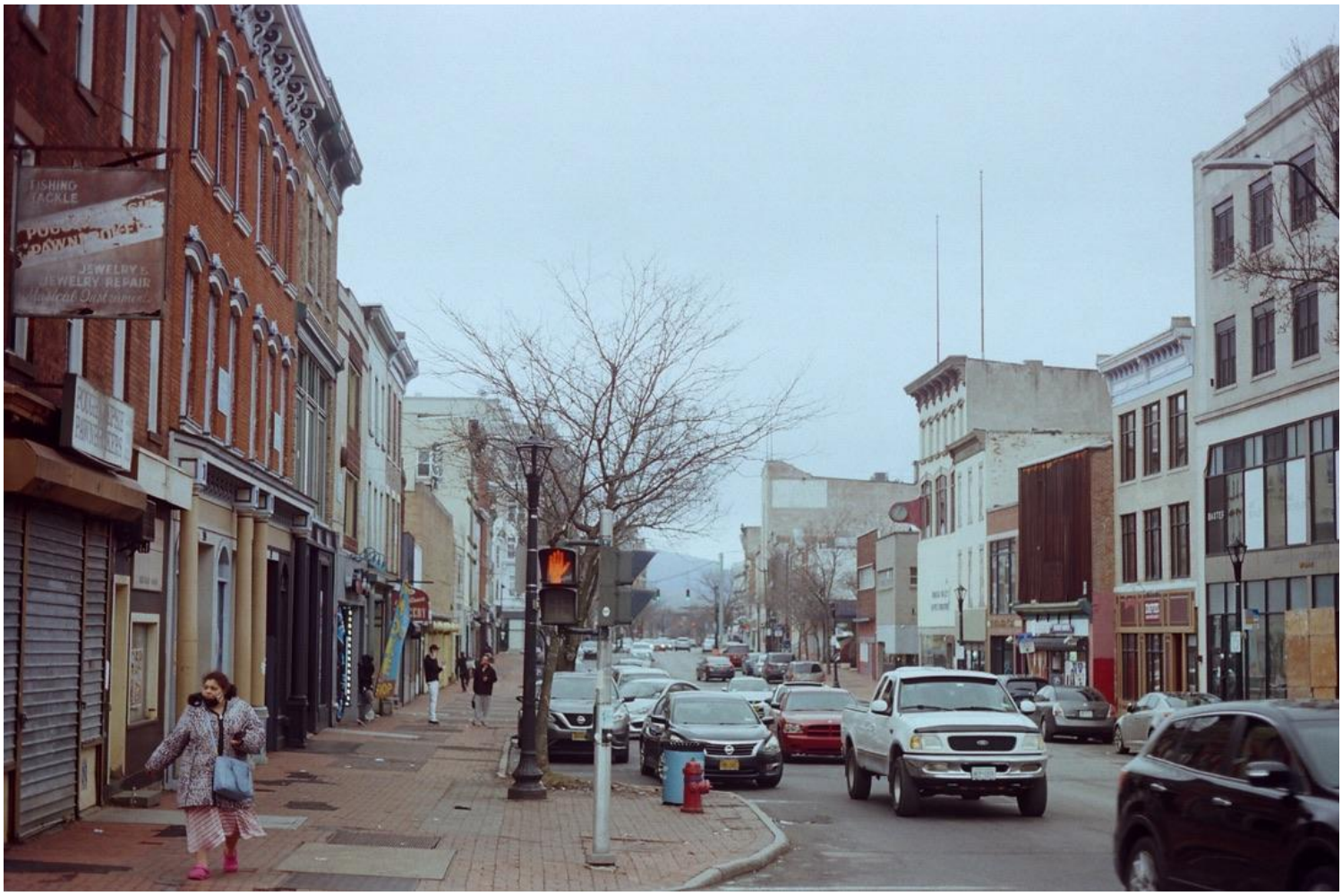


"The crux of the moral issue… was a tough call—and a close call, really—about whether we were doing the right thing." — Norman Carter, Spackenkill Board of Education

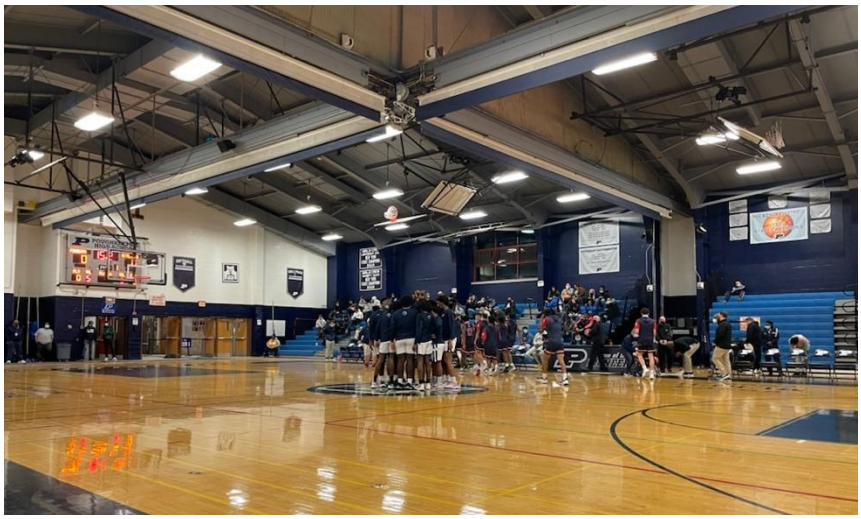
"Defense! Defense! Defense!" — Varsity Boys *Pioneers* 2021-2022

Introduction

Poughkeepsie was down from the start. The visiting St. Francis Prep Terriers of Queens won the tip-off with a spike that sent the basketball darting into the flat-footed Poughkeepsie defense. A Terrier player recovered the pass and sliced through the Pioneers who reacted too slowly to counter the designed play. A moment later, Poughkeepsie failed to answer with a score on their first possession, and the Terriers responded with a crisp three-pointer in transition from the left elbow. Poughkeepsie's first bucket didn't come for several long minutes. In just a handful of ticks, St. Francis set a tone to dominate the Pioneers all night. The decisive opening and the Terriers' size and skill mounted a gap that the Pioneers never closed.

Yet the Friday crowd was waverless. Fans cheered their Pioneers and roasted the opposing prep schoolers. Even if St. Francis was going to overmatch their team, the home crowd would encourage the players on the court. Nothing on the scoreboard quieted the festive hum of the gymnasium.

Danielle Green, a history teacher of seven years at the high school, was louder than most. For her, being at the game was part of supporting her students. “I’m happy to support them in all aspects of life. That includes games and checking in at home. At the end of the day, we love them. That’s number one.” Love, as a fan, short for fanatic, can lead even arbiters of discipline like Ms. Greene to let their emotions flow. Once, on an inbound play well within earshot, she dared the Terrier inbounder: “don’t drop it number four!”



Even in blowouts, there is joy in high school basketball. To see a ballhandler negotiate space in sequence is to appreciate pure artistry. But at the youth level, antique and cramped gyms bring fans to the edge of the court making the community a part of the game. Basketball is connective tissue masked as an extra-curricular. Parents, friends, teachers, and a smattering of the opposing faithful come out to share pride in their youth, and the Poughkeepsie crowd is no exception. “They cheer their Pioneers in any sports,” said varsity boys coach Cody Moffett, “but Poughkeepsie’s a basketball town. It just gets a little more intense.”

That reputation is well earned. In 2019, Moffett guided the Pioneers to a Class A state championship in just his first year as head coach. Two years before, the Pioneers won the section 9 championship. The team lost the chance to repeat as champions after they were eliminated in the sectional playoffs. Just a week later, a distant virus called COVID-19 became a reality after WHO declared a global pandemic.

Enclosed spaces accelerate the spread of the virus, and the intimacy of basketball only augments that risk. The 2020 state tournament was canceled and playing the 2021 tournament was never in the cards, so in an unprecedented turn of events, Poughkeepsie is still home to the defending state champions of New York, although Moffett dismisses the label.

As the country slowly negotiates a return to normalcy, so do high school sports. In the fall of 2021, Poughkeepsie's perennially mediocre football team improbably won their league championship, and come last winter, spectators were allowed back in games. Masks are still mandated for players, although a formality. From the National Anthem to the final buzzer, St. Francis wore red, white, and blue balaclavas that never left the base of their necks. In that sense, the return of basketball to Poughkeepsie is a joyful return to normal. But if you were to ask one of the Poughkeepsie High School supporters, the community is a long way from where they want to be.

II

Poughkeepsie, like the megalopolis to the south, is an urban foil in the greater Hudson Valley. The Shawangunks, Taconics, and Catskills bookend the countryside as it stretches from the City to Albany. Along the way, a smattering of boutique towns and hiking trails beckon city-slickers. Tourism from New Yorkers is a well-worn irritant that local businesses rely on, nonetheless. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, Sullivan, Delaware, and Greene counties asked if they would please stay put in their first homes and keep Covid to themselves.[1]

The Town of Poughkeepsie, which also surrounds the City proper, is home to the Arlington business and school district where Vassar College resides. Just beyond the City limits to the north and east cattle, horses, and goat farms are set upon verdant hills, rolling apple orchards, and peach trees. To the north is Hyde Park, where the Roosevelts and Vanderbilts constructed estates overlooking Hudson River bluffs. Peering west across the Hudson from the top of any tall Main Street building, the loping foothills of Ulster County are visible. In the fall their slopes blossom in a tapestry of blood red, burnt orange, and turmeric foliage. The experience makes for a famous view from the Walkway over the Hudson, a converted railroad bridge, and one of the city's most popular attractions.

Following south from the high school past where Grand Avenue meets Hooker Ave at the Vassar athletics complex, beyond Spratt Park and

[1] Burton, Amber. (2020, March 24). Upstate Counties Urge New York City Residents to Stay in Primary Homes. The Wall Street Journal.

McCann Golf Course where the city ends along an enclosed bike path, is Poughkeepsie's southside and its estranged sibling schools, Spackenkill Free Union District.

III

In the early 1940s, the Hudson Valley was set for a bright second half of the 21st century. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, progeny of Hyde Park who once delivered speeches from the balcony of Poughkeepsie's storied Nelson House Hotel, helmed a nation-leading the fight to preserve western democracy, and in the husk of a former pickle factory, International Business Machines Inc, set up shop a stone's throw from the waterfront. First a federally contracted munitions facility, IBM built a new plant to house the manufacturing of electronic typewriters in 1948, a sector it entered when it acquired Electromatic Typewriters, Inc ten years before.[2]

Soon, data-processing products such as sorters and keypunches joined the production line. The plant brought an influx of white-collar workers to the area as IBM demanded a highly-skilled, educated workforce. The new factory featured a large clock with a sleek dial formed from minimalist rectangular markers set flush to the building's tan edifice. A modern tide was rolling in from the banks of the Hudson River.

Harvey Flad, emeritus professor of geography at Vassar College called IBM the most important economic driver in the Hudson Valley since it

[2] Blauweiss, Stephen, & Berelowitz, Karen. (2021, September 4). IBM, Ulster County's largest employer came – and went. Hudson Valley One.

opened shop.[3] Two decades later, the IBM plant employed more than of manufacturing jobs in Dutchess County, yet that wealth was disconnected from the City of Poughkeepsie.[4] IBM is located outside the city limits, meaning that Poughkeepsie wasn't seeing the rewards of all those imported IBM employees who were buying homes, paying taxes, and raising families in the Spackenkill part of town. At the same time, the post-war economy was taking shape. As Ghee and Spence describe in "Poughkeepsie 1898-1998: A century of change."

> IBM arrived and changed the economic base of Poughkeepsie and [Dutchess]County... People from all of Dutchess County came to shop on Main Street, where owners proudly displayed their names on their stores. However, by the early 1960s, some industries had left the city, a few relocating to the town. Supermarkets and shopping centers began to line Dutchess Turnpike as well as South Road (site of the IBM plant). Local businesses that had flourished for generations found themselves facing heavy competition from large national chains, often encouraged by developers to "anchor" new plazas.[5]

Amid post-war urban decentralization, the City of Poughkeepsie was not an economic priority. As Ghee and Spence suggest, the economic vitality naturally flowed to the Spackenkill area. Traveling along Route 9, the same reality is very much alive. The stretch of highway is like a concrete scar slashing the void from the ridges east of Beacon to downtown Poughkeepsie. But the Galleria Mall and its numerous big box stores draw shoppers from all around Mid-Hudson. The regional attraction to Route 9 is

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[3] Rulison, Larry. (2014, May 31). Are IBM's ghosts a lesson for the future? Times Union and PK. Albany Times Union.
[4] Griffen, Clyde, Flad K., Harvey. (1987). New Perspectives on Poughkeepsie's Past: Essays to Honor Edmund Platt. Dutchess County Historical Society. p.153
[5] Spence, Joan, & Ghee, Joyce. (1999). Poughkeepsie, 1898-1998: A Century of Change. Arcadia Publishing. P.79

the bane of those that want to see a resurgence of local shopping in Poughkeepsie. But City planning director Natalie Quinn, who as much as anyone yearns for the return of commercial vibrance on Main Street, is skeptical that downtown can fully turn back the hands of time. “A lot of folks, you hear all the time say, ‘let's go back to the days of, of Luckey Platt,’ referencing the old Main Street department store. Opened in 1869, it was once the largest store between New York City and Albany. The showroom spanned 60,000 square feet of floor space boasting 33 departments with over 400 employees according to the building’s current developer.[6] “That's just not realistic,” Quinn admitted. In part, because the retail economy relied on another lost industry: manufacturing.

Poughkeepsie was once a center of large-scale production. The De Laval Separator Company pioneered and refined the way milk was separated from cream in the late 19th century on the city’s southern waterfront.[7] The Hudson River Boot and Shoe Manufacturing Co. on Cherry Street produced 3,000 pairs of shoes and boots daily. Later, on the same site, the Consolidated Cigar Co. employed a 375-person workforce comprised 80% of women and produced 4,200 pairs each day.[8]

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[6] Property History. (n.d.). Luckey Platt. https://www.luckeyplatt.com/building-history

[7] Musso, Anthony. (2017, September 19). DeLaval Separator Co. Device made cream easily available. The Poughkeepsie Journal.

[8] Musso, Anthony. (2017, December 5). Boots, shoes and cigars, all manufactured at city site: Dateline. The Poughkeepsie Journal.

Swedish inventor Carl E. Johansson who invented precise measuring gages opened his Poughkeepsie plant in an old piano factory. The red brick chimney still stands above South Road, emblazoned with gold letters, “SG CO.” The Wire Corp invented the double-looping wire for notebooks here. [9] Poughkeepsie Iron Works and Vassar Brewery, where college founder Matthew Vassar’s family fortune derived, were all stitches in the manufacturing economy.[10]

In the new half of the 20th century, the diversity of employers and skillsets whittled away. The city’s population dropped beginning in 1950 and the consolidation of the workforce behind IBM would lead to systemic inequities. The economic shifts of the 20th century wiped their hands clean of Poughkeepsie and left a ripple of issues that are as real for the Poughkeepsie City School District as they ever were.

III

The history above projects old Poughkeepsie as an Eden of reliable work and economic prosperity. Gesturing to the former is an easy contrast to the city’s current malaise. In telling of this past, everyone had security and it’s only with offshoring and corporate skimming of production costs did the residents of Poughkeepsie suffer. But to accept this narrative is to unsubtly remove the Black community that dealt with hunger, high

[9] (James Burn International Inc)
[10] A Monument to Manufacturing in Poughkeepsie. (2019, February 10). City of Poughkeepsie Historic District and Landmarks Preservation Commission.

unemployment, and housing discrimination while others in the city prospered. Nationally and in Poughkeepsie, discrimination and intimidation kept Black people in the community from forming the very economic future that the city's majority nonwhite population deals with now.

Historical data and oral testimonies depict how national and local patterns contributed to the political, economic, and racial makeup of modern Poughkeepsie. In the first half of the 19th century, Blacks lived alongside working-class whites in a neighborhood near modern-day downtown Market and Washington Street. However, tensions flared between white and black laborers. Though many were recent immigrants from Ireland and Germany, racial casting caused whites to suspect Black workers of taking jobs. Their fears came true when Black workers were able to enter the workforce as strike-breakers.[11]

In 1870, the Black population was just 500. But over the next 100 years, agriculture in the Mid-Hudson brought migrant workers from the Caribbean, including Jamaica, and in the 1920s, the Great Migration contributed the greatest population change to the Black population in Poughkeepsie.[12] Yet the resurgence of the KKK and employment discrimination prevented the community from taking economic and political power as it formed. The Klan was active in the region in the 20s

[11] Griffen, Clyde, Mamiya, Lawrence, & Roberts, Lorraine. (1987). New Perspectives on Poughkeepsie's Past: Essays to Honor Edmund Platt. Dutchess County Historical Society. p.79
[12] Mamiya and Roberts, p.88

and 30s. Cross burnings, parades in full regalia, and attempts at meddling in local elections were all designed to secure white power in the Hudson Valley. One summer evening in 1924, the Klan held a membership rally on the Dutchess County Fairgrounds that attracted 3,000 people.[13]

Behind the scenes, Black city leaders and clergy negotiated with hospitals and factory owners to ease employment discrimination. A special commission called the New York State Temporary Commission on the Condition of the Urban Colored Population published a report on the dull state of affairs for black workers. In large factories and wholesale and retail establishments out of 5,252 workers, only seven were Black." The commission editorialized their findings:

"Your Commission was at a loss to understand how Negroes in these and other communities in the up-state region manage to make a living and to survive starvation... they have been unable through their own efforts to cope with this serious problem of no employment [14]

Though improvements were made on the individual level, the environment still appeared grim when in 1944 Judge Janin Bolin Mazelle, the first Black female judge in the United States, gave a speech to the American Brotherhood club of her hometown. Speaking against the backdrop of the war on fascism, she testified to the systemic lack of Black people in political offices, teachers in the City's schools, skilled workers in

[13] Mamiya and Roberts, p.89

[14] New York State Temporary Commission on the Condition of the Urban Colored Population. (1938). Report of the New York State Temporary Commission on the Condition of the Urban Colored Population to the Legislature of the state of New York. Albany : J.B. Lyon Company, Printers. P.42

industrial plants, and even the YWCA and YMCA.[15] Eleanor Roosevelt was told through discussions with Vassar Hospital that "Negro doctors and nurses can work with a predominantly white staff... However, there doesn't appear to have been any black doctors or nurses hired permanently on the staff until the 1960s."[16]

In 1960, the Black population of Poughkeepsie was a small proportion, just 5.8%. Over the next two decades, however, that figure would drastically change[17]. As the arrival of IBM in 1942 drew education, money, and population to Spackenkill, the industrial economic veins of Poughkeepsie collapsed. The De Lavel plant, Standard Gage factory, and others all shuttered. The backbone of the city, clustered downtown, that had helped spur its cultural centers was dwindling by the 1960s. Without a reliable workforce to live, shop, and relax, Main Street began to rust. As Ghee and Spence described previously, the arrival of the automobile and the suburbs only accelerated this change. The city became a vast traffic jam.

The suburbs of Dutchess County had long been segregated. A prominent Black couple, Thelma and Victor Morris reported "rigid residential segregation".[18] A few civil rights victories had expanded the market for Black buyers, but by 1960, as white flight was well underway, the

[15] Judge Bolin Declares "Brotherhood" Pointless Unless Poughkeepsie Ends Its Intolerance. (1944, February 23). The Poughkeepsie Journal. Newspapers.com.
[16] Historical Views on Racism in Poughkeepsie. (n.d.). Poughkeepsie Public Library. https://poklib.org/historical-views-on-racism-in-poughkeepsie/
[17] Mamiya and Roberts, p.95
[18] Mamiya and Roberts, p.95

suburbs were not an option for the Black middle class. IBM was located in one such suburb, Spackenkill, and was complicit in segregating its neighborhood. The company's Housing Office offered lists to help available employees find homes, but these lists only included retail that Blacks could not buy or rent. According to the Morrises, even IBM's welcome wagon did not pick up black employees.[19] Only in 1963, the same year Dutchess County suburbs were formally desegregated, did IBM begin actively recruiting Black employees. These hires, like Victor Morris, became leaders in the community and worked to break down Poughkeepsie's segregated society.

But the breakthrough co-occurred with white flight. In 1960, 34,633 residents of the city were white, but by 1980, the white population had dropped to 21,669. Black residents had weathered a half-century of discrimination, growing in number, and attaining marginal power in school boards, political offices, and hospitals. In 1960, the nonwhite population of Poughkeepsie was 7,606, or 25.6%. It was a 20% increase from 1960.[20] Those who left the city did so at the perfect time. Alongside IBM, Dutchess County was thriving. A 1967 report published by the City sounded the alarm for what could occur if the drain continued:

"In spite of the fact that Poughkeepsie is located in the heart of a rapidly growing and developing County, only a small part of this growth has been reflected in the City The dynamic forces of economic activity which have

[19] Ibid, p.94
[20] Mamiya and Roberts, p.95

flooded the County with more people, more jobs, and more money threatens the City with increasing deterioration and decay."[21]

Income, while not a wholistic indicator of prosperity, showed a foreboding gulf: Town income was $6,614 per year, and within the city of Poughkeepsie, it was $5,500. For non-white residents of the city, the median income was less than half that, just $2,475 per year.[22] Generations of discrimination, underemployment, and underrepresentation had stymied the Black community. Now that economic regression was affecting the whole city, white flight was going to make them progeny of the downfall. When Vassar professor Edward Mamiya interviewed the Morrises in 1987, they summed up the situation that Black people found themselves inheriting. The city's residents were "trapped in decaying census tracts"[23]

IV

With the IBM economy in full swing in the second half of the 20th century, Spackenkill families and educators began a campaign to reinvest in its school district. They wanted to build a school that would cater to the high-achieving goals that IBMers had for their children. However, there was a problem.[24] A state master plan from 1947 called for the merger of the

[21] Poughkeepsie (1967,April).Model cities proposal: Application to the Department of Housing and Urban Development for a grant to plan a comprehensive city demonstration program. City of Poughkeepsie, Municipal Building, Poughkeepsie, NY.
[22] Books, Sue. (2006). The Politics of School Districting: A Case Study in Upstate New York. Educational Foundations. P.18
[23] Mamiya and Roberts, p.94
[24] I've always heard the Spackenkill affair described as a creation of a new district. In fact, the two had been separate for a hundred years. Coddy Moffett said, "a lot of racial lines were drawn." In fact they'd been drawn in pencil before. Now the line was notarized and sealed.

Spackenkill Union Free School District and the Poughkeepsie City School District.[25] In the 1950s, when Dutchess County was solidly segregated, education activists in Spackenkill knew what consolidation would represent. Their high property values, level of education, and income were incongruous with the City, and coalesced school district would muddle the concentration of resources. There would be benefits to merging: a more diverse educational experience for their kids, and a promise of a 10% increase in operating funds over 5 years.[26]

Rather, Spackenkill parents used the language of "excellence," "independence", and "local control" to make their case.[27] Because the State Commissioner of Education refused to contradict the state's plan, the Spackenkill Board of Education sued in 1968. The New York State Supreme Court ultimately overruled the Education Commissioner.

It was an asymmetric battle. Though the Commissioner represented a plan that would favor Poughkeepsie students, they were not directly involved in the suit. Of course, they couldn't vote in district referendums even if a new school district would affect them directly. Still, The Poughkeepsie School Board president called plans to build a high school in Spackenkill "an unnecessary and unwarranted expenditure of state and local funds."[28] The state appointed a committee of the Board of Regents to

[25] Books, p.18
[26] Ibid.,
[27] Books, p.17
[28] City labels Spackenkill High plan "unnecessary, unwarrantable. (1967, November 29). The Poughkeepsie Journal.

evaluate the dispute. They found a new Spackenkill school would, "not assure and provide equally efficient and economical educational facilities to the area affected, and that the educational interests of the school children in the area [would] not be at least equally served by the proposed change."[29]

But the fate of students at Poughkeepsie High School was not a deterrent, nor did it seem objectionable to use Spackenkill's resources to undercut a state plan. It wasn't as if the consequences were unknown; There was an awareness from the top down that Spackenkill would have deleterious effects on Poughkeepsie. Three Spackenkill-area clergymen spoke out with foresight, "...We should be preparing to... help meet the educational needs of the entire area. We see far too many frightening signs that we in the Poughkeepsie area are rushing headlong toward that disaster [of becoming two societies, one black, and one white]".[30] Anthony Tereno, State Education Department Official reported after visiting PHS wrote to the Spackenkill board after a visit to PHS, "Contrary to the impression your group had conveyed to me, I saw a well-organized... well qualified, experienced faculty and a wide range of curricular offerings. I am certain your students are receiving a strong educational program in this school.[31] School board president William Pappas sent a resolution to the Spackenkill Board asking to meet with Poughkeepsie to discuss the matter and

[29] Spackenkill Board of Education Minutes, (September 6, 1967)
[30] Clergymen oppose Spackenkill's Plan. (1969, September 19). The Poughkeepsie Journal. Newspapers.com.
[31] Spackenkill Board of Education Minutes, December 15, 1970

reconsider trying consolidation The Spackenkill president responded in an open letter that the request would, “be given such attention as deemed necessary.” No Spackenkill board minutes give evidence that they ever visited PHS as Tereno suggested. Spackenkill was “unequivocal” in its determination.[32] The new school was not up for public debate.

Norman Carter, who was Spackenkill Board of Education president at the time, recalled to Sue Books in 2005: “The crux of the moral issue was, was Spackenkill really harming Poughkeepsie?... Some people felt we weren’t doing our part in raising the Poughkeepsie situation.”[33] Carter felt the quandary was a moral one, but for Poughkeepsie, it was an economic one. The issue was that the question was on Spackenkill’s terms, not Poughkeepsie’s.

Primed with the history of discrimination in Poughkeepsie gathered above, Carter’s reflection encapsulates how those see who see themselves as average, even marginal people acting on reasonable self-interest can reify privilege. In this case, it was a desire to secure resources for their children. Yet this mindset was chock-full of notions of entitlement that developed alongside discriminatory practices in Dutchess County and beyond.[34] These biases, when armed with the resources to hire lawyers, organize town halls

[32] Books, p.21
[33] Ibid., 22
[34] At the private school I attended for most of middle and high school, I remember being told that we were smart by virtue of being students there. In fact, the school admitted students as young three. I also attended a suburban public high school in Tennessee that was consistently ranked atop the best in the state. Imagine my surprise when I heard the same thing expressed there.

and sue the state of New York, skewed access to education for generations. In the end, parents and Carter alike failed to see how their desires fit into a pattern of power; Instead, they acted as if navigating a sad but rigid state of affairs. This was clear in how Carter rationalized severing ties from the school up the road. "That's where it's difficult for Poughkeepsie. Part of it was that people weren't well off," he explained. Here, urban decline, unemployment, and poverty are fixtures, not variables subject to change. In this view, these were issues that community organizing like what he led in Spackenkill could not fix. He continued: "My feeling at the time was that Spackenkill isn't going to cure this problem… People out here wanted the high school so badly… It was a tough call—and a close call, really—about whether we were doing the right thing…"[35]

While we cannot know how things would've transpired if the schools merged, we do know that Spackenkill continued to thrive while Poughkeepsie faltered with city deficits, youth violence, adult unemployment, and the anemic tax base of a post-industrial city. From 2016-2020, 29% percent of Poughkeepsie children live in poverty compared to 10% in Dutchess County.[36] 66% of students in PCSD are classified as economically disadvantaged, exactly triple the rate in the Spackenkill district and 30 points higher than the county average.[37] The high school

[35] Ibid.,
[36]Mid-Hudson Valley Community Profiles. (n.d.). Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley. https://mhvcommunityprofiles.org/financial%20stability/economically-disadvantaged-students
[37] Ibid.,

graduation rate in 2021 was just 58%. The 2021 dropout rate was 20% compared to 5% in Dutchess County.[38] Though a recent member of the Poughkeepsie, Moffett is aware and disheartened by what transpired 50 years ago. “if you really want to get down to it…the reason they didn't want their children mixing with children from here… they looked at Poughkeepsie as, as less than as inadequate…but they wanted to make sure that they wanted to have their own.”

The segregation of Spackenkill is just one corner in a constellation of systems, post-industrialism, school segregation, and urban renewal, that produced the issues that Poughkeepsie families deal with today. In this decade, Poughkeepsie is at the crux of another change. Developers, transplants, and stakeholders are all eying the city for rejuvenation. Some of these highly influential people, including policymakers and corporations, know Poughkeepsie. Some are part of its privileged inner circle of landlords and developers. Many come from the Town, Spackenkill for example, and many more are city folks looking for cheaper rent in the scenic Hudson Valley. The trouble is that the overarching narrative of post-industrialism and bleak statistics of poverty tend to delegitimize and overlook the strength of community in the view of outsiders. That is the impetus of this project, to record perspectives from community leaders, to hear their hopes

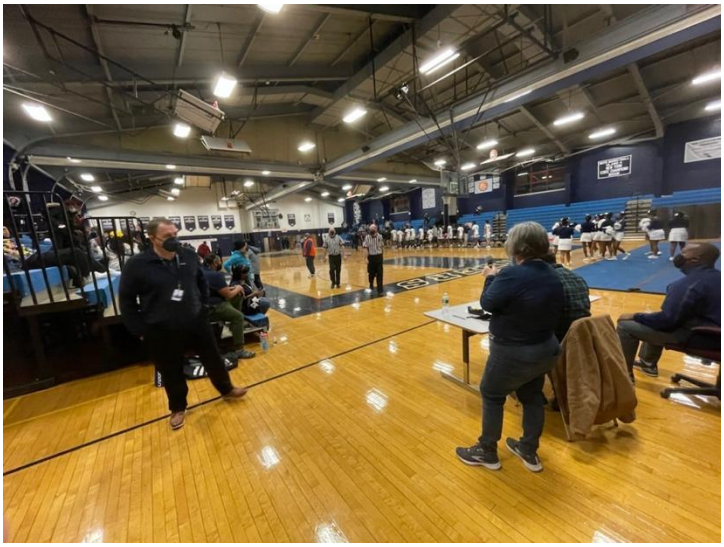
[38] Ibid.,

for Poughkeepsie, and to investigate the agency within this community to determine its future.

Many in Poughkeepsie are skeptical of change even if it leads to better circumstances. Some are skeptical if change is coming at all, and some are eager to see the City change even if they know some will get left behind, again. In so many ways, Poughkeepsie is like other towns across America, plagued by the same systemic issues that seem unavoidable. What makes this moment unique is it is entirely unclear what will work in a city that historically struggles to get out of its way (despite numerous opportunities). The question is, will Poughkeepsie continue along the track 21st century track of urban renewal as in other cities — reinvestment, gentrification, displacement — or will it falter on the same traumas that have defined the city for fifty years? The voices in this project are not representative, but they are cut from the fabric of the community. Through their testimonies, I'll piece together a perspective of a fluid moment in time in this city on the banks of the river that flows both ways.

“Stronger on the Other Side” with Kelleyann Royce-Giron

The gym buzzer rang in a break in the game. Margaret Piro, a longtime health-ed teacher at PHS, and Coach Jay'Quan Floyd, freshman basketball coach, gazed out to the court, quietly observing the dwindling action. It was the 3rd quarter, and St. Francis was firmly in control. Subs had subbed in the game from both benches.



Piro doing PA duties at the St Francis game

I asked the typical questions of the moment, what it was like teaching during the pandemic and how the kids were adapting. Piro and Floyd echoed what educators around the country have stressed for years: students dislike online classes, and many have fallen behind. Floyd described the impact for students who were already struggling: “from the time off the children were

already missing a lot a lot of content information," he explained about the period that PHS was remote in 2020. Now those students have come back to in-person learning at a greater disadvantage... "a lot of students are already low in many areas, academically, but with the time has also hindered their education," he said.

In the eyes of the press and business interests, Poughkeepsie has developed an undesirable image. Yet the success of PHS sports gives the community unabashed pride. Judging the teacher engagement from Ms. Green in the stands to Floyd and Piro pacing the sidelines to Ms. Royce-Giron, PHS Principal, leading chants, to the handful of educators volunteering at the scorer's table, the support for sports at PHS speaks to an urgency to instill self-esteem in the next generation. For Floyd, high school sports give students the opportunity to practice being a part of something greater than themselves: "it keeps them away from trouble, gives a sense of family, [teaches] understanding being dedicated, and committed." More than anything, it gives them a chance to have pride in what they do. Later in the season, point guard Jahlyl Morgan spoke to the values Floyd espoused in the game, "A lot of the things go on in Poughkeepsie gets a bad reputation, he said, "but we've got great people in this city, great kids in our school, kids with good academics on this team, it means a lot to be able to shine some positive light on Poughkeepsie."[39]

[39] Haynes, Stephen. (2022, March 6). Boys basketball: Poughkeepsie rallies to beat Lourdes for Section 1 Class A title. *The Poughkeepsie Journal*.

Ms. Piro, who has taught at PHS for 12 years, said the game is about throwing off the stresses of schoolwork: “Playing in front of the community and their friends just add to the wholesomeness of all the kids here.” She found it a way of rejuvenating the joy in school discarded in the pandemic. “It's nice to get them together and enjoy each other’s company and learning,” she said, “if the children come, we come…we just try to keep moving forward.”

To this day, Kelleyann Royce-Giron feels her pride for Poughkeepsie more than she can speak it. Growing up as a third-generation resident, the stories of Poughkeepsie of old became a part of who she was. “There’s always some conversation about what is and is no longer,” she recalled of the anecdotes her grandparents and parents passed on. She treasures the story of her dad scoring the most ever points in a Poughkeepsie High School basketball game, a record that still stands today. She was two years old when the Poughkeepsie-Highland Bridge turned from a busy railway to smoldering ruin when it caught fire in 1974. 35 years later it became the Walkway over the Hudson. Her family is wedded to the City’s beyond in more than memory. Her mom’s father was a mason and laid brick for the construction of the Poughkeepsie Journal and post office building. At PHS, her parents were high school sweethearts, and after graduating her mom worked for the chief of the Fire Department. Later, she took a job in the Retreat at Vassar so her daughter might attend the college for free. Her

father, the basketball star, studied at DCCC before working with the postal services for three decades. His route took him through downtown and the Main Mall and Royce-Giron affectionately calls him the “unannounced mayor.”

Royce-Giron wanted to be a teacher her whole life. As a kid, she asked Santa to bring her a chalkboard and colored chalk for Christmas. She found mentors who encouraged her passions, a list that would require “hours of stories” to do justice. A math teacher who became a second mom is known to her family as “nana.” Her junior year PE teacher still works at the high school. Her guidance counselor, “Dr. J” remains in touch, sending her postcards each week. Her current secretary helped fill out her FAFSA forms for college. Inspiration came stirringly when a family member committed suicide when she was 13. Shaken by the tremendous loss of a loved one, she decided in the moment to add counselor to her list of aspirations.

She attended catholic school until Our Lady of Lourdes high school. But sophomore year she wanted to transfer from Poughkeepsie. To Royce, the switch to public school was an obvious choice. “I didn’t feel comfortable,” she explained. Though it meant leaving friends from the beginning of her education, it didn’t matter, “It just didn’t feel me.” Her parents approved, happily in fact. PHS was not only more diverse but closer to her parent’s community. “I could count on two hands, the number of young people of color at Lourdes at that time. I grew up on the north side of

Poughkeepsie in my father's friendships and my mother's friendships, but Poughkeepsie High School, this is me, this is my upbringing."

Royce-Girron, 50, can reflect on institutions come and gone from her own life. As a kid, she went to the Main Mall for milkshakes and shopped and Woolworths on Main Street. Outside of school, she worked at the galleria mall, "like every other teenager in Dutchess County." Main Mall and Woolworths are long gone. Staples of Dutchess County and Poughkeepsie have shuttered, especially during the pandemic.

She spent 15 years as a counselor and then in special education in New York City. She took an adjunct professorship at CCNY and then became principal at New Venture STEAM Academy in the Bronx. Finally, in February of 2020, she got her dream job, becoming the principal of Poughkeepsie High School. The move to one of the state's most struggling districts was a challenge in itself. Her predecessor, Phee Simpson, was implicated and fired for graduating 22 students who did not meet graduation requirements.[40]

And yet, she could not have predicted the arrival of COVID-19 which flipped the role upside down. Like schools across the country, PHS went online, adding pressure to the already strained resources of the district. Royce-Giron is stoically dedicated to steering her hometown through the unprecedented anxiety. To her, the Poughkeepsie community evokes a

[40] Wilson, G. (2019, August 19). Poughkeepsie principal Phee Simpson terminated following improper graduations. *The Poughkeepsie Journal*.

mantra of faith: “we really do come out stronger on the other side,” she believes.

Now as a principal, she focuses on the cross-district friendships she had. At meetings with educators at better-funded schools, Lourdes, Spackenkill, and Arlington, she finds more to say about their similarities than differences. COVID is the primary focus, and at this moment they aren’t discussing material resources, “we’re talking about, are you ok?” She doesn’t see resentment from the students towards better-off schools either. “We know all the history. I know what my taxes are. Four blocks over is Spackenkill and their taxes are much higher, well that’s why they have resources. Those things are just what they are.”

The material differences exist not as total sums, but as how far spread thin the revenue is and the community tax burden. To make the wealth disparity between the districts clearer, SUFSD boasts $7,570,000 more local funding than PCSD even though 1,448 students make up the body of Spackenkill’s four schools, and Poughkeepsie serves 4,420 students across eight schools. At the same time, Spackenkill residents are taxed at 30% of the rate paid by in the city of Poughkeepsie, meaning a greater burden for City residents.[41] [42] [43] To keep the district afloat, Poughkeepsie received 10.6 times

[41] Books, p.24
[42] Mid-Hudson Valley Community Profiles, 2021
[43] *National Center for Education Statistics*. (2019-2020). https://nces.ed.gov/edfin/search/peergroupdata.asp?dataid=1&subdataid=2&pagenumber=1&mt=0&bleaid=3606500&jobid={69FA0D73-82A7-4184-8AB8-B81A2119BFAD}, https://nces.ed.gov/edfin/search/peergroupdata.asp?dataid=1&subdataid=2&pagenumber=1&mt=0&bleaid=3623760&jobid={ABEE0F29-EEE4-4DDE-A594-9CD45EDC8342}

more federal funding than SUFSD, and yet, Spackenkill's per-student revenue is $6,969 more than Poughkeepsie's.[44]

When I asked if she wishes the student communities were more integrated, she rejected the premise: "they all hang out" she assured. If the students know about the history of the districts, it's been eroded by time "Spackenkill is just Spackenkill." The gap persists all the same.

On other deep-rooted issues affecting her job and Poughkeepsie, she remained upbeat. Our conversation was filled with catchphrases, "PK All Day, Once a Pioneer always a Pioneer, and stronger on the other side." A graduate of the class of 1990, Royce-Giron's experience is entirely within the post-industrial economic malaise that defines the city to outsiders now. Her courage is both admirable and tragic as long-term turnarounds have been fleeting and rare. More so, the grit she loves in her community is a parallel to the preputial poverty that keeps her community struggling. Her take contrasted with Doug Nobiletti or Nick Jackson's illuminates the divisions within the city. Both Nobiletti and Royce-Giron are heavily involved in the community. Nick Jackson, a PHS student who saw arts programs cut and walked past known drug use and prostitution spots because the PCSD lacked buses, is cynical about the city and the focus of its leaders. Nobiletti is cynical because mental illness, violence and alcoholism affect his tenants and the overall image of the city to potential investors.

[44] Ibid,

And Royce-Giron, who is closer to the day-to-day lives of more families in Poughkeepsie than most anyone else, was not vocal about these issues but optimistic in her community's resolve to push through. "Right now, these issues are being dealt with in every other school across the country," she said. It's just that unfortunately, the news here at Poughkeepsie gets put on blast far more than Arlington, Roosevelt, Spackenkill, or any of the other surrounding districts."

What can you do but espouse pride the city you grew up in that is characterized in terms of violence and economic depression by residents, city council members, and the press. Every day, Giron-Royce gets to see students, family and colleagues pushing through. She has seen students grow and learn despite the pandemic and everything else. "I've been given the opportunity to be part of what I hope is a narrative change and growth for young people." Her voice shook with pride as she described a moment from the heart of the pandemic. "When we were hosting my first senior parade around the city of Poughkeepsie, to delivering the signs and personal letters from me and taking pictures and honking and people out in the community banging in pots when we drove by waiving and crying. I mean, that's PK. That's Poughkeepsie. That's why we're going through it." She logged off the Zoom call and delivered afternoon announcements. She'd missed them during our conversation.

Exploring the new face of Main Street with Natalie Quinn

I called Natalie Quinn, Planning Director for the City of Poughkeepsie, to get a sense of the economic development that I'm contextualizing this project within. As planning director Quinn has intimate knowledge of the City's concerns and goals relating to downtown. We spoke about rezoning downtown, housing issues, how the city is courting businesses back to downtown, and much more.

As soon as I asked about economic development Quinn brought up the City's deficit. Her chief concern in development seemed to be remediating the deficit through rezoning and maximizing commercial districts downtown to increase revenue. The city's deficit is a serious problem. When Quinn became acting planning director, the city was $13 million underwater. Over four years, she worked with the city administrator to reduce that to $7 million. On the business end of things, it means upzoning the city's downtown to maximize tax revenue. This doesn't just mean building more apartments, it means adding new forms of development as well. Quinn cited mixed-used developments, places with residential, commercial, and leisure economic activity as part of the plan. In addition to property taxes, increasing sales taxes is one way the city plans to

increase revenue. She reiterated that without a balanced deficit, the city can't fund the social programs it wants for its residents.

Quinn brought up the idea of "densification," reviewing what parcels in the city could have a higher and better use. As she sees it, the bane of downtown is excess parking. "Surface parking lots are the least kind of desirable use for your downtown because they're not adding economic activity, necessarily," she explained. A 2018 study revealed that a large city-owned parking lot on the corner of Catharine and Mill Street was never more than 30% full. Quinn was concerned that the copious amounts of parking were contributing to a downtown that was not attracting visitors. Quinn pictured a downtown that would be less accessible to cars, somewhat in the vein of the infamous Main Mall that turned the downtown corridor into a pedestrian thoroughfare. But the Main Mall failed, in part because people just didn't want to come downtown for shopping any longer. The big box stores on Route 9 and the Poughkeepsie Galleria were safer and more familiar than the haunts of old Main Street. "A lot of folks you hear all the time say, 'let's go back to the days of, of Lucky Platt' [the old department store on Main Street]," she said. "That's just not realistic."

Quinn spoke at length about her goals for downtown, among which are expanding residential units and stimulating a downtown environment that is bustling and attractive to walkers or window shoppers. She wants to create a "feeling of activity" one might find on a street corner in New York.

She explained further that densification is a concern as the city struggles to make housing not just affordable, but available. The current vacancy rate hovers around 1%. She pointed to the number of vacant storefronts on Main Street as the most ideal starting place for residential units. This “built-in community” would be ideal for increasing traffic downtown. In this view, an influx of new downtown residents milling about would make others feel more comfortable, increasing the number of day-visitors.

I asked Quinn about what she’s learned from Poughkeepsie’s past — namely struggles revitalizing the downtown, specifically the “Main Mall” development which ultimately failed to attract pedestrians. She described a confluence of factors that contributed to the detrition of economic activity downtown. “This story isn't just about Poughkeepsie. This is the United States, and in many cases urban development in general…department stores and everything like that, that used to be the mainstays of our Main Street, that kind of retail just really isn't existing in this environment anymore. It has been an issue faced by Poughkeepsie, but it's an issue faced by communities all across the nation,” she said. Later on, a lifelong resident of Poughkeepsie, Nick Johnson, will describe how Poughkeepsie has been sliced up like a ‘pizza pie’ time and again to separate school-districts, neighborhoods, and classes. The excavating of retail from downtown was one such moment. The southside shoppers that once patronized the Lucky-Platt department store took their cars and dollars to the new

shopping centers along Route 9 that offered nationalized chains. At the same time, the mental hospital north of the city shuttered. Those residents were pushed downtown. Then, in the early 90s, IBM massive layoffs due to corporate restructuring and the city continued hemorrhaging white-collar residents and tax dollars. Every administration for the last century has been tasked with picking up the pieces of these events.

One issue holding Poughkeepsie back is that the code for downtown is outdated, still stuck in the mid to late 20th century. The zoning downtown is mostly office space and commercial with little residential to spare. It's why the southside, the city's more affluent and white area, has been kept mostly residential. Quinn wants to "get lean" with the code: increase the residential and open opportunity for diverse economic activity. Ironically for a post-industrial town like Poughkeepsie, that includes lite manufacturing: "If you want to put a light manufacturing business like you're making furniture, or you're making kombucha, or you're making any kind of small scale manufacturing, that used to not really necessarily be allowed in the downtown, and we've tried to open up that ability for what we're seeing as a new market in the US, which is this smaller scale production and retail in the same space," she explained. It's a trend that small cities across the country have explored. In terms of controlling the types of business that want to set up shop, Quinn isn't too concerned: "We're really trying not to regulate use in the downtown. So if you want to have a studio and your

apartment, we allow that as a use." She mentioned coffee roasting, beer brewing, furniture manufacturing specifically. The remade Poughkeepsie Underwear factory is a perfect example of what Quinn envisioned. The late-19th century red-brick factory is the prototype of repurposed industrial space. Now, the Underwear Factory is home to a coffee shop, printmaking studio, and the Poughkeepsie Open Kitchen, a shared-use laboratory for culinary entrepreneurs as well as apartment buildings. Quinn continued to harp on the need for these spaces in how she described a vision for the walkability of Main Street.

Without naming it directly, Quinn harkened back to the growing dictate of "new urbanism." The city-planning scheme envisions a return to the controlled-entropy of early-20th century cities, in which activity, demography and economy varied from door to door and people commuted between blocks rather than suburbs. Reclaiming the lost organism of the pedestrian city seems like synthesizing dinosaurs from fossilized cells: well-intentioned but runs the risk of making monsters. Where mixed-use may have once referred to the small-scale industry that duplicated as living spaces, modern conceptions are block length projects owned and designed by development corporations. These new mixed-used developments are springing up around Poughkeepsie from the waterfront to the mental hospital to the new Eastdale development on Rout 44 between Arlington and Pleasant Valley. But on "Middle Main" the most concentrated and

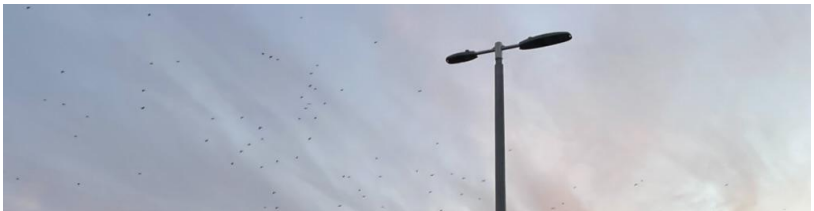
problematic section of downtown, those developments seem a long way away.

As Poughkeepsie resolves homelessness and abandoned buildings that contribute to an unattractive downtown, Quinn was concerned with the built environment of the new Main Street. She's thinking of things like architectural design, lighting, and the transparency of windows, so people can browse the interior of storefronts. She described a scenario that made clear just how important every moment of a trip downtown is to increasing revenue. It starts with where you put your car: "where are you putting the parking? Are you putting it in front of the building or behind? We want you to get out of your car and walk around. So maybe you're only going to one business, but along your walk, you see three others that you didn't know existed, that's the kind of environment that we're trying to create in the downtown." There are a handful of businesses on Main Street that are already beginning to show signs of big-window urbanism. The recently renovated Trolly Barn on 489 Main Street, the MASS Designs headquarters on 289 Main Street. Something like a Poughkeepsie Chelsea Market, called "The Academy" is going up on 33 and 35 Academy Street, just off of Main Street. The development's slick Instagram feed featuring renderings of fusion cuisine and artisanal alcoholic offerings are novel enough to make one think that this time, changing the face of Poughkeepsie is within reach.

Questions remain. If Poughkeepsie's mindset is to get "lean" and unpicky, where would these new businesses come from, and why they would pick Poughkeepsie? The subtext is if Quinn is recruiting businesses looking for cheaper rent and labor rather than an interest in the cultural identity of Poughkeepsie. Her response illuminated the push and pull of regulating businesses that the city needs to encourage revenue growth. "There's a lot of legality in terms of regulating. So, what we really tried to do is through the zoning code is incentivize the ones that we do want and kind of list them specifically...I get calls from local entrepreneurs who haven't had a business before but are interested."

Yet regulating the businesses that open here is more difficult: "But our ability to restrict commercial, what a landlord charges for commercial space in the United States is very hard. I don't know if there's any policies in place to kind of keep out those trying to take advantage of lower rents or rates. So, there's very little we can do to not allow you to locate. We're just trying to incentivize those that kind of meet the needs."

As Quinn and the city develop a new downtown through rezoning, they're beginning to market for businesses to open up shop. Some businesses in downtown have long been considering the idea of a BID, or a business improvement district. An unofficial coalition of representatives from local banks and businesses has coalesced. "That's been something that's been long needed but hasn't necessarily risen as a priority. Now we're

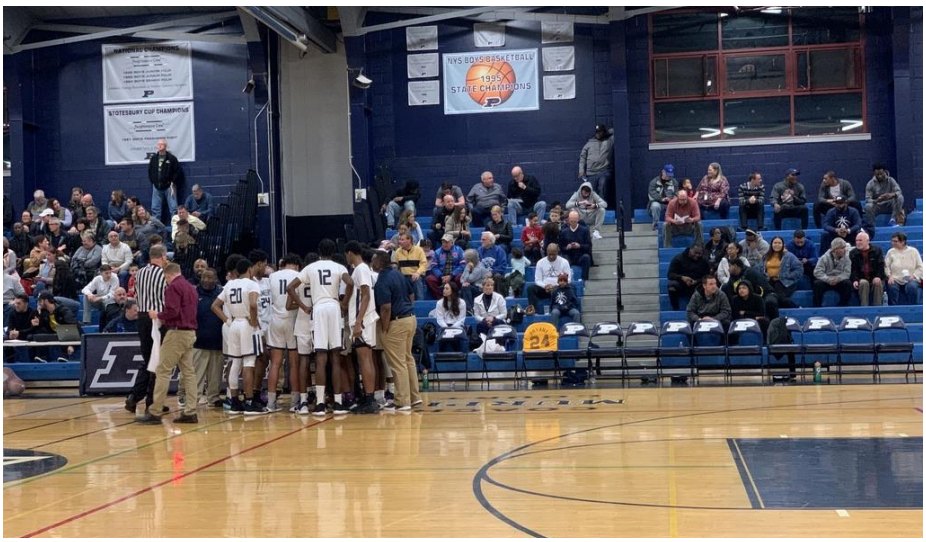


kind of looking to what can we do to attract and retain businesses, both from local residents or outside." At this moment in time, the market is made up of developers looking to capitalize on the migration of New Yorkers into the Hudson Valley, and how much those businesses are a priority was the last subject we spoke on. She said, "How can we reach out to people who are maybe getting priced out of Brooklyn or price out of Beacon or price out of Rhinebeck that are looking for new locations? And then the City, we're working on some promotional materials to try and highlight vacant spaces that we have in the downtown." We spoke on the Thursday, a couple days before Halloween. Just hours after our conversation, five people were shot outside Revel 32, a new nightclub in the very heart of the creative district that Quinn spoke about at length.

Coach Cody Moffett and The Poughkeepsie High School Pioneers

Cody Moffett and the Poughkeepsie Pioneers are coming off a championship season, albeit a very different one than they would've hoped for. In the spring of 2019, they won the single A New York boys division basketball state championship. Their stars were mostly sophomores and

juniors at the time, but they stopped short of capturing the magic of 2019 in the 2020 playoffs. But in elimination they remained victorious. Days after bowing out, the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a pandemic. The state tournament was cancelled, and New York hasn't crowned a new set of champions since 2019.



The 2019-2020 team featuring a tribute to the recently decease Kobe Bryant

I met Coach Moffett at an open gym on a gloomy Saturday morning. The JV and freshman hopefuls played full court on the near side of the entrance. On the far side of the court, Moffett observed the Varsity in half court shell drills. "Observed" isn't quite the right word, his grey sweatsuit was soaked through with sweat. Each dead ball he'd reappear at random vantages of the court before I realized he moved at all.

As we walked to his office, he bid good luck to some football players heading to the practice field (the football team, for the first time in years had a playoff game). I wanted to learn about Moffett's journey towards coaching, his positioning to Poughkeepsie, the school, and the team.

From Coney Island, Brooklyn, Moffett grew up around future NBA talent. “Out there, in that era, all the greats came out of Coney Island,” he recalled: Sebastian Telfair, Stephon Marbury, the latest Isaiah Whitehead, “Born Ready” Lance Stephenson (who briefly dated his cousin) … “I joke that my one zip code has had more NBA players than a lot of other states.”

That part of Coney Island is home to two New York basketball powerhouses, Grady and Lincoln High School. Moffett started at Grady; his brothers went to rival Lincoln. “If you're in that Coney Island area, you need to get into one of those schools,” he explained. He was good enough to play at the D1 level, but after a year at Iona University, he transferred to D3 Manhattanville.

He wasn’t exactly a coach’s player. “I was someone that gave the coaches headaches in the beginning,” explained. In college, especially, there were lessons to learn about humility and commitment. Being a guy with D1 talent transferring to a D3 school was a difficult identity to work out on his new team. “You already got the stigma…,” he recollected, “‘Oh, you think you showing up late because of that…’ and that wasn't the case, I was just in college, I was late, I just needed to get over that hurdle.”

Under the guidance of coach Patrick Scanlon, the lessons started pilling up, and he was named team captain senior year: “That was something that I cherish and that I earned, because it was a process, it was not something that, for me, came easy,” he said. Like many who follow the

same course, coaching wasn't his first option: "I was thinking about becoming a ref. I knew I wanted to be around the game because I loved it so much." But while earning his teaching degree, he joined the staff at Manhattanville. Right off the bat he saw the work it took to coach. He invited his girlfriend, now wife, to their first game. "Game's over. As a player you shower, you ice, whatever. You go home, you hang out," he explained. Not as a coach. After the huddle he learned about the three-hour postgame meeting. "I look at my wife, like, I gotta catch you another time. My mentality was at the end of the game, I'm going home, but as a coach after the game, you're figuring out what ways you can get better…. Those years as a graduate assistant were some of the most learning that I've ever done."

Before the season, he got lunch with some of the guys from the 2019 team and mused on all the bumps that led to the championship. What seemed to be barriers, suspending players for getting off track academically or extra sprints because they were continuously making a mistake, were steps up a ladder towards success. "If I had told them, we were going to win states, and you're going to have this much success as a group, the mentality would have been different… all of those bumps in the road would have never existed. But it only made you better and only made you stronger. It made you mentally tough," he explained.

Teaching discipline is probably the hardest thing to do as a coach. There's no play design or scouting. Your opponent is yourself and your

environment. It was most frustrating when he started as a coach at Briarcliff High School in Westchester County. He was trying to implement a press break and was getting frustrated at their lax handling skills. Half the kids couldn't go both right and left. He remembered thinking, "why can't you do this? I could do this at that age. Why can't you… only a third can go one direction at a good speed. It just made me grow, but that's what you want."

Frustrating moments happen, but watching Moffett from the sidelines, he maintains a calm composure. It's partly because he's nurtured trust between himself and the players to execute independently. Detail, communication, and reps help to avoid frustration. He likens it to opening a door: "I can tell you to run through that door over and over," but that's lazy. "I communicate… how you turn the knob, you twist it this way you pull it that, all those little details."

That communication extends beyond the court: "If you don't build up those conversations, then those moments where it gets heated, more times than not it's gonna go south. You got to know the kid, you got to know the person. They have to know you care. The minute they feel like you don't care there's no saving that relationship."

In Poughkeepsie, a basketball town, Moffett has also earned the trust of the community. Folks come out consistently for their Pioneers. Royce-Giron's father cheers at every game. Moffett told me about Ms. Carter, a huge supporter who won a raffle for a state championship ring.

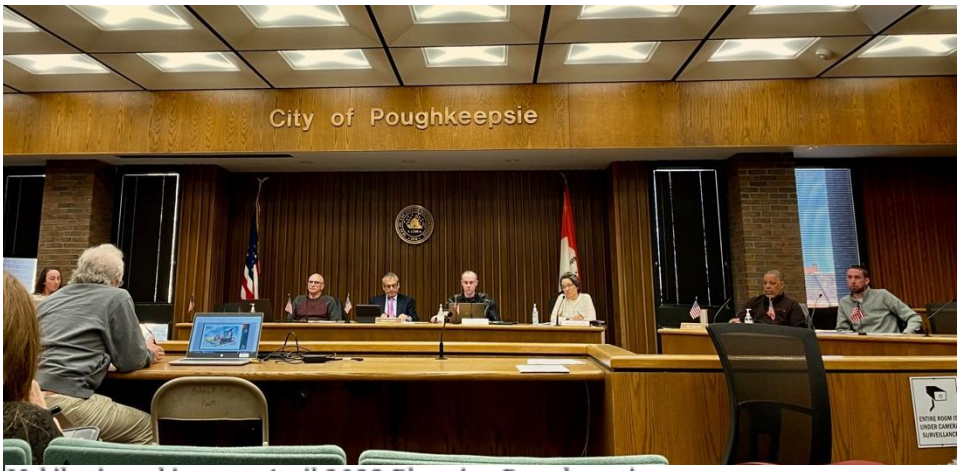
Another family, the Johnson's, took the team out for dinner. “You get so many people that just want to be a part of helping and the journey and rooting for the kids. You just see the camaraderie that comes with it, and they cheer for the Pioneers in any sport. It's just basketball gets a little bit more intense.”

Doug Nobiletti

Doug Nobiletti has lived in Poughkeepsie for over two decades. He’s a stout man whose wax-coated fedora hat is something out of a 60s crime thriller wardrobe. This is only one way in which Nobiletti oozes a sort of old-school New York ethos. He has a recognizable accent, and talks like a

game of red-light, green light: pitter-patter fragments string together his long-winded observations and histories.

Nobiletti owns and operates several apartments, office spaces, and storefronts on Main Street. His very first tenant was La Internacional, just west of Catharine Street, not much more than a narrow hallway in one of the oldest buildings on Main Street, built in the 1830s by a family with a Revolution-era fortune. Nobiletti renovated the edifices a few years ago. Tucked inside is a mini-mall, accounting office, and immigration law firm. The storefront sells popsicles, crunchy flat tortillas called *Tlayudas,* Oaxacan pottery, and (presumably) fake designer clothing. Right next to La Internecinal is one of his newest tenants, Topanga, a consignment store owned by a woman named Kathy, who days prior, had finally quit her job in homeless services for Dutchess County. The store's interior is still in the works and the selection of ladies clothing and fashion doesn't scream trendy thrift store, but the California themed storefront and the slightest hint of tasteful clothing at consignment price points is enough to stand out next to the plain white plaster façade of La

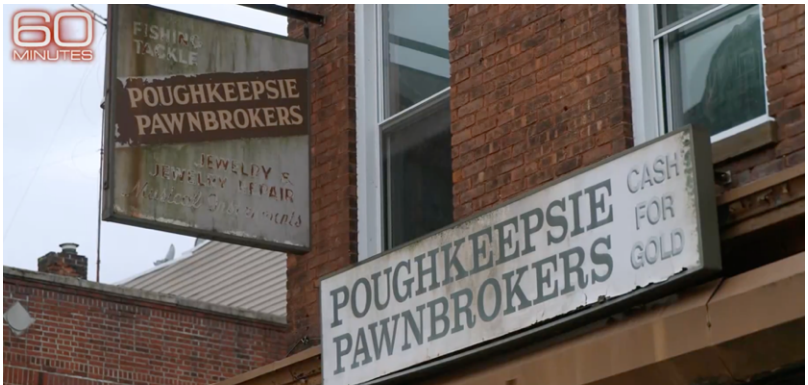


Nobiletti speaking at a April 2022 Planning Board meeting

Internacional. Nobiletti can easily give the impression of a cantankerous older white man, and he lives up to it at times. He described the shooting that took place at Revel 32 saying it happened after some guys got mad their "little rapper couldn't go on." And before I saw them, I heard them, from Nobiletti at least. All the barbershops, the salons, the delis, the package stores. Nobiletti's office neighbors a liquor store, so he started and ended our walking tour lamenting the excess number of such stores.

His theory is that the shops push drugs out the back. Even without illicit businesses, the $500 rent is cheap enough to pay and they're cheap to run in general. The liquor stores have a captive market. They sell nips of fireball for less than a dollar. Before a flower bed near Nobiletti's office was torn up for gas line work, a group of people would gather there to drink and sleep. The small plastic bottles crunched under his boot.

Nobiletti and I walked from his office, tucked in a cobbled alley called Liberty St. between the liquor store and a Mexican restaurant and Brasserie 292. We headed towards the river. Nobiletti counted the barbershops. At the corner of Civic Center and Main, before the thoroughfare dips towards the river, he pointed me to a void between the Dutchess County building. The glamourous Nelson House Hotel, where FDR used to make speeches, once filled the air in that spot. Then, the county tore it down and a contractor



promised to replace it with an upscale hotel. But today it is only a parking lot.

We turned back towards his office, looking east down Main Street. We could see the new MASS designs office, a Cambridge-based architecture firm run by Poughkeepsie-born Michael Murphy. Just a week earlier, Murphy gave Leslie Stahl of *60 Minutes* the same tour Nobiletti was giving me on the same street we were standing. The young architect glowed about Poughkeepsie in the same way I've seen other folks who grew up there. *It has so much promise, but it can never get it right.* Nobiletti was ambivalent about the coverage. On one hand, he said everyone needed to support it. When a small city that gets mentioned 4.9 times a year by *The New York Times* has *60 Minutes* in town, that's something everyone needs to get behind.[45] But the narrative of rejuvenation *60 Minutes* was inaccurate. The CBS show wanted to tell the story of the Ivy League kid who comes home to fix his hometown, but where was he in the intervening time? "Michael rode the crest of waves others have put into motion," Nobiletti said to me when I first spoke to him over the phone. Renovating the Trolly Barn at 489 Main Street was MASS Designs big project, but he and other community members had been toiling to renovate the numerous derelict storefronts around it for decades. "You could look up

An abandoned storefront on Main filmed by 60 Minutes

[45] Nevarez, L. and Simons, J. (2020), Small-City Dualism in the Metro Hinterland: The Racialized "Brooklynization" of New York's Hudson Valley. City & Community

four stories and see daylight," he said about some of the decrepit buildings on Middle Main in the early 2000s.

In the late 80's, IBM began downsizing its workforce. In 1985, it

employed 12,3000 in Poughkeepsie, but over the next ten years, almost 3,000 jobs were eliminated.[46] Even those still employed would not be returning to the same IBM. The new president, Louis Gerstner, believed in a lean business model that narrowed in on the company's bread and butter: mainframes and semiconductors, but the previous benefits and the idea that a worker could go his or her entire career at IBM, was not going to be part of the reinvestment.[47] The population was already dropping precipitously,

[46] Griffen, Clyde, Mamiya, Lawrence, & Roberts, Lorraine. (1987). *New Perspectives on Poughkeepsie's Past: Essays to Honor Edmund Platt*. Dutchess County Historical Society. p.273-283
[47] Flad and Griffen., p.273-283

but with IBM workers gone and their houses sold, the city was caught without its trademark company, its workers, and the tax dollars they took with them. Despite programs and grant funding to retrain workers, many left Poughkeepsie, some for IBM plants in other areas of the country, Texas, New Hampshire. By 1994, home prices had dropped a third of their value to $102,000.[48]

After arriving in the late 90s from New York, Nobiletti got involved in efforts to revitalize the city. He went around the area of the southern arterial collecting data on neglected houses: which ones were abandoned, how many were used seasonally, which should be demolished. At the time, a project from Pace University was consulting with the city on renewal projects. A plan was in place to purchase the houses, flip them, and either sell, rent, or even subsidize low-income tenants. But as the plan neared implementation, the city got cold feet: it wasn't willing to subsidize more Section-8 housing.

Nobiletti's next crusade was to establish an arts scene on Main at the old Trolley Barn. He worked with developers to make it happen, but the plans always fell through. Just enough incompetence by the city here, a little neglect by the developers there, it never worked. "We could've been what Beacon is in 2004," he insisted. Instead, the artists left Poughkeepsie and Beacon became what it is today, for better and worse.

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[48] Ibid., p.284

We started down Main Street, looking at The Brasserie, MASS Designs, a grassy field in the shadow of two-dimensional pink and blue pastel storefronts known as Mural Park. The newer developments were a clear improvement to the aesthetic of Middle Main, but giving Main Street a new face, making it something new draws skepticism. Who deems something “revitalizing” and what does that mean? It seems like a question that Nobiletti already on Nobiletti’s mind. “I understand the concern with gentrifications but why can this be the jewel of the city?” he said, gesturing down the corridor. His point was, did every block need county social services? Affordable housing on every block?

It’s an interesting question. Poughkeepsie needs revenue, and this is the densest, prime, historic area in the whole city, can it be made perfect as it grows into itself? That question has somewhat been answered by the city’s zoning law. The area between the arterials going from Civic Center to around Hamilton is the “Innovation District” an area where the zoning codes are lean in order to drive densification and growth. The city’s multi-million-dollar deficit makes it difficult for the city to provide public services in the first place. Before it can help others, maybe the city needs to help itself. I could understand why limiting the scope of businesses on Main before it can take off is undesirable, but I was also curious if others on Main Street, the barbers, and the deli owners were so keen. They certainly didn’t invent the economic problems the city has faced. In fact, their businesses

have opened day after day on Main Street when no one else would. It seems unfair that they should be pushed out once other businesses feel safe coming in. They sacrificed, and now they're the scapegoat.

The MASS designed building, 289 Main Street, stands out with an acid-washed façade, a take on the trend of white painted brick that delivers a modern accent. But we turn left on Garden Street, another cobble alley reclamation off Main to peer into the side of the building. We peer into a clean, open space with a spacious wooden desk. The office is well lit from high ceilings. It is a trademark modern office space. New ideas in an old building, just like Jane Jacobs wrote. Next door is a yoga studio, but it's the kombucha company, Laughing Gut, that catches Nobiletti's eye. Laughing Gut might sound familiar to Vassar folks, or they may at least recognize its logo, a giggling porcupine with an agape mouth. Laughing Gut is sold at the Crafted Kup and they frequently set up a tent at the weekly Arlington farmers market. Laughing Gut recently moved down the street from the Poughkeepsie Open Kitchen, an incubator-styled commercial space for fledgling businesses. Now, Laughing Gut owns its own 1,850 space at 289 Main Street where they've expanded its manufacturing capabilities and opened the very first Kombucha tasting room in the Mid-Hudson Valley.

289 Main is the development of longtime Poughkeepsie developer Baxter Building Corporation. A former M&T Bank and cosmetology school, Baxter refashioned 289 Main with off-white walls, high ceilings, and a busy

but organized workspace. Office spaces like this seem to say, “a young, creative person with taste works here.” The building’s legend is etched onto the opaque grey window that faces Garden Street. I counted two film studios, Laughing Gut, a Reiki studio, a photography studio, a yoga studio, a chic hair salon (the kind Nobiletti endorses), and MASS Designs. The more spaces like 289 Main pop up, the more tolerance for the dull red brick façade it replaced dwindles. Nobiletti gestured affirmingly to Laughing Gut as if to say, “finally.” After decades of toiling, here is a piece of Beacon, or Beacon pretending to be Brooklyn, or Poughkeepsie pretending to be Beacon pretending to be Brooklyn, it begins on this little block.

Leaving Garden Street, I prodded Nobiletti on his excitement for 289. “Why does it always have to be the coffee shops, the record stores, the fixie bike companies,” I asked. Nobiletti, a 60-something New Yorker with a very cluttered and untasteful office space doesn’t seem like the kind of person that patronizes kombucha breweries or Reiki (a Japanese practice of healing by directing energy channels through the body). Because it’s here was his answer.

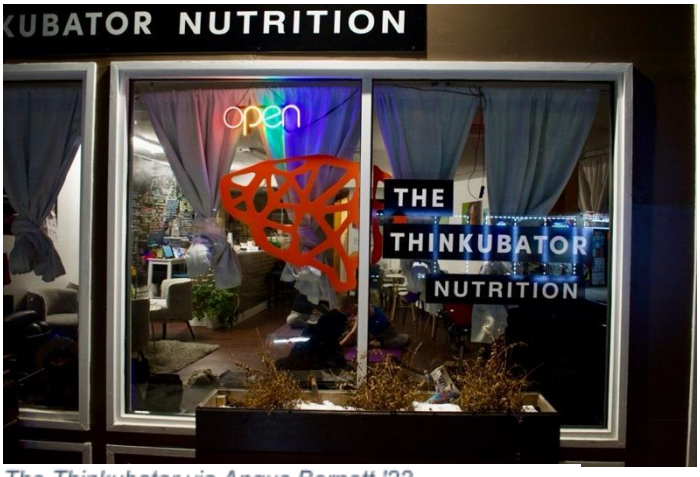
Dr Eddie Summers on "the g-word"

Dr. Edward Summers has worn a number of hats in his life. He was born and raised in the Bronx and came to Poughkeepsie as a student at Marist. He stuck around for a masters before heading back to the city for a Ph.D. from the New School. Since his time at the New School, Summers has been a professor at LIU, Chief of Staff for the Kelly Adirondack Research Center at Union College, and most recently Executive Director of The Bronx Private Industry Council. Summers is the rare example of the academic entrepreneur. We don't often think about private business as a way to address social issues. But at the community level, for Summers, it seems possible.

On yet another gloomy Saturday, I biked over the half-mile from College Ave to meet him at his Thinkubator. Besides a few pedestrians, the sidewalks were quiet and empty. At first, I was bewildered by the sound of Olivia Rodrigo's "Good 4 U" as it rang out from blocks away, but as I got

closer to the store, I realized it had to be coming from Thinkubator. Two stereo speakers were set up next to a chalkboard menu listing snacks, juices, and coffees. Inside, the walls were white and brightly lit against the grey sky outside. A set of weights lined the front window along with yoga mats and workout machines. Towards the back was the bar, and behind that were rows of protein powder, blenders, and a broad chalk menu. Posters advertising wellness and nutrition products were scattered about the walls, with a couple pieces of art to spare. It wasn't excessive or over-stylized like a similar spot in Brooklyn would need to be in order to stick out. The interior was clean and comfortable enough, a place to work out, eat and congregate. With the pop radio out front, Thinkubator stuck out enough.

Nepotism was a word that I had not heard in the context of Poughkeepsie, but Summers insisted this was a driving problem. The few developers in town are not interested in Main Street — either they've given up on it coming back or for other reasons — but they chose to start over in one of several new complexes that offer live-work amenities. "Exclusive communities" is the phrasing Summers used. He could've been speaking of Hudson Heritage, the mixed-use takeover of the old insane asylum off of Route 9, the



The Thinkubator via Angus Bernett '22

Queen City Lofts, or Eastdale Village, a 390-unit development and host to a new Rossi's Deli. Regardless of their reasons, those driving the 3-D mockups of tomorrow are not invested in maintaining the bones of downtown Poughkeepsie.

I've seen this pattern in Atlanta. The Beltline, a proposed 22-mile circuit of sidewalk, greenspace, transportation, and commerce, has accelerated purchasing and development beyond what the city can control. At its core, the Beltline connects all of Atlanta's in-town neighborhoods, rich, poor, Black, white. But the implementation has seen these live-work spaces with sleek modern aesthetics (they likewise borrow from the well-worn texture of old manufacturing and warehouses that they replace) completely erode the character of the neighborhoods that made them worth investing in at all. If Brooklynification is a concern, Beltlinification is the nightmare.

The second thing that Summers mentioned was the community conversations on development are segregated themselves. He mentioned a meeting of a couple dozen leaders in Poughkeepsie's southside, the whiter affluent side of town that includes the Spackenkill School District. Summers recalled being the only person of color at the meeting. At one point he asked the crowd, which gathered for wine and cheese on a patio that overlooked a garden, how many had recently been to Main Street. The question proved to be rhetorical, to his frustration. "This is your city," he

recalled thinking, “you are trying to create a strategy for a city you are not engaged with. You’re in your bubble.” They were shocked to hear about Summers’s nutrition shop. To his point, it’s not that nice porches and cheese and wine are bad things, or that the people here necessarily had malcontent for the Black businesses on Main Street, but it’s the lack of connection with Main Street, supported mostly by the Black and Latinx Northside, that will have consequences. If left to their visions of Main Street, a place that they don’t know on a personal level, that the figures and news say is derelict and drug-ridden, more live-work clones might seem like the solution.

Summers’s point about the larger developments was the same one I raised to Planning Director Natalie Quinn, and he was concerned about limiting what projects should start on Main. He adamantly hailed what community members in Beacon did when the city steered towards a focus on access to transit to New York City. “Beacon killed development, he said. “Residents rose up… they knew that all the progress they’d made on Main Street would be compromised,” if Beacon was to become one big bedroom, a community of New Yorkers looking for boutique trappings. In the end, development in Beacon was kept to its Main Street. It’s the crown jewel of Hudson Valley revitalization: art galleries, cafés, and public services from the Hudson River to Mount Beacon. “It feels like Brooklyn,” Summers said. The mention of the borough was unprompted. But these days, it’s unnecessary to bring up what’s on everyone’s mind.

Kombucha. The word seems to lose its meaning the more it comes up. I brought up the 289 developments to Summers. “Breweries are happening, nice wine shops. Kombucha. Those are signs of the first wave of gentrification and displacement,” he said. But he remained dismissive to its near future ramifications. Before these businesses start pushing the “less desirable” stores out, they need to have customers to do so. In Quinn’s ideal Main, people walk up and down the street. They pause to peer into stores through big, inviting windows. Summers envisions something similar. But as he said, “People have to visit. If the businesses aren’t gonna thrive, Main Street is not gonna thrive.” In short, gentrification (The “g-word” as Summers put it. He avoids the term as the difference between displacement, revitalization, and growth becomes murky) is far away. Still, there are pockets of pushback among Main business owner towards anything that smell like fermented black tea and ginger. Some were even skeptical of his business. “Some people are weird about us… You think about nutrition, you automatically think about gentrification as well,” he admitted. So Thinkubator puts on dance classes, community events. They’re planning on turning the space into a lounge atmosphere on Fridays and Saturdays, just to help pay the bills. Summers seemed to scrupulously internalize the doubt saying, “We opened this space in the heart of drug addicts, of gang violence. We opened anyway. We took a risk… We are happy to talk to people about

what we see as healthy eating and healthy lifestyles. Not that we want to impose that, but we think it's important."

From his descriptions of Beacon community involvement to the directory he organized after the southside meeting to account for businesses on Main, Summers clearly had a romantic view of Poughkeepsie. Nothing stood out more than a story he told about a place called the Muddy Cup on Main which has since moved. Muddy Cup was a café that held swing dancing in the back. One night he saw a Vassar girl, an urban studies major, dancing with an elderly black man. The man was 91 years old, had been born and raised in Poughkeepsie, and was a civil rights leader. "I was moved. It sent chills down my spine." That was in the 2000s, in another wave of development, before the Great Recession, before another urban renewal plan. But it stuck with Summers all these years later: "That was beautiful, that's what Poughkeepsie needs."

A Meeting with the Mayor

A couple of days after I first met Eddie Summers at Thinkubator, I was back there again on Tuesday for a conversation with Mayor of Poughkeepsie Rob Rolison. Rolison, a Republican, has been the relatively popular mayor of Poughkeepsie since 2016. Though he hails from the Hudson Valley and spent 26 years on the Town of Poughkeepsie police force, the mayor governs with a New England Republican nature. Reducing the city's

multi-million-dollar deficit has been his mandate, and he has shown willingness to listen and work with activists on issue like poverty and police reform. That morning, he Zoomed in to the Thinkubator at Summers's request to discuss his vision for the City and answer questions from the public. In attendance was the chatty landlord Doug Nobiletti, a couple Thinkubator employees, and Nick Jackson and Lauryn Dimmie, two locals who just opened their own garden on Pershing Avenue on Poughkeepsie's northside that summer.

Summers began by asking for Rolison's vision for the city as mayor, a question that spoke to this project. Rolison defaulted to a pitch from his first campaign, "I had this theme… safer, cleaner, stronger, and feeling that we needed to be a safer City, we needed to be a cleaner City, because those things lead to a stronger City and a stronger City, not only fiscally, but internally within the community." His response indicated a focus on Main Street specifically, where the City's dilemmas are focused to one thoroughfare. The focus on "safer" and "cleaner" spoke to the attempt to make the downtown more marketable. To whom? People who are not already living on Main Street, like the people that Summers met at the kitchen table discussion that don't visit downtown. The mayor did connect a cleaner, safer Main Street with greater opportunity for public services, "revitalization also goes with a better run City government to be able to provide services to people that I believe weren't being provided in the

manner which they should have, when I got here and saw it firsthand… we were going to become a more functioning City government because revitalization, rebirth, and new development doesn't happen by itself." The words, revitalization, rebirth, and new development fit into the miasma of words used to describe some future on Main Street that is better than now. They are impeachable notions of progress, a prescription that everyone can superimpose their visions towards.

Summers brought up Beacon, his example of a vision for Poughkeepsie. Rolison "I see like lights, activities and young people and older people, people going to bars and people go and swing dancing, what do you see as revitalized Main Street?" he asked. By his question, it was clear here how much the Muddy Cup scene has influenced Summers's visions for Poughkeepsie, where he saw the Vassar girl swing dancing with the elderly Black man. In response, Rolison iterated that he was focused on Main Street, rather than the waterfront that under the control of private developers has led to inaccessible and luxury properties. "Some people thought we were all focused on the waterfront and the rest of the center core, and the upper core of the City was being neglected. The way that I that I always approached that was that you could go to the waterfront and never go uptown." The idea of a waterfront town would mean two things for Poughkeepsie. One, it would increase the likelihood that Poughkeepsie turns into a "bedroom community" in which people sleep intown and commute

to New York during the day. An influx of this demographic would detract for the sense of community downtown. It would also drive up the cost of living by beckoning developers to build less affordable housing for wealthier folks from the city. Second, and as Rolison alluded to, it would leave Main Street neglected if the development is only occurring on the riverfront. The two mile stretch from the water to Vassar would continue to get overlooked.

The Innovation District, which corresponds to more flexible zoning, is one way the city is attracting a diversity of businesses to Main Street. But that development was disrupted by the pandemic: “I would say it still is it is the number one focus, but we did lose a lot of ground,” Rolison admitted.

Summers mentioned the meeting in which the majority hadn’t been downtown in years. “So how can you create a vision for a City don't even know about, and how do we support a process that really provides a plan and a vision for Poughkeepsie that will be embraced by all?” Rolison said he shared Summers’ frustration but took another angle. He was dismayed by the fruits of outreach in the northside, Poughkeepsie’s predominantly poorer community. He mentioned a meeting led by PCSD Superintendent Dr. Eric Rosser at the Hudson Garden Centers, a public housing project, that only four people showed up to. “It’s very difficult to engage people…There are others that just don't want to, for whatever reason, you can bang your head against the wall, and try to have all the meetings that you want…” In previous conversation with Summers, he brought up how the Beacon

mayor took steps to ensure there was diverse representation at City planning meetings, ending meetings if there wasn't sufficient representation. While the Hudson Garden effort is one example of outreach, the mayor didn't mention the underlying reasons why poor people of color in Poughkeepsie feel like they don't have a voice or are not welcome at City meetings. This is a point that comes up later in conversations with Nick Jackson, the gardener. In a small City like Poughkeepsie, underlying structural inequalities merge with a lack of resources and lack of time. Many of the City's administrators are volunteer or part-time positions. In fact, Rolison is the first full-time mayor of Poughkeepsie. Most City meetings are available on the City's website, but that raises questions of internet accessibility. The Poughkeepsie Housing Authority also has a website, but it is comically outdated and grossly lacking in information. The calendar page is empty, including the aforementioned meeting headed by the superintendent. But under all this is the question: how can the City connect with its poor population that by either malice or neglect is not heard from in the discussion?

Necessary to the discussion of people not visiting downtown is *why* they aren't coming. That is connected to the "safer, cleaner" language Rolison used earlier. But delving deeper, the details become more uncomfortable, especially for the white former police officer speaking to the room of mostly Black folks. "I do agree with you," he began, "there are

people who don't go downtown, or they don't go anywhere in certain areas if they don't feel safe, and that's an issue I'm not gonna candy coat. Safety is people's real priority for the most part. And if you're not feeling comfortable either you're not going to go or go back there. And I know that is very specific to some of the folks that are there with Thinkubator, and it's something that is challenging."

Summers picked up on the throw-away descriptor: "I'm wondering if big part of the notion of people not be able to see is because *and I hate to bring it up* is because of race? And is that the perception? And what should we all be collectively doing together to work together to have a better perception of downtown?"

Before Summers could finish the question, Lauryn, the gardener, chimed in: "We live on Main Street, not because we want to live on Main Street, but because that's what we can afford. So while people who are in different classes are different situations may have the privilege of being able to avoid Main Street, there are a lot of people here who are confined to this area." Lauryn's comment hit the nail on what could cause development in Poughkeepsie to go wrong. Until that point, the conversation had been about people coming to Main Street. The event Summers attended was on development for people *coming to* downtown. But people like Lauryn are left out. Once development happens, and if it's not done carefully, it will be done without the input of people who live and work there. Lauryn said she

could smell crack cocaine walking down Main Street. Everyday she sees the same homeless people, those with drug addiction. On Halloween, when there were seven shootings in 72 hours, one occurred right outside her building. She went on, “Simple infrastructure, things like the streets, the potholes, [that] energy needs to go there supporting us, because regardless of whether people from Uptown [white, southside], come downtown, we're still downtown.”

We’re still downtown. The same issues, the things that are holding the City back, refract based on the positionality of the person discussing them. Nobiletti complained of the homeless folks who leave emptied nips in his garden without acknowledging issues of substance abuse. Coach Moffett once uses the stilted language of a disappointed mentor: “*we’ve got young people making poor decisions for themselves,”* he said about the distractions that plagued this school year. Nick, who grew up with this, spoke of it plainly, “people doing what they do.” And here was Lauryn, talking about her lived experience on the same street that Michael Murphy of MASS Designs gave a walking tour to Leslie Stahl of *60 Minutes,* promising to save his hometown.

Nick Jackson's Poughkeepsie Pizza Pie

Nick Jackson met me on his off day, a comfortably chilly morning in Mid-November. He wore a black trench coat, black sweatpants, and matching black converse. He was not here to work the dirt, just to talk.

I met Nick during the Thinkubator meeting a few days before. He let me know about the farm project he's working on with his girlfriend, Lauryn. The two have a contract to work a farm on Pershing Avenue sponsored by Poughkeepsie Farm Project and the Ecological Citizens Project. After a summer spent off the grid in Garrison, NY, Nick says he was bummed to return to his hometown. "I didn't want to come back to Poughkeepsie. But I had to do what I had to do." Nick graduated from Poughkeepsie High School in 2012 and went to Dutchess Community College to study education and then film. But when his mom got sick he dropped out and turned to his first passion, cooking, to make money. He started at Sodexo who operates DCCC's dining services. Slowly, he worked up from there. He left for Ruby Tuesdays, and "then I just started cooking everywhere. I worked at River Station, I've worked at 'Nic L Inn', and I've worked at the Mansion, across the bridge. Just been cooking for the past 10 years."

What “he had to do” is what brings Nick back to Poughkeepsie over and over again. Folks in here are always asking to take part in educational and arts programs, requests he always obliges. He’s been trying to leave Poughkeepsie for ten years, but after this project, he hopes he’s done. His goal is to start farms like this in other cities, and then start a landscaping business. The idea is that he’ll clear leaves, weed, and leave the customer with a crop, maybe a bush or perennial. Something simple that his customers can cultivate for themselves.

In the interim, Nick and Lauryn are working to make fresh produce more accessible to the community. It’s a problem that hasn’t been resolved since Nick grew up here. According to a report by SUNY New Paltz’s Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach (CRREO), Poughkeepsie’s northside is a food desert. 26% of all Poughkeepsie households are food insecure. 10% are considered hungry, meaning, 10% of Poughkeepsie residents experience, “discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain,” caused by prolonged inaccess to nutritional food.[49]

Despite the myriad of bodegas and delis that offer cheap and accessible food options, there are just two grocery stores, both on the eastern edge of the City. This makes a lacking transportation system another barrier. More than 4 in 10 of City households who did not usually drive a car

[49] Nevarez, Leonard. & Simons, Joshua. (2019, August 18). Small-city dualism in the Metro Hinterland: The racialized "brooklynization" of New York's Hudson Valley. Wiley Online Library. Retrieved from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cico.12429.

to go grocery shopping were food insecure.[50] Unsurprisingly, poor households were less likely to have a car for food shopping: 50 percent of households with an annual income of less than $15,000 went shopping some other way. Rather than rely on personal vehicles or the public transport, shoppers reported relying on neighbors, friends, and family members with cars.

Nick's been diagnosing problems with Poughkeepsie since he was a kid. As a middle schooler growing up around the corner from the farm he now tendered, he recalled seeing drug abuse and prostitution. He pointed to a building on the other side of Pershing where a lot of illicit business went down. While the spot on Pershing Ave is no longer sees as much prostitution and drug use, "people still come here to do what they do," he said. Even a church just a couple yards from the farm was closed for a long time and attracted prostitution in the back. "A lot of messed up stuff happens over in this block, and a lot of people have been afraid to come over here because of just the crackheads," he remembered. As a kid in the Poughkeepsie school district, there were no school buses. Even today, there is no bus system for the high school, so students ride the metro busses for free. It's just one of many quirks about the school district that draws bitter humor from Nick: "They make everybody walk... it's a walking district, so they say," he smiled. Somehow the absurdity of walking the mile from

[50] Nevarez and Simons

Pershing Ave to Poughkeepsie, crossing the arterial, passing the block on Pershing that until recently people were afraid to visit, in hindsight, at least, drew a chuckle.

Nick showed me to a row of neat dirt mounds at the southern edge of the farm covered in what looked like a thick spider's web. It was greenhouse plastic, perforated so water can seep through. He lifted the plastic to reveal leaves of kale growing in the cold wet dirt. They were planted in August, and with insulated greenhouse plastic they'll survive the winter.

There are more beds lined against the fence, a chain link contraption about 6 feet high. It gives the garden a beefed-up security vibe, but it's only to keep out deer. Still, for the surrounding neighborhood that is used to this space being off limits, the garden and the high fence gave some visitors the impression that this wasn't for them. But Nick expects that the community will start warming up to the farm. He and Lauryn are installing lounge chairs for kids to read and a wooden pavilion for performances. They're planning on collaborating with the gardens in the Poughkeepsie School District to give away produce when parents pick their kids up from school. The apartments behind the farm, once obstructed by a row of trees, now have a clear view. Perhaps curious kids will start to take an interest in the adults playing in dirt.

We walked around the farm some more and Nick rattled off a long list of the produce growing or soon to grow under our feet. They're working on

seeds for cover crops to sure up the root structures in the planting beds. Summer lettuce is already in the ground; milkweed and sunflowers will grow at the corner of the farm so they can be seen from the street. Parsley, cabbage, spinach, and more leafy vegetables are all underway. At the end that faces the apartment buildings, Nick and Lauryn planted a row of blueberry bushes. He grinned while explaining his plan to teach kids how to make jam and soups and of the fruit. We trundled around some more. The saturated dark soil gave a pleasing squelch under our feet.

Just a mile's walk away is the Dutchess County Jail on North Hamilton. Five years ago, the county passed a $153 investment in a building, the Dutchess County Justice & Transition Center (JTC).[51] County legislatures sold JTC as a progressive institution that focuses on transition as opposed to incarceration at the existing county jail. Occupants will not stay for years, and most will be there while awaiting trial or sentencing. Those with sentences of less than one year may spend their entire stay at JTC. Still, the massive investment has drawn ire from activists and community members.

"That jail. They're building that giant jail," Nick muttered. The two towers of the elevator shafts stand above the rest of the northside and we could see them from Parker Ave and North Hamilton. From a birdseye view atop the jail one can see basketball courts, the New Hope Community Center housing project, and numerous automotive body shops, the only

[51] Lynch, Sarah. Chronogram. (2021, November 9). Can building a jail advance the goals of restorative justice? *The River.*

business besides fast-food restaurants named by Quinn that were excluded from up-zoned Main Street.

“What’s going on here!” I ask Nick. It’s obvious that the northside lost the NIMBY fight, if there was a fight. Nick finds it funny. “Poughkeepsie was always to just a giant circle. Okay. Carvings in a pizza pie, and then a line going through it, that's Main Street,” he explains, drawing the pie on his hand. “The whole city doesn't get the attention that it needs… It's just real messed up, man. When you really sit and think, how they're just cutting up Poughkeepsie. Dividing it up into sections and pushing everybody else over here,” he said, gesturing north.

Nick has wanted to work with food since he was a kid. As a middle schooler, he was excited for the art and culinary classes that the High School offered. But right before he became a freshman in 2008, the school cut the art classes. He was stung when a new football field was built in 2012 after the team won their division. “They're only concerned about things that make them look good, aesthetically… you win a championship, you get money for winning the championship, but in terms of putting on a concert with the music, that's not something that's really a priority.”

Poughkeepsie is not Texas. It’s not even a football town. The High school team had a winning season for the first time in eight years in 2021. But as Coach Moffett said, Poughkeepsie loves its Pioneers. Tanya Hernandez Martinez, a graduate of the High School, current Marist student

and youth policy researcher with the Poughkeepsie Children's Cabinet, testified to that effect at a public hearing in September of 2021. “As a student, I noticed that funds and schools were not being allocated properly,” she reflected, “[it] led to sports teams having coach buses while teachers were struggling to find paper for lessons. Whether it's for education, necessities, or extracurricular programs, [are] not easily accessible for everyone.”

My conversation with Nick enlightened the frustrations about exclusion and elitism in city planning that was brought up in the Thinkubator meeting. Even for someone as heavily involved in the community as Nick, his insights revealed unfamiliarity with the City government. He spoke of the City government as an opaque decision-making body like a far-off bureaucracy.

These gaps in information, in understanding, will impede a better and more equal Poughkeepsie. The southside doesn’t visit Main Street, so they believe live-work developments of new urbanism are the answer. It’s the people in Hudson Garden that don’t show up to meetings because cyclical poverty and segregation have left them disenfranchised. It’s an outdated website and a hearing that a common council member on a $15,000 salary doesn’t have the time for. It’s kitchen cabinet meetings for those in the know. It’s the Vassar freshman on move-in day that drives past old houses on the Arterial and a neglected Main Street and never comes back again. It’s

a COVID-19 pandemic and a million-dollar deficit and a Common Council and mayor that don't see eye to eye. It's a defunct local paper with a paywall and its right-wing replacements. It's a Vassar student who has run down Main Street dozens of times, smelling weed, urine, and alcohol, but never recognizing the smell of crack who wonders what else he's missing.

Revisiting the season

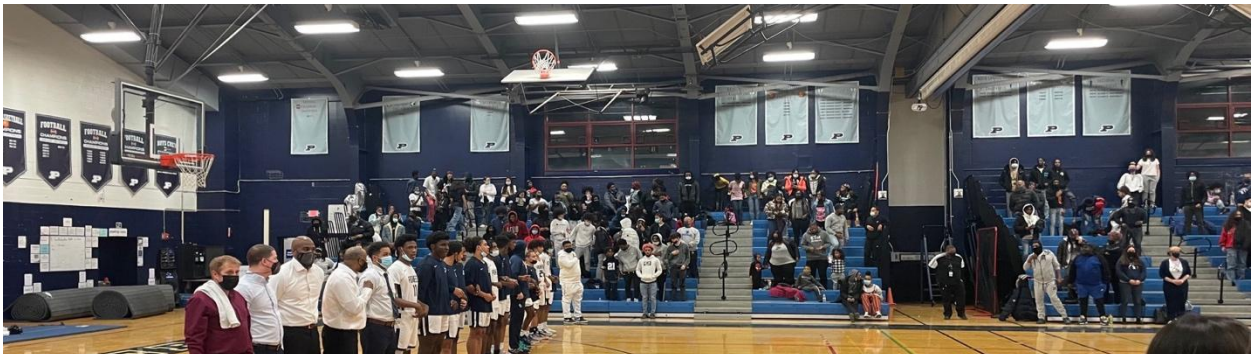
I first spoke with coach Coddy Moffett in October of 2021 towards the end of an especially difficult year for Poughkeepsie. At the time 16 shootings had resulted in injury since January. Once kids got back to school, it didn't get better. In September, a 16-year-old named Quraan Smith was killed in a stabbing at an Arlington football game. The loss of Smith, a stand-out football player who grew up in the City of Poughkeepsie, rattled the whole community. Royce-Giron knew the Smiths, and Quraan had friends at PHS. Then in November, shots were fired outside of the school just as the day was winding down. The school shut down for a week as faculty and students regrouped. When I spoke with Moffett briefly about the incident, he sounded tired. "We've got young people making poor decisions for themselves," he said. The shooters turned out to be 13 and 15 years old. In response, the school added staff, increased law enforcement during arrival and dismissal, and applied for grants to purchase surveillance technology.

So much of what Moffett does is empower his athletes with agency: not only in the game, in life beyond high school and Poughkeepsie. The link

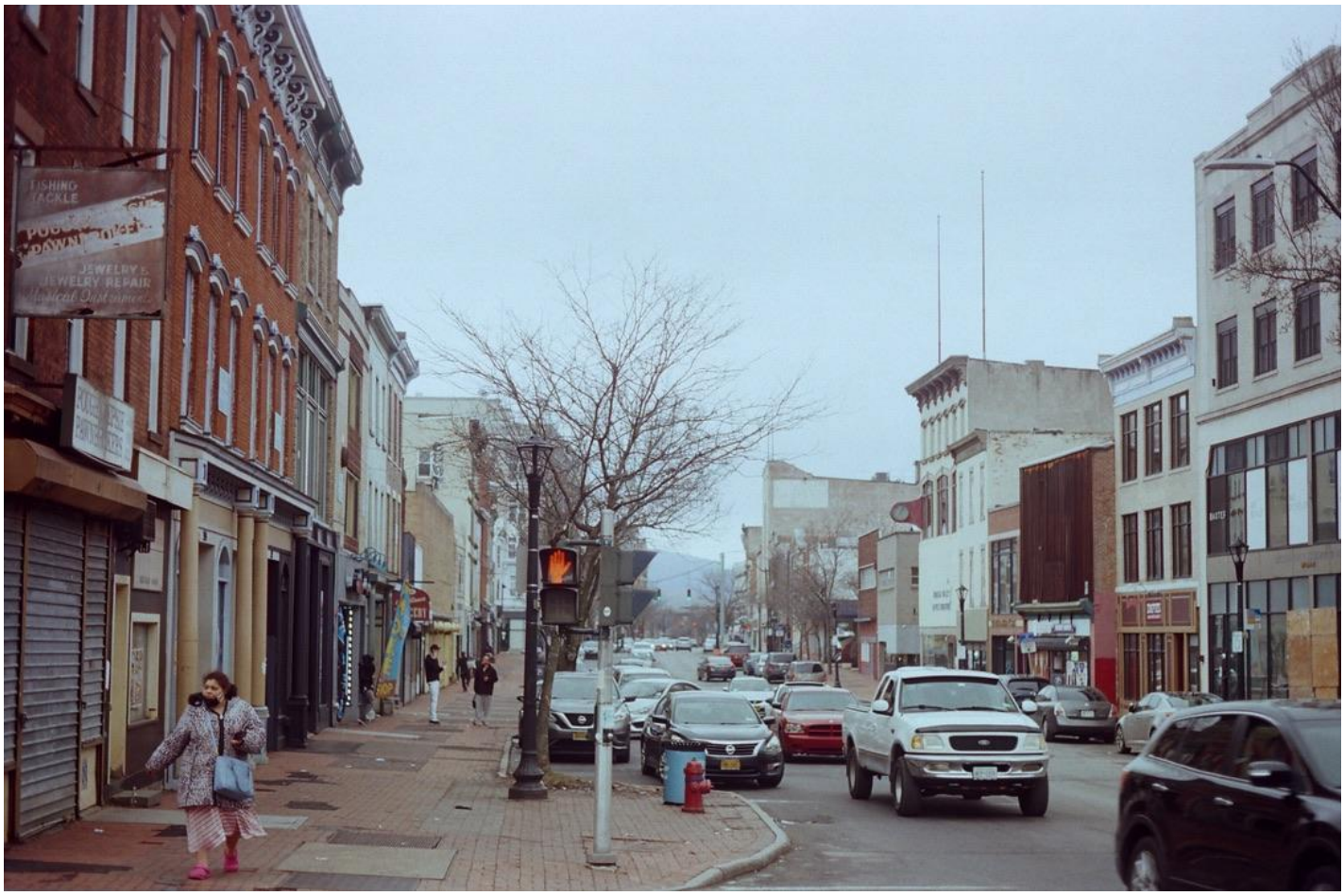
is natural. Royce-Giron, Piro, and coach Floyd all said sports bring out discipline and pride. Growing up in Coney Island and transferring from D1 to D3, Moffett learned to find the lessons in adversity. As a mentor, he tries to get his players to embrace similar moments. Later in the season, after losing by double digits to Catholic School Our Lady of Lourdes, Moffett kept the team back for an hour-and-a-half-long intervention. Guys had been missing or coming into class late. Untimely, he shut down practice a couple times to get their attention.

The Pioneers emerged from the stretch with a new purpose. The difference? “Accountability, sense of pride in the name on the front of the jersey, playing for play for the person to their left and to their right…having a sense of togetherness,” Moffett said. They turned the season around after that and won ten games in a row between February and March. Then they qualified for the state championship. A repeat seemed possible. The pride and community lost in the Covid years was coming back.

In a city in which systematic forces suppress agency, playing for pride falls with a heavy weight on the shoulders of its student-athletes. In February, during the second half of the season, the school shut down for two more days after threats of violence were made on social media. The school and the city were in the headlines for the wrong reasons once again.



Like many times before, it was up to Moffett and the Pioneers to deliver pride, the heavy burden, for their city.



Imagining Main Street

The air was characteristically chilly, the concrete wet on the evening of March 31st as I biked down Main Street for the mayor's state of the city address. The occasion left me more observant than usual on the state of things. At the split of Main and Church Street was a new complex, the Maple Street Apartments built in 2019 by the local developer, Baxter. Their cool grey and white exteriors looked like repurposed shipping containers, and

the modern touch seemed to spawn the future right onto Main Street. Farther down, I spotted a brick building with a fresh paint job. The low grey sky and neighboring unloved facades deepened its navy-blue coat in polarized light. Across the street from the green and white awning of TJs Pizza, I passed a mural with “Welcome to Middle Main” written in a clear, playful script. Traveling west, the bookending parking lots slowly evaporate into the antiqued buildings of downtown Main Street

The growing density of the corridor gives off a point-of-view effect that funnels the viewer toward the river. This stretch of road doubles as an identity and storytelling device built into the structure of cities across America. This main street charm yearns for cohabitation and commerce, for people to buzz about the blocks as they weave together the tapestry of city life. The fixed geography places in relief the change and congruency of place like a time capsule. The Poughkeepsie’s Historical Society is dedicated to pointing out the puzzle pieces that filled and departed these lots. In one post, it calls attention to what was lost over the last half-century:

“Folks walked, took buses, trolleys before that, and later, parked their cars along Main Street, side streets and in city lots. Everyone shopped for nearly every need in the City of Poughkeepsie expressly on Main Street. Was it providence, the move to suburbia, IBM coming to the South Road, urban renewal, a blend of all these factors?”

Everyone in Poughkeepsie knows that the arterials, the dueling roads that refocused transportation away from Main Street contributed, to this

shift in city life. The quickest way to get downtown that evening would've been to take the arterials. But by design, I would've missed the snippets of conversation, the music sounding from storefronts, and others carrying out their routines. The arterials are a technology of efficiency meant to by-pass the start and stop traffic that comes with traffic lights and jaywalking pedestrians. They singularized commutes, removed much of the interaction that occurs in walking about this cosmopolitan scene.

Compare this experience to the Walkway Over the Hudson. The walkway was once a railroad before it caught fire in the story mentioned by Royce-Giron. The fire delivered an unapparent opportunity to repurpose the old bridge. Rather than reproduce an object of efficiency, county and city residents fought to turn it into a public space. The bridge is synonymous with the city's identity now. Yet it marketed as one of many Hudson Valley attractions for New York weekenders and transplants. [52]

An undercurrent of the glum language used to describe downtown of is an insecurity that without Main Street vibrancy the City lost its character. And after that, what is a city at all? A disembodied collection of people with occupations and interior lives united under a zip code driving to and from work at 40mph on the arterials. Cities no matter their size are constantly grappling with how to unite their populations as it relocates, diversifies, move to the suburbs, and start the process all over again.

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[52] Hughes, CJ. (2019, June 12). Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: A Postindustrial City Ready for Its Revival. *The New York Times*.

Identity also attracts capital. For Poughkeepsie, a city in the tens of thousands, losing its identity at the hands of an economic downturn was massively depressing for residents. Professor Kafui Attoh of CCNY stated it in deeply troubling terms: “capitalism doesn’t work here.” A city whose heart was literally excavated cannot market itself.

Therefore the business and political class are rejuvenating a city that cannot point to an identity. The city comes up with an array of puns and slogans. “Middle Main” “PK4keeps” “PK All Day” “PKGO.” Those that grow up here, who live the struggle within their community like principal Royce-Giron will say endurance is what makes the community special. But unless you’re talking about a basketball team, grit isn’t sexy. Who would want to move to a city that exports stoicism against post-industrial poverty? “Youngstown of the Hudson Valley?”

In the meantime, the city markets what it can. Attoh calls these “gimmicks,” offering generous enticements with the hope that something sticks. One gimmick is playing out at the sight of the old DeLaval Milk separating plant. There has been no sustained economic activity on the 13 acres stretch since the City took over the sight in 1968 after De Lavel relocated to the town. In 2004, the City signed an agreement with developer Joseph Bonura to improve the site on startling terms. Bonura, through his company JM Development, received a 99-year-long lease for the site as a PILOT program. That is, instead of paying taxes based on property value,

Bonura would pay the city through “payments in lieu of taxes.” Bonura constructed the Shadows on the Hudson, the Grandview event space, the Water Club luxury apartments, and a marina.

Not only are these expensive services that the public uses infrequently, but they also take up some of the prime real estate that could be used for more inclusive businesses. The waterfront area, where the Summerfest once attracted tens of thousands of tourists in the 80s and 90s remains vacant and blocked off by a chain-link fence. In late 2020 despite Mayor Rolison’s veto, the Common Council voted to rescind the agreement because the ready for development property had been vacant for seven years. Bonura promptly sued the City and Industrial Development Agency (IDA). The litigation is ongoing.

In the intervening years, other projects began flourishing outside of the City’s borders. The Eastdale mixed-use apartments beyond Adam’s Faircare on 44 are already catching fanfare; in part, because the famed Rossi and Sons Deli, which is perhaps the City’s most celebrated and indelible landmark, opened a larger storefront with a greater variety of goods.

Just outside the City limits on Route 9, at the grounds of the former Hudson River State Hospital for the mentally ill, a $300 million site called Hudson Heritage is taking shape. The project is described as a “live-work-play community” with a retail “village” and a performing arts center. The project is estimated to create 750 permanent jobs and generate

$8 million in annual property taxes annually for the Town of Poughkeepsie and Dutchess County.

There are numerous reasons why these developments offer a depressing outlook for the city beyond dollars and cents. The “village” and “live-work” visions are meant to evoke the long-lost vibrancy of Main Street. In cities across the country, people are rediscovering downtowns. Either they repurpose old warehouses or turn the suburbs into models of old-fashioned main street. Urban decay presents the opportunity for urban rejuvenation. But Poughkeepsie has lost the faith of the investor class. According to landlord Doug Nobiletti, property owners are incredibly picky about who and what businesses they’d lease their buildings to. Storefronts up and down Main Street have sat dilapidated for decades, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of neglect. Without an active tenant, no one looks after the sidewalks of storefronts. Much of Main Street's sidewalks are composed of red brick. If a business relied on its upkeep, it might be a glowing feature. But there are few to get in the ear of municipal officials about trash and uneven footing. Glass, trash, and urine accumulate between the cracked spaces. Main Street gives an aura that no one lives here or nowhere who lives here cares. It makes investors stare down 44/55 or up Route 9 for their projects. Or worse, they may raise the place as was done in the 1970s. Once again, from the historical commission:

"Old, they said. Bad shape, they said. In the way, they said. Blight, they said. Ah, but, it was the 1970s. Was the awareness not there? In fact, the thinking, the policy (?) was that there was no historic significance to the buildings. The beliefs were that new was better than old, that new was progress, that new was more aesthetically pleasing, that new cost less, that new would last longer, that new was more efficient."

Speak with most any resident that spends time on Main Street and they respond with a mixture of frustration and strained optimism. If Poughkeepsie chose a slogan based on what residents actually said, the phrase would be, "so much promise." Some are actively working on a fix. Progressives, including Attoh, own rental property here. Later, Isis Benitez will describe her desire to rent a home. Mention to Nobiletti any of the restaurants that opened new locations in Eastdale or Heritage and he groans. That should've been here, on Main Street. Instead, the money flowed down the very arterials and highways that destroyed Poughkeepsie. They carry commuters to artificial to reimaginations in Eastdale and Heritages. Once more their tax dollars leave with them.

It's up to business owners and landlords like Nobiletti to fill the space. His tenants include a Spanish language immigrant law office, Vassar Professors, and a new consignment clothing store. His properties are beautiful 19th-century buildings that evaded the destruction of the 70s (Nobiletti is a member of the historical commission). But inherent is the invisible tax of risk. How many burglaries can a tenant put up with? After

how many calls to the police or the mental health services? How many gunshots before their tenants move out?

Shereen Salmon Swims Upstream on Main Street

Shereen Salmon took a chance on Poughkeepsie. In February, she and her husband Garfield opened Upstream Café, a French inspired Jamaican restaurant that reflects their cooking and her husband's culinary school training. With fish she described, "the French use a lot of stocks, a lot of

fresh vegetables and peppers and onions." They boil the ingredients and reduce it to smaller portions. Then they mix the seasoned, reduced blend into whatever they like. That day the special was spinach rice cooked in a seasoned dew.

Prior to investing in Poughkeepsie, the couple ran a catering business from their home in Putnam County. But cooking for upwards of 300 people an event gave them a desire for a commercial space. They scoured the region until they landed on 368 Main Street. That was three years ago, and a lot of buildings were for sale Salmon remembered. If they had more funds, they would've looked to Eastdale or a safer option. But they bought the vacant building, five apartments, and the main floor in cash for $100,000 from a developer in Queens.

The Salmons didn't know much about Poughkeepsie, and it wasn't long before they realized what they'd bought into. They were concerned with why the building sat vacant so long, the state of the sidewalks, and the overall safety of Main Streets. "It's depressing. we have to make people want to come home to Main Street. And with me bringing in five new tenants, I cannot promote a place I wouldn't want to live myself." She was especially shaken by a shootout a couple doors down. "The guy sat outside and waited for the gentleman to get his haircut. Three hours waiting outside," she said. He evaded the assassination attempt but Shereen was flustered when the police told her that the target wouldn't identify a gunman. "So it's a hard

you know, it's hard. It's hard to really do the clean-up that you need when the other side is silent. I'm in charge of five families upstairs… Once they step out of the building, they're on Main Street." Prospective tenants told her the apartments were gorgeous, if only they were somewhere else.

They want to uplift the city. The shutters that boarded up neighboring business reminded Salmon of a prison. "When you go to the village in New York City, the windows are tilted out, and the traffic and the sidewalk blends inside." When she told another business owner she wanted similar windows he guaranteed they'd get broken into. "No," she insisted, "this is different. We deserve better than this. We need to make some noise. We need to wake some people up. Food and chemistry and people. It has to coexist." She wrote the mayor a long letter with her concerns. She was new to the city, and here she was criticizing his work. She feared she might be blacklisted. She asked her friends to pray for her and waited.

It went far better than she expected. The mayor came to the grand opening celebration and held a ribbon-cutting ceremony. The food was introduced, "it just flew off from there," she said. He introduced her to the police and told her to call if she needed anything. She knew there was an issue with policing. In three years, she did not see one black police officer in any patrol cars. She asked the mayor, "How can you respond to domestic violence, to the needs of the home, if when you walk in there is no resemblance of me?"

The Salmons found racism imbedded in other ways. As they applied for loans, bank after bank turned them away. A few said their area on Main Street was not of interest to their investors, that if they were closer to the river, it would have been a yes. “They did not expect black investors,” she said frankly.

15 dumpsters of gutting later and framing done, one bank told them a loan was 99.99% approved. But when they met in person Shereen could see the banker was startled: "[Our names] didn't give an inclination as to who we were.” Now the bank deemed the building too old. Their investors were not looking for something this age. Shereen was baffled, “You're in Poughkeepsie. It’s an old town. What buildings were you in?” she thought. “I knew it was racism.”

Maybe on a Brooklyn cross-street Upstream wouldn’t stick out much. But there is nothing else like its crisp teal edifice and art deco lettering on Main Street. The abandoned buildings that border Upstream hammer home the point. Like the Thinkubator, I was curious to hear what their neighbors thought of Upstream. If nutritional shakes would cause suspicion in some, a French-fusion take on a cuisine the city already has in spades might draw up Dr. Summer’s “G Word.”

In Poughkeepsie there are about ten Jamaican restaurants from the river down Main Street. But despite the large Jamaican community, Upstream’s customers are not Jamaican. “To be honest with you,” they are

white she laughs. A lot of their patrons are corporate lawyers that comes in for lunch, judges, and executives from city officials. They do a lot of reading and they're interested to try the French blend cuisine." They don't have time to enjoy the rice and vegetables the way they should she adds. Garfield comes by and lets me know they're rolling out jerk chicken wraps to appease the fast-eating executives.

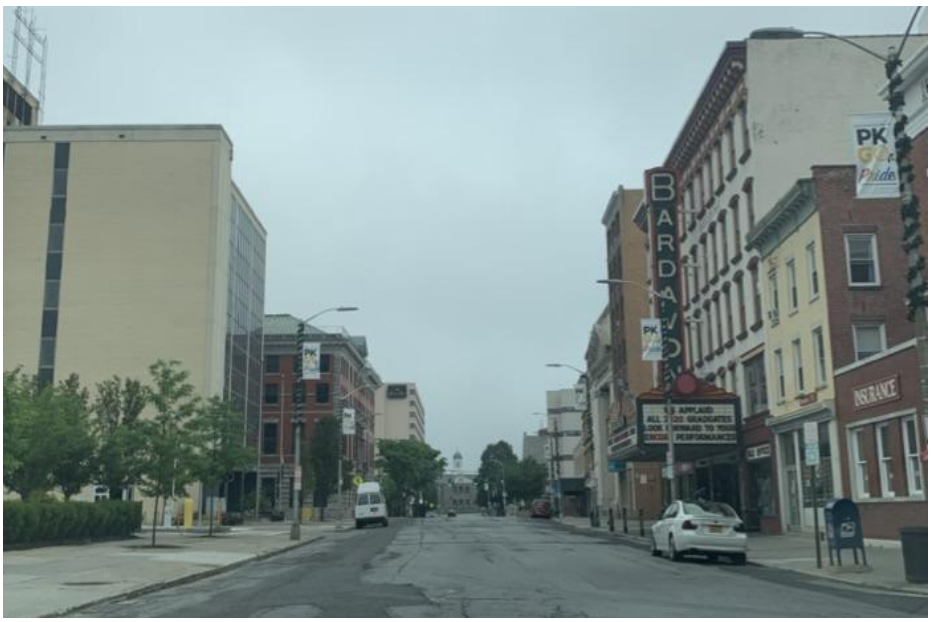
Their second biggest clients caused a change in the business plan. They had intended on being credit and debit only, but then the barbershops and salons caught wind and were eager to try. They get paid in cash, so naturally, they pushed for change: "You can't do this to us! we need to try your food" she recalled and breaks up laughing. So, they adjusted.

We were wrapping up and I asked her, after a few months of living here, what she hoped for. "I need to get people that live here hope again because people that live here have lost hope. I don't know why. You're by the water, you have Metro-North going through, you have Amtrak, it's an ideal location for anyone. I'm really hoping that we see a lot of mixture and diversity," she said. Telling me about a new business owner's idea, she was incredulous: "I don't agree with the business. It's a bar and barbecue joint. I'm like Poughkeepsie doesn't need to have..." she trailed off showing confusion and concern. "But for him to move from Brooklyn, what was the attraction?" That, at least, piqued her interest. Recalling the potential tenant from Manhattan who pulled out after hearing about Main Street's bad rep,

Shereen told her, “Don’t worry, that’s how Harlem started, Now, you don't see many Shereens in Harlem,” she joked.

How are the Children?

Changepoint Church, at the corner of Market and the westbound arterial, is very near to the 19th century integrated community of Blacks and recent white immigrants. Today Market and Civic Center Plaza border the end of Main Street before it slopes sharply downwards to Little Italy and the Hudson River. Market Street is Poughkeepsie's municipal thoroughfare. The

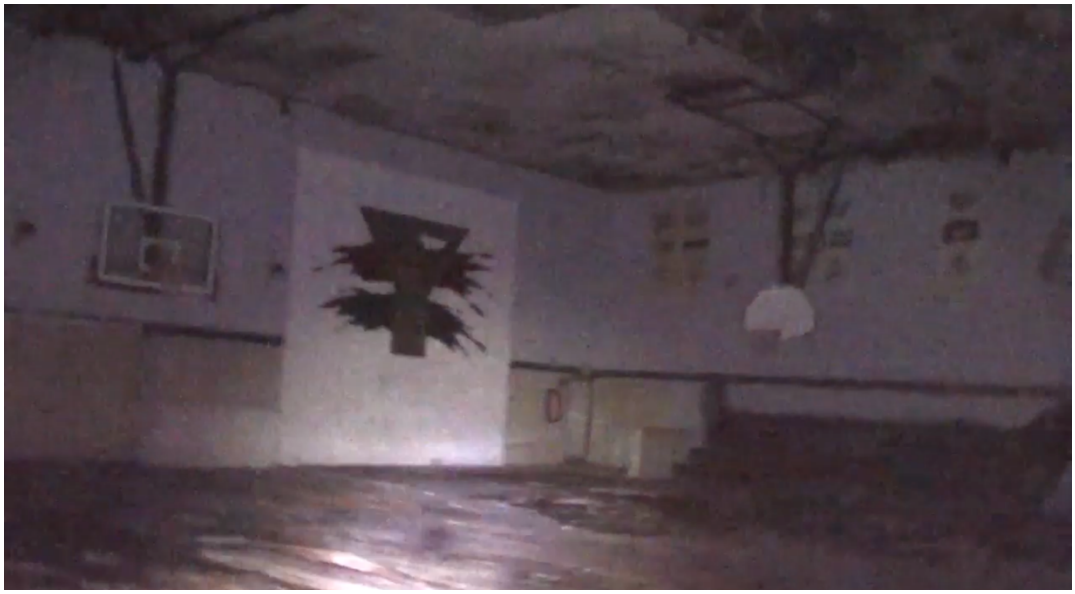


Adriance Public Library, City Hall, the historic Bardavon Theatre, and the Civic Center line the street for a half-mile stretch. It doubles as Dutchess County's Main Street, with the DA's office, County Supreme Court, the Probation office, and Department of Behavioral & Community Health. The concentration of services here would seem to signal Poughkeepsie's preeminence as the county seat. Yet, these mental health services in addition to the very nearby Dutchess County Jail reveal how Poughkeepsie acts as a funnel for the county's distressed population.

As Poughkeepsie's population declined, Dutchess County's expanded. When the city population peaked in 1950, about 41,000 people lived in

Poughkeepsie. From 1960 to 2010, Dutchess County grew dramatically with the introduction of highways, decentralized commerce, suburbanization, and IBM. Poughkeepsie's population bottomed out in 1990 at 28,860. While numerous cities have redeveloped, gentrified, and increased tax revenue, Beacon, for instance, Poughkeepsie remains the legacy city and county seat. Meanwhile, Poughkeepsie maintains markers of poverty far higher than surrounding Dutchess County. Concentrating the county's homeless, mentally ill, and others in need of city services here creates an undue burden on the city.

There is cooperation between the governments. At the far end of Market Street is the dismal remains of the YMCA. A video tour posted on the City's Facebook page makes the site look like a cross between the Blair Witch Project and footage of the sunken Titanic. Inside, mold grows six feet high besides children's toys and cribs. Lights lay on the floor, their wiring still hanging from the ceiling. Looking at the graffitied tile, rusted pipes, the warped hardwood of the gymnasium, it is hard to believe this building, designed by Vassar professor Jeh V. Johnson (whom Vassar's ALANA Center is named for), was a community center just a decade and a half ago.



The basketball court inside the YMCA via City of Poughkeepsie

If the blight of Main Street is a metaphor for the city's economic struggles, the YMCA represents the depressed state of youth services. But that appears to be changing as well. In 2019, Dutchess County and the City agreed to deal the YMCA property to the City for $10.[53] The city hired MASS designs, led by Poughkeepsie-born Michael Murphy, who added modern touches to Main Street with the Trolly Barn and 289 Main Street. His Main Street buildings make Upstream's storefront look shabby. When an Uber picked me up from the Trolley Barn in December, the man's eyes lingered on the south-facing glass edifice: that is a nice building, *what is that?"* he said. "Something new," I said, unsure where to start.

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https://www.dutchessny.gov/Departments/County-Executive/Dutchess-County-Unveils-Youth-Opportunity-Union-Website-to-Chart-Progress-of-Project.htm

Mass Design's renderings promise a state-of-the-art facility with a sharp, angular design. The copper-colored scaffolding supports a huge ramp-like green roof. Enormous glass walls offer 360 inner-facing views of the central courtyard while the westward side gives panoramic views of the Hudson River and waterfront. All in all, the county pledges to invest $25 million in bringing the renderings to life.

The YOU will be packaged along legislation establishing a Division of Youth and Opportunity development. For years, the city's families have struggled to provide adequate out-of-school care for children. At a public hearing in the fall of last year, Town of Poughkeepsie representative Giancarlo Llaverias addressed how strained financial situations create daily struggles for families. "Salaries aren't increasing and trying to buy milk isn't going down either...if mom has to work the morning shift, the midday shift, and the overnight shift to provide for her baby, well, she doesn't know where her kids at," he said. The city has designated stop gaps for grassroots organizations filling in the work. Rebuilding Our Children and Community is one such organization. I spoke with Satara Brown, ROCC Founder, in the fall as the legislation was passing for a *Miscellany News* story. ROCC runs the only seven-week long summer program for children and offers services from out-of-school care to job training for parents. But according to Brown, ROCC is chronically underfunded, and at times she uses her own financial resources (she is a city employee) to help keep the program afloat. Since

2018, the City has offered a youth grant program for such agencies, though the grants are capped at just $15,000. Not nearly enough, said, Brown, “we’re one hundred percent underfunded.”

When Rolison announced at the state of the city address that the YMCA will be demolished in the coming months, Changepoint erupted in loud applause. “I can’t wait till that building comes down,” he emphasized as the claps died down.

When I spoke with Brown in the fall, she welcomed the YOU, but worried that the county would feel entitled to control the project given its huge investment. She wondered, “Are they going to prioritize the City of Poughkeepsie residents?” In an August 23rd Council meeting, City Administrator Marc Nelson, echoed the concern, “During those YMCA deliberations, the concern on [the part] of the council members was… the city still wants to and needs and deserves a seat at the table.” Her concern stems from the city’s recent transport history.

In a city that lacks a school bus system for its own district, she was concerned about transportation to another site, asking, “How [are] children from the opposite side of the town are going to be able to utilize those resources?” In 2017, Mayor Rolison proposed to consolidate the City’s bus system with Dutchess County. It was at a tense time. Just one year into Rolison’s tenure the City’s deficit hung at $12.5 million, and the mayor wanted to consolidate services to cut costs. Some felt the measure would

disparately impact the city's poor population that relied on public transport.[54] For months, negotiations dragged on with council members failing to show up for meetings. Those who resolved against consolidation failed to overrule the mayor's veto on legislation to keep the system in place. That summer six busses sat in a garage until the City was smacked with a $1.6 million fine from the federal government for failing to turn them over to Dutchess County. [55]Finally, the resolution passed, and the City agreed to lease the buses to Dutchess county for one dollar a year.

This year, the City plans to spend $3.1 million of the $10,431,891 of the federal dollars on rejuvenating community infrastructure including parks and pools.[56] Rolison harped on the new infrastructure calling, the dilapidated pools, "a symbol of decay in the city," and that the renovated spaces will be "the largest investment in our parks and pools in the city's history." As for the Department of Youth Opportunity and Development, the 2022 budget calls for $1 million to pay for the programing, resources, and salaries needed to address out-of-school care.[57] The Division of Youth Services lies at the apex of the city's greatest issues: a large deficit unable to foot the bill for social programs, struggling schools, and youth violence. It is a program developed from scratch with a new full-time hire to oversee the

[54] Wilson, Geoffrey. (2018, February 9). Complaint on Poughkeepsie bus services thrown out by Federal Transit Administration. *The Poughkeepsie Journal*.
[55] Brant, Abbott. (2017, August 29). Resolution to transfer city bus assets fails; $1.6M still owed. *The Poughkeepsie Journal*.
[56] Rolison, Robert. (2022) 2022 Mayor's Preliminary Budget
[57] Leach, Ollivia. (2022, March 24). What one community group wants from Poughkeepsie's $1M youth services investment. *Spectrum News 1*

Youth Division. It is perhaps the greatest test of the city's competence to make a dent in what Attoh called the most fiscally strained and struggling school district in New York state. The question remains, will one million dollars be enough?

Isis Benitez and the Gorgeous Vortex

Halfway through the mayor's address, PCSD Superintendent Eric Rosser got up to speak on the state of the youth in Poughkeepsie. "How are the children?" he asked to begin his remarks. The answer came as a mix of murmurs, "not good" said someone in the crowd. It's worse than that, according to Isis Benitez, an activist with End the New Jim Crowe Action Network who sat in the pews that night.

We'd spoken a few days prior in her office in her Planned Parenthood office at the Family Partnership, a huge complex of civic

minded organizations located on North Hamilton, just north of Main Street. I

Isis was raised here after her parents relocated from the Bronx. Violence in the Bronx was up in the early 2000s, and beyond that, her parents who grew up there wanted different for their children. “They were paying house-worthy rent in the Bronx, and they wanted us to have a backyard. They wanted us to have a house,” she explained. When a family member put their southside home on the market, her parents snapped it up and suddenly they were living the suburban dream. When they friends and family visited from the Bronx, they gave her shit for living in the country. “They would joke like, ‘Oh, I missed the police sirens.’ They thought it was very polished.”

But living within PCSD, her education didn’t match the investment her parents expected. “I started to feel like no one cared when I was in was in third grade,” she said. That was the year her teacher threw a chair in the classroom. “She yelled at the kids, like all of us. ‘You guys just don't know how to shut up!’... And to hear that from a teacher, it's just, it's incredible,” she reflected. Then the budget issues became apparent. She remembers a history class that had only five up to date textbooks among the whole class. The rest were torn up and ratty. Teachers were over stressed dealing with the lack of resources, but Isis felt they weren’t there for the kids or the community. A lot of them lived across the river in Highland or in

Wappingers and weren't in the community and didn't care about the development of the kids.

The problem is that schools like Poughkeepsie need to hire teachers despite the poor working conditions. Isis noticed what was going on from a young age: "There's so many teachers when I was in school that only care about the money, because you get paid bucks to work here. Because it's 'scary.'"

With the strained resources and teachers, and the dearth of arts programs, there were also the constant threats of violence. There were fights almost every day. There were lockdowns too, constantly, and she remembers dogs sweeping the hallway. It wasn't just extraneous circumstances that led to an unsuccessful environment, it was top-down attitude of failure from the administration. At her freshman assembly, the class was told to look to their right and left because one of the three wouldn't graduate. Lo and behold, the graduation rate in 2017 was 60%. "For them to tell us that a freshman…When I told my mom that she was on the floor." It was another reason to suspect the school didn't care. They were taking shortcuts, scaring the students into success. For those that do graduate, they aren't ready for college. Isis herself admitted that she wasn't ready to go to Marist, where she graduated from in 2020. She wasn't challenged or held to a college-prep standard at PHS. The lack of preparation leads to a lot of kids going to Dutchess Community College,

“they go to Dutchess automatically. It's called the 13th grade for a reason. That's how you get prepared for college.”

The lack of preparation for the outside worlds leads to another issue with Poughkeepsie. People grow up here and never leave. “There’s a magnetic pole or something that always brings people back. People have tried to leave. It's hard. And it's sad... to not be able to see the growth. There's literally a shield over Poughkeepsie,” explained. She’s concerned for the young people growing up thinking that this is all there is, the 7/11, Genie’s soul food, their family members down the block. “It’s gorgeous” she repeated, “But I don't want anyone to feel like this is all they have.” She contrasts the experience with people she knows in just one community over. “In Arlington, people from there aren't there anymore. They've gone and spread their wings.”

Isis’s perspective clashes with Royce-Girons experience, the PHS graduate and current principal. Where Royce-Giron left private school for PHS because she thought it would give her a better education, Isis laments those conditions. “I wasn't getting the challenge that I needed. I always thought that Arlington would be better. I would be a little more prepared at Arlington.” On the other hand, “I would experience racism so it's like a win lose everything.” Given the history of Poughkeepsie and Dutchess County, Isis did experience racism, in the form of ratty textbooks, chronic violence and ill-equipped faculty.

The year Isis graduated Marist was the year Royce-Giron took over PHS, a few years after the graduation scandal. Isis's many issues with Poughkeepsie left her searching for more while Royce-Giron came back. "There's a little bit [more movement] now," she said about her generation. "A lot of older people, people that been here forever and a day they're getting mad at no change. They have the same walls, but they never did anything to change it or they have they failed. And they gave up."

Like so many others I talked to during this project, Isis spoke of hope, potential, and how beautiful this city is. But she's tired: "I have a little bit of hope. I'm not gonna lie to you. Where does it land? How old will I be? Will I still be here is the question." She called it the boomerang. She called it a vortex. She called it gorgeous. She spoke of family and gang violence and her trauma. She spoke of intergenerational community that has repeated the same lives for three generations. She's done hearing about the past. Staying in Poughkeepsie is a make-or-break proposition: "I will give back. I will ensure that gentrification isn't happening. but I don't want my kids to be confined to this vortex." That vortex keeps people of color here, keeps them under-educated in the violence, instability, and insecurity that defines poverty. What happens when the vortex breaks, when developers become unafraid, and the deficit is relinquished?

On developments already happening she said, "They're gorgeous. I actually am excited to see how they will look in person, I'm excited to see

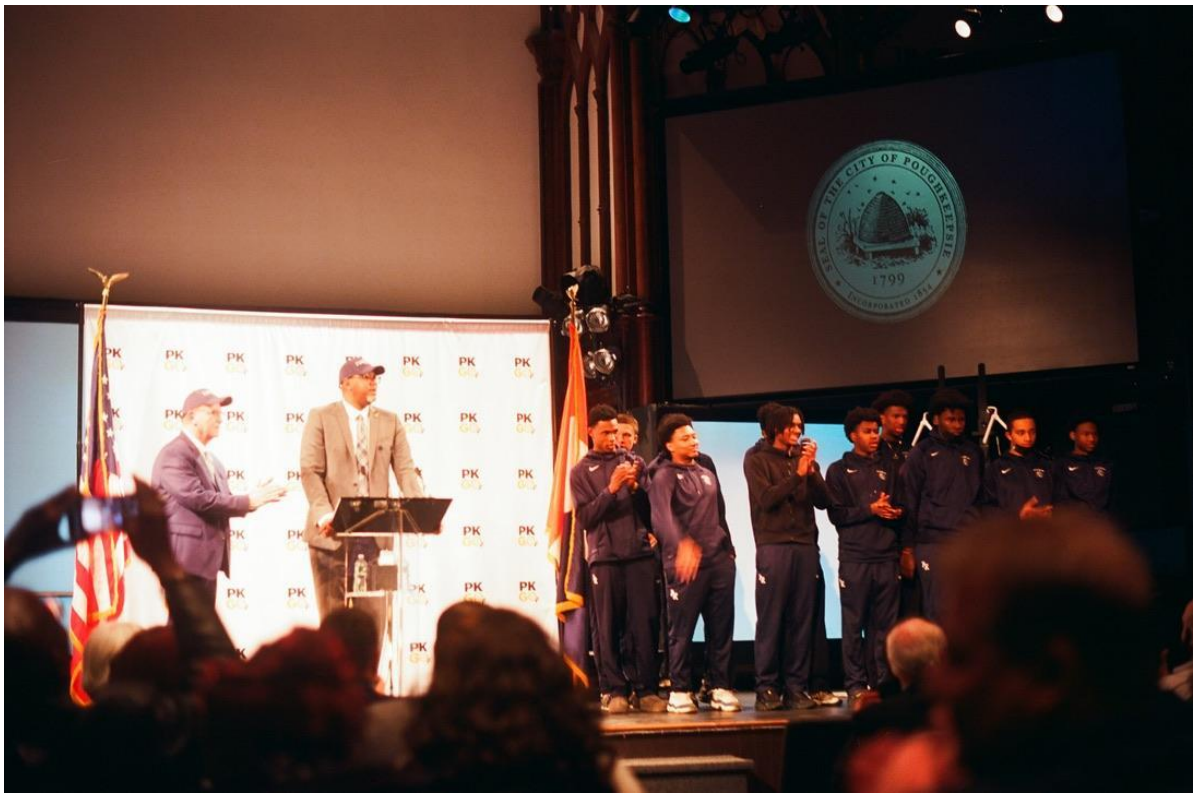
the growth of it. But I am not excited to see where it's gonna put the people of color. All of [what's] happening, it's being done by white people. And what they're not taking into account is how diverse Poughkeepsie is... they're not taking into account how no one can afford that."

Housing here is already unaffordable, already at max compacity. Those paying more than 30% of their income on housing are "cost-burdened." In Poughkeepsie, half of residents are cost-burdened. Over half of those residents pay more than 50% of their income on housing.[58] "We're stuck here," Isis said, "People of color are the ones that are suffering. People of color are the ones that don't have the equitable jobs," echoing the issue that goes back to the industrial golden age of the city. "People of color care so much about the community, and yet, we're the ones that are getting pushed out."

The American Rescue Plan, the Innovation District, the Division of Youth Opportunity and Development, the perennial playoff basketball team, the struggling school, the max occupancy rental market, the food desert, the callous politicking of the Common Council and mayor, the 10-year peak in violence, the multi-million-dollar master plans, the handful of community organizers including Isis that show up to nearly every open house, march, and protest. The last year in Poughkeepsie was a vortex, a gorgeous vortex to borrow Isis's phrasing. For now, it spins alongside the Hudson River.

[58] Ali, Saba. (2022, March 22). A broken ladder: Why fixing housing affordability in Dutchess is more than a city problem. *The Poughkeepsie Journal*.

Poughkeepsie's original community, the Lenape, called it *Shatemuc*, or the water that flows both ways. For the near future, the Pioneers will wait to see how their fortunes develop beside the restless force of nature.



Epilogue

For two weeks the Pioneers had the wind at their backs. They began the Section 1 Class A playoffs as the seven seed, but on March 6, they knocked off Our Lady of Lourdes in the sectional championship game. "This school has some of the most resilient youth in America," said Royce-Giron after toppling her former high school. "This moment means so much, not just to the team, but this community, she exclaimed,"[59] But they weren't done. In the state tournament, they received a bye and hammered Main-Endwell to reach the state semis. At the Cool Insuring Arena in Glenn Falls, their run closed with a loss to the eventual champions, the Manhasset Indians from the North Shore of Long Island.

[59] Haynes, Stephen. (2022, March 6). Boys basketball: Poughkeepsie rallies to beat Lourdes for Section 1 Class A title. *The Poughkeepsie Journal*.

I debriefed the season with coach Moffett while he was in between periods subbing for classes. After asking so many others in business and politics what they wanted to see in Poughkeepsie's future, I needed to ask Moffett, whose job is to teach the future, for his perspective.

Once again, he emphasized the adversity inherent to growth: "In my opinion, it's always about the people. I've been around some really good people in my lifetime. And to be honest with you, I've been fortunate enough to be around people that I don't view as such." For him, there wasn't a new development or tax new gimmick to try out. "It's the people that make a family and community foundation, as opposed to just the money. The people is where you start."

As I arrived to Changepoint Church for the mayor's address, I recognized a kid wearing the team's warmups getting out of a car. I knew what was about to happen. Sure enough, midway through Rosser's remarks, he invited the team on stage to recognize their achievement. The mayor and superintendent put on Pioneer hats and paused for a photo op with the team. It was fitting. At the end of one of the most difficult years for the school and the city, in the middle of a speech on deficits, infrastructure, and taxes, the city, as usual, looked up to its Pioneers.

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