

BASIC INFORMATION

Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) Region: **Hudson Valley**

Municipality Name: **City of Mount Vernon**

Downtown Name: **Downtown Mount Vernon**

County: **Westchester County**

Downtown Description - Provide an overview of the downtown and summarize the rationale behind nominating this downtown for a Downtown Revitalization Initiative (“DRI”) award:

According to the Journal News, the City of Mount Vernon (Mt. Vernon) is where the next generation of New Yorkers is coming to live and work. Our unique location, diversity, walkability, and access to the nation’s busiest transit hubs makes Mt. Vernon the focal point for sustainable growth. A state-funded market study found that Mt. Vernon could grow its economic activity by \$208 million if the city were to fill vacant storefronts in its downtown. Currently under new leadership, the city is proposing new policies to realize its potential by implementing a ground floor tax credit for “mom and pop” shops to jumpstart job growth.

We are nominating Mt. Vernon’s downtown to receive the Downtown Revitalization Initiative Award (DRI) because over 40 percent of resident and worker spending occurs outside of Mt. Vernon. Additionally, 30 percent of our downtown retail space is vacant, contributing to a depressed local economy. There is no reason for this to continue.

Mt. Vernon is situated at the intersection of all the major transits nodes between New York City and the northeastern United States. The downtown is served by two Metro-North train lines and is easily accessible off of Interstate 95, the Cross-County Parkway, the Bronx River Parkway, the Hutchinson River Parkway, and the Sprain Brook Parkway. Two New York City subway stops are accessible less than a mile from downtown and the Westchester County Bus Line provides direct access to these stops. Mt. Vernon has approximately 68,458 residents within zip codes 10550, 10552, and 10553. The City is a compact 4.4 square miles making it one of the most densely populated cities in New York State, second only to New York City.

Selecting Mt. Vernon as the Hudson Valley’s DRI is a natural fit on multiple levels. First, it will put us on track toward activating over \$200 million in downtown economic development. This translates into an additional \$12 million in new tax dollars for the city, essentially doubling our sales tax budget of on average \$17 million. Second, this will lead to a dramatic reduction in the crippling property tax burden on homeowners enabling Mt. Vernon to shed the distinction of the highest taxed city in the region. Last, it will enable the city to accelerate its business retention and attraction plans by incentivizing new economy companies to flock to Mt. Vernon because of our resilient and reliable infrastructure and proximity to New York City.

DOWNTOWN IDENTIFICATION

1) Boundaries of the Downtown Neighborhood

Downtown Mt. Vernon is compact, easily accessible, and well-defined by existing boundaries. The northern boundary of downtown is Hartley Park, a popular community gathering space. Mt. Vernon Hospital marks the western end of downtown, the Fulton Avenue Bridge borders the downtown on the east and the south is bordered by an industrial zone. Within this perimeter is Mt. Vernon’s Central Business District (CBD). Additionally, there are two smaller enclaves within Downtown Mt. Vernon that afford a "downtown living lifestyle".

The CBD was recently further expanded in 2010 with the adoption of an urban renewal plan for a one block industrial corridor along South Fourth Avenue between East Third and East Fourth Streets. This urban renewal plan expansion created an overlay zoning district; wherein, mixed use development is encouraged to

allow for greater commercial amenities within the CBD thus maximizing the livability of the CBD. The city prioritizes the development of walkable neighborhoods as current population trends show people desiring to live and work in locations that are less auto-dependent. To date 812 residential multi-family units, 170,000 sq. ft of retail and commercial and a municipal parking garage featuring 584 parking spaces is planned for this zone.

2) Size.

Downtown Mt. Vernon is a Transit Oriented Development (“TOD”) Center and has been since its inception. The downtown area is easily accessible existing populations. It is also only 27 minutes via Metro North to Grand Central Station which makes it a prime location for young professionals seeking a reasonable commute to their jobs while maintaining an active and affordable lifestyle. Downtown Mt. Vernon’s downtown supports an array of land uses, including retail, housing, office space, parks and green space, and institutions.

Many of the commercial amenities are owned and operated by small "mom and pop" stores with deep roots providing individualized goods and services and the level of community connection that the next generation of New Yorkers seek as they select a preferable location to live, work, and raise their families. The CBD is also home to a numerous mass transit network, one of the City’s greatest competitive advantages. While the network itself allows pedestrians to walk a maximum of two blocks to reach buses that do not directly enter the County's third busiest bus terminal called Petrillo Plaza. Petrillo Plaza has numerous bus routes that traverse the City on a continual basis. This allows for various levels of connectivity from a bus transferring stand point but also makes this facility a multimodal transit accommodation because the Metro-North's Mt. Vernon East Train Station stands directly adjacent (1 block to the north).

Directly adjacent to Mt. Vernon's CBD are our outlying neighborhoods. These neighborhoods embody "high rise" housing for Westchester County standards as well as low scale high density dwellings. The Downtown’s high rise housing stock includes buildings which average approximately 10-20 stories and includes the City's tallest building at 22 stories. These high rises were constructed in the 1970's in accordance with the Mitchell-Lama Housing Program and are found north of the Metro-North Rail tracks. The low scale high density housing located within the Downtown is found south of the Metro-North Rail tracks and was constructed in the late 1800's - the early 1900's. This architecturally significant housing inventory has been internally subdivided and/or contains multi-generational families. These homes are typically attached "brownstones" or Victorian style dwellings. All of this housing stock ties into Mt. Vernon being the second mostly densely populated city in the State behind New York City.

Coupled with this high density housing stock is a regionally disproportionately high number of affordable units. He CBD has Mitchell-Lama buildings that were constructed for middle-income residents to have affordable housing. At the same time, Downtown Mt. Vernon has been one of three major places where the County has traditionally sought to create affordable units within Westchester. Accordingly, downtown Mt. Vernon's has many of the County's affordable units.

Downtown Mt. Vernon is also home to many institutional uses many of which are located in architecturally, historically and/or culturally significant buildings. These uses include a Montefiore Hospital, government offices, schools and performing arts studios.

With all of these attributes in place, it is easy to understand that Downtown Mt. Vernon has all of the necessary infrastructure in place to support the various activities that occur in a typical major-city downtown. This existing infrastructure includes sewers, water, mass transit, roads, bridges, municipal parking facilities and schools. While most of Downtown's infrastructure was built in the late 1800's, the City is working diligently to continue upgrading its infrastructure to support the future growth of Downtown.

3) Past Investments & Future Investment Potential.

Mount Vernon has \$6.1 billion in residential and commercial development, of which \$2 billion is in the ground and \$4 billion is in discussion. This number does not include hundreds of millions in infrastructure and utility investments to serve the growing population. The \$10 million award will be transformative. It will enhance our strategy to meet the needs of the new, creative economy while preserving our strong industrial base. There are approximately 22,000 jobs in Mount Vernon of which 8,000 are related to manufacturing, construction, transportation, and distribution. The city has an abysmal 125 for the technology sector. The DRI will change that by making our downtown the most connected tech sector on the planet, ahead of Wall Street.

There is a significant stock of developable properties within the downtown zone and the city has prioritized policies, starting with aggressive tax breaks matched by tactical clean-ups to maximize desirability of said locations. For example, the Mount Vernon Industrial Development Agency is seeking to offer tax credits to storefronts on the “ground floor” of many of these properties. Numerous studies show that availability of diverse retail establishments lead to a sustainable and walkable downtown that is attractive to many young professionals who seek urban environments that are healthy and conducive to a pedestrian culture. As the city moves to stop crime and grime, it is also moving to plant trees and make public spaces more green to soften the urban environment.

As Mayor Thomas presented to the World Economic Forum on the future of mobility, Mount Vernon desires to become an electric city combining walkability with autonomous travel. Mount Vernon has a WalkScore of 76 comparable to Washington, D.C. A study by WalkScore, a national organization devoted to using data to evaluate urban livability standards, found that the average Mount Vernon resident could walk to an average of four separate restaurants, bars, and coffee shops within five minutes.

The City of Mount Vernon has committed to continued investment in the downtown region, particularly its transit network and zoning policies. In 2015, Mount Vernon adopted the South 4th Avenue – East 3rd Street Urban Renewal Plan which is a public/private partnership that is transforming a former one-block industrial area into a diverse residential and commercial area that will be an environment that people want to live in.

Since January, the city has undertaken an aggressive approach to road resurfacing using crowd-sourced data to identify the most problematic locations in downtown and allocate existing resources accordingly. Mount Vernon is also leveraging public private partnerships and allowing individual neighborhood associations to bond and co-finance with the city road resurfacing. The city prioritizes collaboration with other stakeholders including the Metropolitan Transit Authority and Con Edison thus coordinating infrastructure upgrades in a cohesive manner allowing for a more efficient process.

Most importantly, the compact and easily accessible design of Mount Vernon’s existing downtown allow for ready application of Smart Growth principles. The centralized location allows for the reduction of sprawl as the population and resources are focused on a well-defined area. There is diverse land use with many existing residential buildings woven in with restaurants, retail, transit hubs, and office space.

Mount Vernon is a recognized capital of arts and entertainment. Our festivals, athletic stature, long roster of celebrities, and burgeoning film industry enhance our value proposition to receive the DRI.

4) Job Growth.

Downtown Mt. Vernon is well-situated to attract continued job growth in the near future. Mt. Vernon has partnered with private industry to support development that is market rate and will attract young professionals as well as individuals well-established in their careers.

Downtown Mt. Vernon imports more goods and services than it exports—whether the customer is in a neighboring community or in an overseas market. Accordingly, jobs and labor tend to move to locations where more goods and services are manufactured and exported rather than imported. This is a strong indicator of the health of the area’s economy. This relates to an economic surplus as opposed to the economic deficit in which the heart of Mt. Vernon’s economy has been mired for years. Mt. Vernon as a whole has also been exporting more labor and intellectual capital than it retains.

While the aforementioned holds true, the City of Mt. Vernon has over 16,000 people commuting into the municipality for work on a daily basis. Many of this number are employed in Downtown Mt. Vernon or in a light-industrial area directly adjacent to the Downtown. This is coupled with the fact that there are over 3,000 people who live and work within the City’s borders. It is important to underscore that a majority of this workforce is employed either in Downtown Mt. Vernon or in the adjacent light industrial area. This is proven in that there is an approximate 15% difference between Mt. Vernon's total population and its daytime population and serves as an indicator of the City’s economic health. This economic indicator leads to the following considerations:

1. There is ample room for job growth when considering the amount of underutilized land within the boundaries of Downtown Mt. Vernon.
2. There is room for industry within Downtown Mt. Vernon, and
3. There is robust pool of untapped labor within and around Downtown Mt. Vernon.

Prior to the 1960's, Mt. Vernon's main industry was "goods handling" as indicated in the City's adopted 1968 Comprehensive Plan. Currently, 58% of the City's private sector employment is "service providing". While there is room for growth, the Downtown Revitalization Initiative will assist the City in determining which industry best fits Downtown Mt. Vernon. Accordingly, the City has evidenced its willingness make the necessary changes in the zoning code, allow building heights to maximize floor area ratio in order to increase property values . The City is very accommodating when it comes to these types of concessions because it translates into "jobs". This means that the local labor force will come to Downtown Mt. Vernon pursuing employment opportunities directly from the industry(ies) the Downtown Revitalization Initiative helps the City to collaboratively identify as most viable or with the greatest likelihood of generating new jobs consistent with our Downtown. Specifically, the resulting outcome will be the identification and subsequent establishment of the best industry(ies) suitable and complementary to Downtown Mt. Vernon and generate a net increase of locally produced exports.

Operating on a parallel, but equally important, long-term track the City will enhance its relationship with the Mt. Vernon City School District to support demand-based learning for in-school youth, the under and unemployed, our Veterans, as well as the difficult to employ and re-entry populations. The Mt. Vernon City School District is also committed to participating with the City and State in the provision of job training for their student pool. We are confident that the sum of this collective investment will yield a burgeoning and robust Downtown Mt. Vernon economy and a net positive increase to our region’s gross domestic product (“GDP”).

5) Attractiveness of the Downtown.

Downtown Mt. Vernon has a very attractive downtown because of the infrastructure that is currently in place to support high-tech, high-skilled industries. The current provisions in the zoning code facilitate these types of needs within existing office buildings. Much of Downtown Mt. Vernon's office space inventory remains unoccupied because due to the lack of marketing and the various high-tech industries are not aware of Downtown Mt. Vernon.

Accordingly, Downtown Mt. Vernon has numerous affordable housing options ranging from the Mitchell-Lama housing in the northern part of Downtown Mt. Vernon to the historically, culturally and/or architecturally significant structures found in the southern section of Downtown Mt. Vernon. This is coupled with various housing options that are found within Downtown Mt. Vernon most of which is multifamily living but there are many two-family homes and single family homes as well.

Downtown Mt. Vernon is very walkable. Many commercial amenities are located within Downtown so that people elect to use a "Park Once" strategy. This is where people park their car either on-street or a municipal parking facility and walk to various stores and shops in which they seek to conduct business. Downtown Mt. Vernon offers numerous opportunities to expand this type of approach. Coupled with this method is multimodal transit system found within Downtown. As Downtown Mt. Vernon continues to grow and expand, people will find it easier to use mass transit because of its reliability as opposed to driving. While the City is working to incorporate "bike specific" infrastructure on City streets, Downtown Mt. Vernon is very accessible for anyone using non-motorized transportation. Accordingly, the pedestrian friendly nature of Downtown Mt. Vernon is very attractive to anyone seeking an urban downtown living accommodation.

To further showcase Downtown Mt. Vernon's attractiveness, the zoning is currently in place for high density office space which is ideal for innovation in terms of high-tech companies. Downtown Mt. Vernon has three zoning designation in place with the intent to transform the City's downtown. Of the three zoning designations two are special overlay zones which allow for mixed use development which the underlying zoning does not allow and they allow for taller building heights. Downtown Mt. Vernon becomes very tempting because the City is willing to change the zoning of Downtown Mt. Vernon to permit mixed use development.

Adaptive reuse of architecturally, culturally and/or historically significant structures is another unique feature of Downtown Mt. Vernon. Accordingly, the City is willing to support building new structures but is also willing to make the necessary allowances for the adaptive reuse of existing structures within Downtown Mt. Vernon.

Downtown Mt. Vernon is very open to identifying or creating a unique marketing niche that will be attractive to high-tech industry and the high wage jobs that this sector creates. Many high-tech firms have been looking at venues in Upstate New York due to the many incentives the State has put in place; however, Downtown Mt. Vernon is a more competitive and viable option because there is an existing infrastructure in place as well as our close proximity to Manhattan, Connecticut and world's economy and the multi-modal transportation access Mt. Vernon has to the same..

Another feature is that the Mt. Vernon City School District is seeking to establish a training and apprenticeship program with the industry. This provides high school students, the underemployed and "hard to employ" individuals with an opportunity to become trained, skilled labor while providing a skilled labor force for an industry with jobs waiting for them in their own home town.

6) Policies to Enhance Quality of Life.

Mt. Vernon has many of the same policies aimed at enhancing the City's quality of life that can be found in most major cities; however the following merits mention based on their effectiveness, innovation and the priority the City has assigned to them. The first is called the *Mt. Vernon Quality of Life Task Force* ("the Task Force"). The Thomas Administration recently launched this major innovative initiative to focus on attacking "crime and grime." The Task Force uses the information found in publicly available sets of large data and analytics (i.e., "big data") to evaluate locations in Mt. Vernon that represent statistical outliers. These locations are ones that receive significantly more calls from constituents to police, fire, and other city agencies and translates to exorbitant expenses to the taxpayer. The Task Force travels house by house, neighborhood by neighborhood, and street by street to obtain and report its findings with the overarching objective of changing and improving the environment in order to stop crime and make our community a desirable place to live, work, play, and pray.

The second quality of life mandate is the creation of market rate housing. For decades Mt. Vernon has been Westchester's County's "affordable housing program" because prior to recent federal intervention, Mt. Vernon was the only city in the County where any meaningful affordable housing existed. As a result, Downtown Mt. Vernon has suffered from having more than its "Fair Share" of affordable housing. This has lead to not having an income mix and diversity in our housing stock thus positioning the City to meet the housing, commercial and retail needs of a wide range of income levels. Accordingly, Downtown Mt. Vernon's job to housing ratio is imbalanced in that many residents are paying more than 30% of their annual household income for their housing costs. As a result, higher end commercial and retail anchors believe Downtown Mt. Vernon's disposable income levels are too low to support their chain. Mt. Vernon seeks to address this issue by giving priority to market rate housing investments.

The third policy objective is to build over the Metro-North rail tracks, as referenced in the City's 1968 adopted Comprehensive Plan. By covering the tracks, the City seeks to increase the amount of buildable land within the Downtown and increase aesthetic appeal through the unification of the physical and visual landscape of the bisected CBD. We also seek to add additional parking facilities on the periphery of the Downtown. The additional parking amenities will encourage and reinforce the City's "park-once strategy" and reduce congestion within the Downtown. Moreover, the City desires to cover the railway cut to create a park increase local property values, beautify the Downtown, and enhance the sense of community by utilizing the newly created space to host various outdoor civic events such as "Jazz in the Park" or free outdoor music series.

The fourth policy is the updating of the City's comprehensive plan, which began in 2011. This process included public meetings, stakeholder meetings and a public survey; wherein, the City was divided into three planning areas based upon the intensity and level of planning needed for that specific area. Downtown Mt. Vernon was identified as a "High Intensity Planning Area" meaning that the City is fostering opportunities for more intensive development and encouraging new growth in terms of markets and industries.

Our fifth policy is to allow for more mixed use structures within our Downtown to capitalize upon the TOD advantages that the Downtown offers. This requires rezoning Downtown Mt. Vernon to allow for use redevelopment to occur. During the public survey, 59% of the respondents recommended that more mixed use development is warranted thus evidencing local stakeholders support for this policy.

Finally, the City seeks to create a "Downtown Revitalization Plan" to encompass the various redevelopment studies and outcomes from the Mt. Vernon East Brownfield Opportunity Area evaluation and leverage additional resources to benefit our Downtown.

7) Local Support.

Mt. Vernon enjoys tremendous local support for planning initiatives that will improve our Downtown. With regard to DRI, the City will establish a Mayoral Steering Committee to work with Mid-Hudson Regional Economic Council, the State's Planning Consultants, and other experts to coordinate the implementation of the Mt. Vernon Downtown Revitalization Initiative and maximize local support. Modeled after our successful 2011 Comprehensive Plan update process, the Mayoral Steering Committee will tentatively include the local Planning & Zoning Board Chairs, the City's Planning Commissioner, the Mt. Vernon Chamber of Commerce, local/regional business leaders, property owners and other major stakeholders. The City has found that the participation of the aforementioned individuals helps to establish a mechanism for more informed decision making as related to land use applications and builds in community involvement from the project's inception.

The City's comprehensive plan update process included the participation of local leaders to guide the overall process, conduct a public survey and facilitate numerous public and stakeholder meetings to update the community on the project's status as well as receive valuable feedback from the same. During the course of the comprehensive plan update process Downtown Mt. Vernon was highlighted as an area of the City where greater planning emphasis is required to take full economic advantage of Downtown Mt. Vernon as a TOD, spur economic growth, encourage new high-tech industry to relocate here, increase density, and intensify land uses, etc.

Accordingly, local support comes from a variety of vested stakeholders who are very interested and concerned with the future growth of Downtown Mt. Vernon. The groups include the citywide general public because they represent the grassroots heart of the City and our primary economic engine. The Mt. Vernon Chamber of Commerce and the Mt. Vernon Merchants' Association are excellent examples of local organizations that are directly impacted and concerned with any outcomes that may be established for Downtown Mt. Vernon. Also, there are many arts and cultural organizations to be identified through this process whose input as stakeholders will inform and advance this strategic investment plan.

The Mt. Vernon City Council is also major supporter of a strategic investment plan for Downtown Mt. Vernon. The City Council for many years has adopted many policies and approved the City's ability to enter into various grants in an effort to boost Downtown Mt. Vernon's economy. The City Council is also the Mayor's legislative partner in advancing his agenda to improve the quality of life for the City. While some strategies have assisted in the Downtown's growth, most are not strong enough to boost the level of market activity to prevent economic leakage and return Downtown Mt. Vernon to solvency.

Accordingly, the City has also enlisted the assistance of regional plans as resources to under gird the economic resurgence of Downtown Mt. Vernon. These regional plans include Westchester County Comprehensive Plan, Mid-Hudson Regional Sustainability Plan, Mid-Hudson South Regional Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan. Additionally, the City participates in current regional initiatives such as a Patterns for Progress study called "A Regional Plan for Urban Centers." The City is working with the Metro-North's TOD Unit whose "Mt. Vernon East" Train Station is in the heart of Downtown Mt. Vernon. The Regional Plan Association ("RPA") is writing "The Fourth Regional Plan" that Mt. Vernon in which the City is very engaged. The City is highly involved in the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council's "Regional Transportation Plan - 2045". The City is also working with the New York State Department of State to conduct a Brownfield Opportunity Area ("BOA") study around the Mt. Vernon East Train Station to assess the existing barriers to redevelopment and formulate actual strategies to alleviate any impediments to growth.

8) Other.

The City of Mt. Vernon and the Thomas Administration looks forward to partnering with the Regional Economic Development Council to make Downtown Mt. Vernon the region's model for municipal economic recovery. Over the past 50-60 years, Downtown Mt. Vernon has suffered the erosion of its fiscal edge from the top of the secondary market due to competition from Yonkers to west, Pelham Manor to east, New Rochelle to the northeast and the Bronx to the south. Prior to the neighboring communities capturing greater market shares, Downtown Mt. Vernon was at one time the economic engine of commercial activity for the region's secondary marketplace with White Plains and New York City being the primary markets.

Since that time, the City of Mt. Vernon has refocused on incorporating current economic and environmental sustainability practices and integrating resiliency policies into the transit oriented development, smart growth and livability practices that are fundamentally inherit within Downtown Mt. Vernon. Accordingly, the Downtown Revitalization Initiative will help the City of Mt. Vernon to restore the economic and fiscal health of not only Downtown but the City as a whole as it relates to spurring growth, reducing the tax burden on citizens, opening untapped markets, attracting new businesses, implementing business retention strategies, using public capital to stimulate private investment and fostering greater confidence in public-private partnerships to increase the City's capital circulation and eliminate the "leakage."

Due to Mt. Vernon's location and its size, it is the second most densely populated city in New York State, second to only New York City itself. With these levels of density in approximately 4.4 square miles, there is nothing preventing Mt. Vernon from having the fourth largest central business district in region behind Downtown Brooklyn where our Downtown shares many of the same characteristics of any major city's central business district. Accordingly, Downtown Mt. Vernon's foundation is based on economical choices in housing, employment, transportation, shopping and entertainment. As a result of shifting economic trends, Downtown Mt. Vernon's industry has left or waned; wherein, the tax base has suffered tremendously.

Currently, the property owners bear the biggest tax burden while Downtown Mt. Vernon provides fewer goods and services in return. This lack of return on investment not only reduces the economic vitality of the City but the entire region. Accordingly, Downtown Mt. Vernon is the Mid Hudson Regional Economic Development council's ideal candidate for selection to receive a Downtown Revitalization Initiative investment due to our extraordinary economic potential, high commercial vacancy rate, our lack of a major industry to fill that vacant commercial space and capitalize on underutilized land, generate jobs and provide training opportunities to those who find it difficult to (re)enter the workforce due to a lack of skills. We look forward to the challenge of partnering with the State to pursue our aggressive agenda to restore Downtown Mt. Vernon to being the shining jewel in the crown of Westchester County and New York State that it once was.