

MID-HUDSON DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION INITIATIVE

BASIC INFORMATION

Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) Region: Mid-Hudson

Municipality Name: Town of Bedford

Downtown Name: Bedford Hills

County: Westchester

Downtown Description:

BEDFORD HILLS, NY offers a unique opportunity to showcase the many ways a sleepy Mid-Hudson Valley community can respond to the national shift in the role of suburbs and creatively redefine itself to spark economic growth and increase its relevance and appeal to a new generation. Re-igniting Bedford Hills' downtown area as a destination, imbuing it with a strong sense of place, community connection, economic vitality, walk-ability and activity, all pointing to wellness and health, is relevant and important to all our residents, both present and future. The impact we will make will resonate not only across the county, or our state, but nationally, as we collaborate across many stakeholder groups to build a model for an exciting new kind of suburban community that both embraces and enables a healthy, active lifestyle, while providing cultural enrichment, inter-connectedness and social well-being for all.

1/ DOWNTOWN IDENTIFICATION

Transforming BEDFORD HILLS into a Healthy, Vibrant, Suburban Destination

Bedford Hills (BH) is one of three hamlets within the Town of Bedford; the other two hamlets being Bedford Village and Katonah. Bedford Hills is a traditional downtown, centered around a historic train station (now a Metro-North station). Our hamlet includes residential neighborhoods of mixed and affordable housing stock, a central commercial strip, an industrial zone and the seat of town government, all within about one square mile. This is the most densely populated hamlet and the demographic data show that it is also the most economically, ethnically and culturally diverse hamlet within the Town of Bedford. *Bedford Hills Correctional Facility* and *Taconic Correctional Facility*, both for women, are contiguous to the hamlet. Services and institutions within walking distance include: the *Bedford Hills Free Library*, *Bedford Hills Elementary School*, *Bedford Hills Historical Museum*, *Antioch Baptist Church*, *St. Matthias*, *Stepping Stones National Landmark* and the *Community House* for town programs. Other organizations include the *Bedford Hills Neighborhood Association*, *Lions Club*, *Rotary Club*, and *Woman's Club*.

Bedford Hills has succumbed over the past few years into the typical suburban community downward spiral of obsolescence of small retail shops, unfocused traffic patterns, uninspired strip mall development, stagnant property values, and below-capacity school populations. However, there are areas of bright hope! We also have built-in resources and assets, which include our diversity, central location, cultural attractions, and areas of natural beauty. Now is a critical moment to harness our assets, tackle our issues, build new systems, re-purposing or upgrading aging infrastructure, and attract young professionals young families to the area. In Bedford Hills, we can create conversations about the challenges of climate change, the gaps of opportunity and wealth, youth flight, diversity of culture, ethnicity, in ways that value and preserve differences, highlighting our shared goals, bringing together segments of the population not usually connected.

Bedford Hills LIVE (BHL) was recently formed as a 501(c)(3) non-profit, specifically to seek solutions to the challenges of our community. Our mission is to strengthen the Bedford Hills area through an organized collaboration comprised of residents, civic groups and local business owners, in conjunction with the municipal government. We know that Bedford Hills, with its side-by-side diversity, provides a timely opportunity and place to face our challenges together. An injection of state funds specifically for revitalizing our downtown would spur the pent up interest in improvement, encouraging private, public and non-profit investment. By leveraging our town's knowledge base and expertise in health and wellness, food and agriculture, real estate and business, combined with our substantial human resources and potential access to capital, we can create a community capable of providing every citizen the opportunity to thrive with an active, healthy, prosperous life.

2 / SIZE: THE HAMLET OF BEDFORD HILLS & CATCHMENT AREA

While the common notion may be that Bedford is wealthy enough to fund its own development, the hamlet of Bedford Hills is a distinct hamlet and special community deserving a closer look:

Bedford Hills Downtown:

- Population approximately 3,000 and 1 sq. mile [is this only downtown?]
- 36.9% Hispanic (vs. 19.8% in Town of Bedford)
- 24% are children and over 50% under 39 years
- Median income \$51,200 (vs. \$96,900 in Town of Bedford)

The catchment area:

- Town of Bedford, population 17,335 and 39 sq. miles
- Neighboring towns, Lewisboro, Mt. Kisco, North Castle, Pound Ridge, combined population of 40,233

Bedford Hills Area Highlights:

- 53+ businesses in Bedford Hills, 58 in light industrial zone
- Bedford Hills provides municipal parking for 350 town residents
- The Community Center of Northern Westchester, located in Bedford, 2,000 families from 38 communities with the majority from Bedford and Mt. Kisco
- The Bedford Hills Free Library has 2,500 resident cardholders and 50,000 annual visits
- The newly formed Bedford Playhouse has 950 grassroots contributors
- The NW Hospital catchment area is 350,000 people, in 2015 served 67,856 patients, 700 employees
- Rt. 117 has more than 17,000 cars pass by daily ***

Northern Westchester property values are still down 25-35% since 2007, having not recovered from the 2008 recession. Our high property tax rates push potential new residents to neighboring Connecticut, where the taxes are commensurate with the local environment. We need a big vision solution to highlight the cost value of our taxes. Our schools are also presenting a challenge as populations decline, making the budgets untenable and reducing the overall appeal to young families. Following national trends, even big box strip malls are suffering long term vacancies. We must find ways to reverse the cycle of decline by building the kind of attractive places to live for new buyers and restoring the population and tax base necessary to support critical services.

***Information from the 2010 Census, the 2009-13 American Community Survey, The Town of Bedford, Commercial Real Estate professionals, Community Organizations noted

3/ INVESTMENTS: PAST & FUTURE POTENTIAL

Over the past 10 years the Town of Bedford has made substantial investments and strides in environmental awareness and actions to collectively reduce the town's carbon footprint and preserve natural resources in partnership with Bedford 2020, the Climate Action Plan, Energize and Solarize Bedford, already nearing the goal of 20% reduction by 2020. Combined with a new town water treatment plant, the recent Community Choice Aggregation to increase renewable energy use, and the potential to upgrade infrastructure with new a sewer district for business districts (including Bedford Hills), the Town of Bedford is a model for environmental sustainability.

Twelve new units of affordable housing are currently being developed in Bedford Hills with Antioch Baptist Church. This development is a result of funding from the County of Westchester, a New York State Community Development Block Grant, and housing initiatives fostered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Town of Bedford donated land adjacent to the development so that a septic system may be installed.

There is also investment across a strong network of non-profit and cultural organizations, such as: *The Northern Westchester Hospital* in Mt. Kisco, which recently expanded its emergency room through a NYS grant, is the largest employer in Mt. Kisco and growing. *The Bedford Playhouse* in Bedford Village is re-configuring the traditional movie theater as a center for culture and education, re-invigorating the area with activity and becoming a community anchor. Similarly, *Rippowam Cisqua School*, a local private school, is underway with a full renovation of their facility using environmentally sustainable technology. And, *The Westchester Land Trust* continues work to preserve open land and also focuses on land for agricultural use.

We would like to complement these investments by government, non-profits and business with an economic development and sustainable growth plan and initiatives for all ages, incomes, and cultures to thrive. Incorporating green practices and developments will strengthen our area as a valuable place work and live. Our belief is that collaborative efforts are critical now and will result in our community growing stronger, more resilient and more economically viable than ever before, creating a shared benefit for all.

The economic stability of our town is seriously impacted by investment in our real estate market and sadly, we have not recovered here from the financial crash of 2008 and our property values are down by approximately 25-35% with no sign of increasing. Regionally there is an enormous demographic shift in the marketplace with the new millennial buyers who place a tremendous premium on living near a vibrant, active downtown and our town must provide more of this experience to be competitive with other areas.

Potential investment in Bedford Hills:

- Mixed-use and affordable housing in the industrial zone near the downtown
- The BH Free Library- expansion physically and enhanced educational programs
- The Historic Train Station restored to a Community Café, a public/ private partnership
- Food hub with incubator kitchens and a food coop
- Sewer system in the business district
- Expanding the Farm Market @ BH and adding SNAP
- BH Historic Museum located in hamlet center
- Art & Culture programs-an annex for cultural institutions and public art
- Green spaces/ pocket parks/ community gardens/ Bike paths and rentals

4/ JOB GROWTH

Bedford Hills displays excellent potential for job growth in large part because of its location at the center of Northern Westchester, with easy transportation access to business and commercial centers. Enhancing Bedford Hills as a vibrant living place and increasing density through a range of housing options would increase demand for businesses offering convenience and entertainment. Revitalization would spur improvement in the downtown economy and increase the appeal of the surrounding train station hub.

The downtown BH district has been restricted due to its reliance on septic systems for waste management. This has inhibited the attractions of many new business to the areas. However, the Town has recently proposed a new sewer district for the downtown business area, which would open up the development of housing, restaurants and other quick-service concepts which would make downtown more attractive for both businesses and residents. Additionally, traffic flow and parking improvements have been identified as necessary to support growth. As a result of new development and infrastructure improvements, downtown revitalization would create jobs in construction and put Bedford Hills residents to work.

With a boost to the vibrancy of the area and the ability to add and attract more business to the district, we would expect jobs creation within small businesses, retail, light industry, and food service. Additionally, there has been interest from the design and arts sector for studio space in the industrial area, due to the access and proximity to NYC. Tying into the existing arts and culture institutions provides an extra hook and lure. Another trend with millennial buyers is portable businesses and the appeal of relocating their businesses as they move to the area, especially noting the ability to attract young staff members with proximity to the train.

More specifically, *Bedford Hills LIVE* has proposed a new and innovative use for the empty historic train station at the center of the hamlet: a non-profit 'Community Café' that would operate full time, bring people into the hamlet, provide evening life, and function as community event and cultural space while restoring the historic building. Responding to demand in the region for well-trained food service workers, the 'Community Café' would run a training program for entry level jobs and entrepreneurship, potentially collaborating with the *Community Center of Northern Westchester* and their vocational training programs *as well as Westchester Community College, BOCES* and area chefs for jobs placement. This would also be a feeder system to culinary programs and higher-level education.

Continuing the theme of job training in the food service industry and cultivating a food hub, we view organizations like *LA Kitchen* (<http://www.lakitchen.org>) and other incubator kitchens as having strong potential in the industrial corridor to develop value-added kitchens which may contribute to the network of regional farms and artisanal food production with easy access to large marketplaces, i.e Westchester and New York City. We see the *BH Correctional Facility* and *Taconic Correctional Facility* as potential program partners in the food service and agricultural sectors, to build skills for women and incorporating the prison population into a contributing part of our community in both food growing (including aquaponics), production, and service either within the correctional system or upon release. This could link to existing programs at the prisons: Marymount Manhattan College Degree program and the Horticulture program.

5/ THE ATTRACTIVE QUALITIES OF BEDFORD HILLS

Bedford has long been attractive to commuters as a quiet place to live with beautiful land and historic character. Increasingly though, this is not enough to remain attractive as we have seen property values decline compared to other areas in Westchester and Connecticut. Bedford Hills is a rare opportunity for retaining the best aspects of the beautiful, semi-rural setting, within one hour travel distance of New York City and other centers of employment. Bedford Hills stands at this crossroads in many ways, poised to thrive as a new suburban experience: a central location and hub of transportation combined with a nexus of diversity, a focus on health & wellness, and surrounded by cultural institutions, historic character, open space, and natural resources.

Our quality of living:

- A strong focus in our area on health & wellness
- Care for local, quality food access that has grown with young farmers in the area and farm markets
- Community institutions, library, schools, hospital
- Local character and community spirit

The cultural institutions in the Bedford area that are a draw from around the county and NYC:

- *The Katonah Museum of Art*
- *Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts*
- *John Jay Homestead*
- *The Bedford Playhouse (renovations in process)*
- *Stepping Stones National Landmark*

Parks, Nature Preserves and active lifestyle attractions:

- *3 town parks*
- *Westmoreland Sanctuary*
- *Bedford Audubon Society*
- *Mianus River Gorge*
- *Bedford Riding Lanes Assoc.*
- *Ward Pound Ridge Reservation*
- *Lasdon Park Arboretum*

An intriguing new potential is to focus on the *Bedford Hills Correctional Facility's* rich history, both in our community and in the broader society, with the aim to better physically and culturally integrate the facility with the Town.. A challenging task, but the nearby communities of Ossining, NY which hosts Sing Sing Correctional Facility and Hudson, NY which hosts Hudson Correctional Facility are recent examples. We can envision tapping into the histories of the correctional facilities for the benefit of their communities as a real possibility in an era of national interest in both prison reform and prison history. The *Bedford Hills Correctional Facility* opened here in 1901 as the NYS Reformatory for Women, one of the first female "reformatories" in the United States. Since its beginnings, this prison has been the site of significant developments in penal and social history. The *Prison Public Memory Project* (www.prisonpublicmemory.org), which has been working with the community in Hudson, NY excavating, interpreting and creating programming for locals and tourists around the history of the prison there, would collaborate with *BHL, the BH Historical Museum and BH Free Library* in the development of a living history project with artist involvement developing a truly unique tourist attraction for new audiences.

6/ POLICIES TO ENHANCE QUALITY OF LIFE

The Town of Bedford began the process of updating its Comprehensive Plan with a series of public engagement workshops in the fall 2015, led by the Pace Law School Land Use Law Center. The report strongly identified the communities concern for the condition of our downtown areas, specifically the dramatic decay of Bedford Hills with key vacant properties, including a long term foreclosed property, and a recently closed anchor food business. Residents across different demographic groups expressed their desire for the downtowns to be active, engaging, centers for community gathering. Small business owners communicated that many are struggling to survive or simply self-funding with the hope of seeing a change.

Our community needs to create a central place that keeps our residents here both to spend leisure time and money as well as inviting new home-owners to set roots. Many people drive to Connecticut to go to dinner, shop, cultural events and the lower real estate tax rate is a serious lure as many CT towns are within similar commuting distance to NYC. With the highest tax rate in the area, Bedford needs to build a center of life and community for its own residents, in order to support the tax base and make community members feel like there is a value and benefit to local and state taxes.

The Town of Bedford zoning codes allow for mixed use, they are discussing Complete Streets and Transit-oriented development, as well as addressing infrastructure improvements. But town policy cannot impact everything and there are other government agencies with jurisdiction- Westchester County, New York City, and New York State. Additionally, the Town of Bedford must spread its resources over 3 distinct hamlets which has, in part, led to Bedford Hills - the hamlet with the greatest need and least outside resources - to gain a reputation of tired neglect.

Bedford Hills LIVE organized in order to approach our concerns from another perspective and bring the community together, as well as resources, to help the Town Government with fresh ideas and solutions. Our organization is united in our effort to make Bedford Hills a vital and dynamic place to live, work and raise a family. In less than one year with a very limited budget, BHL has hosted a public forum workshop with a planning experts Project for Public Spaces, created a harvest dinner, started a farm market, provided beautification efforts, presented to the town proposals for traffic and safety improvements, and crafted a plan for a non-profit 'Community Café' in the historic train station. With our connections and links throughout the community of Bedford, we have brought new attention to Bedford Hills, creating an awareness of the strong potential of the hamlet to not just improve the overall area, but become a major draw and added contributor to the local and regional economy. The BHL efforts need to be expanded tenfold. Bedford has a tremendous breadth of human, commercial and natural resource capital, which, if mobilized, can have a far-reaching economic impact specifically on our town and Northern Westchester in general

7 / LOCAL SUPPORT

We are rooted in our care and concern for realizing a vibrant economy and a strengthened community right here in Bedford Hills, with a shared vision fueled by the cumulative effect of our individual knowledge, experience and connections to create a new model for suburban communities.

“Every revitalization project needs a champion – someone to initiate the process, fight to ensure it is done right and follow through to completion.” Urban Land Institute

Local Leads/ a DRI Committee:

Bedford Hills LIVE, Cynthia Brennan, Gerardo Mendez, Terrie Paladino

Town of Bedford, Supervisor Chris Burdick & Board Members Maryann Carr, Mary Beth Kass, Lee Roberts, Don Scott

Community representatives & business representatives

COLLABORATORS:

Town and County Government Community

BH Library

BH Neighborhood Association

BH Historical Museum

BH Chamber of Commerce

Woman’s Club

Lion’s Club

Rotary Club

Antioch Baptist Church

St. Matthias

Westchester Land Trust

Bedford 2020

The Bedford Playhouse

Stepping Stones National Landmark

Prison Public Memory Project

Nature Preservation

Westmoreland

Marsh Sanctuary

Mianus River Gorge

Education

Area schools (public and private)

Westchester Community College

BOCES

Social / Health / Wellness Services

Community Center of Northern Westchester

Neighbors Link

Northern Westchester Hospital

A-Home

Transcendental Meditation

Business

Real Estate

Car dealers

Food service

Retail

Industrial

Builders

Culture

Katonah Museum of Art

Caramoor Center for Music & the Arts

John Jay Homestead

Local foundations

Westchester Community Foundation

Community Capital NY

8 / OTHER, PROPOSED DEVELOPMENTS & INITIATIVES

Bedford Hills can be developed with an articulated and funded plan to connect cultural assets and natural resources, New Americans, area philanthropy, public and private investment for a new kind of suburban center, one that reflects American cultural and social changes, one that builds true resiliency. The cornerstone projects we identify as unique and key to enhancing quality of life for all residents with a broad overarching theme of holistic well-being and an active lifestyle:

THE COMMUNITY CAFÉ, *A driver of vitality, activity, and destination at the historic train station.*

- A gathering place for community events and cultural activities
- An entrepreneurial training program with community organizations and area chefs.
- Restoration of a historic building/ creation of a town centerpiece / utilizing green operational practices.
- A plan to host an expanded Farmers Market, including SNAP program & bike rental program.

BEDFORD HILLS FREE LIBRARY, *Physical expansion to occupy a new presence in the hamlet.*

- Expansion of programming and educational opportunities with other community organizations.
- Focus on community needs for technology, teen center, and after school activities.
- Developing a training program with local prison for inmate education, specifically, library sciences, history and writing workshops.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING, *New and existing affordable housing properties.*

- Potential to create additional housing on Adam Street or Railroad Avenue, as well as improve access and connection to downtown.
- Support existing Senior Housing with added services.

COMMUNITY HOUSE, *Upgrade facilities and expand public programming*

- Focus on Senior activities and access.

CULTURE & ART, *Downtown annex for area culture institutions with programming & public art*

- Bringing art education programs to greater public visibility.
- Connect to transportation hub/ New York City to draw tourism.
- Tapping the history of the *BH Correctional Facility*, following trends of new interest.
- Public art opportunities.
- Industrial area for studios/ live/ work.

INCUBATOR KITCHEN, *Development as a central food hub*

- Potential in the industrial area for incubator kitchens

BEDFORD HILLS CORRECTIONAL FACILITY, *Integrate history and programs more into community*

- Training for skills/ health & nutrition/ gardening/ food security/ incubator kitchen.
- Highlight history of BHCF in our community, a living story initiative/ museum without walls.