

# ENVISION BREWSTER

## HUDSON VALLEY PATTERN FOR PROGRESS

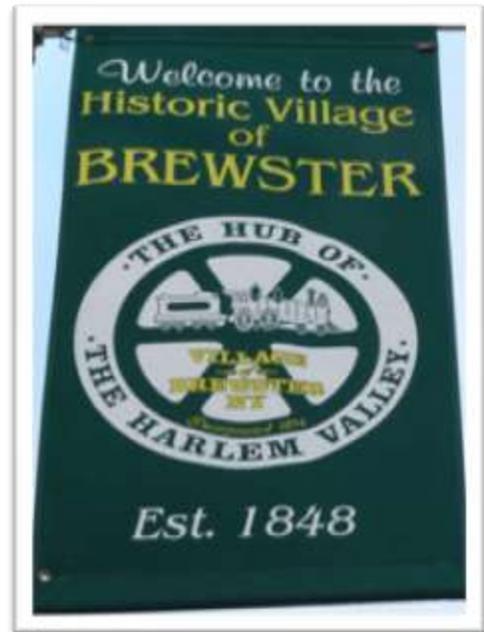
### FELLOWS CLASS 2013

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#### Introduction

The Village of Brewster, located in the northeastern corner of Putnam County, is a hidden gem with a very diverse community, it has all the ingredients and potential to become a vibrant Main Street and downtown. Based upon the existing conditions of the village, there appears to be a lack of vitality that one might see elsewhere in small communities throughout the Hudson Valley. Ranging from current, more broadly appealing retail establishments to engaging cultural opportunities to even fundamental services such as banks and post offices, the village—its Main Street in particular—lacks the amenities needed for healthy residential and business populations, which are missing elements for the attraction of new people, investment and new industry.

Indeed, our team site visits to Brewster did not expose us to a thriving Hudson Valley village, but perhaps to a more historic village—one that currently seems unable to make the necessary investments to become more than just a stop on the train for commuters utilizing its Metro North station, or a hang out for laborers either waiting or passed over for a day's work.



Surveys and subsequent anecdotal conversations with Main Street businesspeople indicate that there appears to be trust issues between some segments of the business community and the local government. It is in the opinion and view of some business owners that the village police are perhaps too great in number for the community's actual needs. Further opinion from some of the business community suggests building codes are often considered too restrictive for businesses to expand or for new ones to come in to Brewster. There is the need for more open lines of communication between retailers and government agencies.

Demographics have also drastically changed in the village of Brewster over the past 10 years, according to Census 2000 and Census 2010. The village has witnessed a dramatic increase in Hispanic and Latino populations and changes in the number of housing units and use. Hispanic and Latino populations have increased by 92.8 percent from 2000 to 2010, while the non-Hispanic and Latino population decreased by 28.3 percent. Today, the Hispanic and Latino population represent 56 percent of the total village population. The change in demographics is not a negative, but homeownership rates have unfortunately decreased as there has been population turnover.

Category	Census 2000	% of total	Census 2010	% of total	% change 2000 to 2010
<b>Population</b>	2162		2390		+10.54%
<b>Non-Hispanic and Latino</b>	1468	67.9%	1052	44%	-28.33%
<b>Hispanic and Latino</b>	694	32.1%	1338	56%	+92.79%
<b>Total Housing Units</b>	881		961		+9.1%
<b>Occupied</b>	840	95.3%	862	89.7%	+2.62%
<b>Vacant</b>	41	4.7%	99	10.3%	+141.46%
<b>Owner-Occupied</b>	208	24.8%	194	22.5%	-6.73%
<b>Renter-Occupied</b>	632	75.2%	668	77.5%	+5.7%
<b>Average HH Size (Owner)</b>	2.65		2.77		4.52%
<b>Average HH Size (Renter)</b>	2.48		2.72		9.67%

The village observed a 9.1 percent increase in the number of housing units during the last decade. There was a 22 unit increase in the number of occupied units and an increase of 58 vacant units. Simultaneously, the number of renter-occupied units increased by 5.7 percent and owner-occupied decreased by 6.73 percent. A healthy community is defined, in part, as having a homeownership rate of approximately 66 percent. The village has a home ownership rate of 22.5 percent as of Census 2010. The average household size has increased in both owner and renter-occupied housing units.

There is great potential in Brewster. The village has several assets that could be used to increase community engagement, which would help reveal the vibrancy we believe is there, but is presently obscured. With a long-term plan and someone in place to facilitate and implement strategic goals and objectives, Brewster could use the assets it has to attract both tourists and new development.

There is a railroad history that the village has branded. Historically—even as recently as the 1970s—three rail lines ran through Brewster. Presently, the Metro North Harlem Division has a stop in the village. There is also a Metro North stop in the town of Southeast, approximately 3–5 miles to the north. The second line, which is now the Putnam County Rail Trail and the North and South County Trailway in Westchester County, was the Putnam Division of the NY Central Railroad. Residents in Westchester and Putnam counties affectionately referred to this line as “The Old Put.” The third line was known as the “Bridge Route.” All trains traveling from Connecticut/New England westward had to cross the Hudson River over the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge, now known as the Walkway Over the Hudson. This line is also known as the Maybrook Corridor. Maybrook is located in Orange County. At one time the

Maybrook Rail Yards was the largest maintenance rail yard on the East Coast before the fire on the Poughkeepsie Bridge in 1974 shut the entire line down.

Perhaps the idea to tie in the existing Putnam County Rail Trail to a newly created North Putnam County Rail Trail on the Maybrook Corridor to the Dutchess County border would create the true hub the village has branded. If this could reach fruition, this trail could be connected to the Walkway. This would allow hikers or bikers to start in Van

Cortland Park in the Bronx, traverse all of Westchester County, Putnam County and lower Dutchess County before finally entering Ulster County, creating a rail trail comparable to the Erie Canal Rail Trail.



The Garden Street School was constructed in 1925 and just recently closed in June 2012. The Adaptive Reuse of the Garden Street School may also aid in the preservation of the village of Brewster's heritage and history. Depending upon the ultimate use of the building and grounds, there may be opportunities to secure federal, state and/or local funding, if available. The location of the Garden Street School is ideal for creating an anchor project that can be a catalyst for the revitalization of the Main Street, connection to the train/mass transit system and enhancing the possibilities of building a walkable community. The adaptive reuse of the school also opens the possibilities of creating new jobs and economic development opportunities, or the creation of either market rate or workforce housing. The building and grounds also lends itself to the "repurposing" as an educational center and commercial development for the performing arts, theater and film. The project may also result in a mixed use and combine

any or of the

elements of perhaps all concepts.



## Planning

The village of Brewster Board of Trustees approved changes to zoning regulations in June 2008 based on recommendations in the Brewster Master Plan in 2004. The Niche Study in 2009 determined that these changes did not adequately address the village's need to adapt to its present conditions. Prior to 2008, zoning regulations were more appropriate for low-density suburban development than for a dense historic village. Another issue was the ongoing discourse or lack of cooperation between various village internal departments and also with the town of Southeast regarding development in Brewster. The recommendations that the Niche Study proposed included the relaxation of parking requirements and simplification of the zoning regulations. Since the Niche Study was published, the village has in fact relaxed parking requirements, tightened cabaret regulations, made modifications for business categories, made changes to auto dealership uses and decreased multi-family zoning by creating owner-occupied single-family zoning.

The village of Brewster, is in fact now considering a thorough review of its master plan prior to any revisions in local zoning ordinances. Ideally, the local zoning code would originate from consensus-driven policy planning for land use, transportation, housing, natural resources, economic development, social equity, culture and so on. In New York, zoning enabling acts continue to require that zoning be undertaken "in accord with a well considered plan" or "in accordance with a comprehensive plan." (See Gen. City Law Section 20 (25); Town Law Section 263; Village Law Section 7-704.) The issue of spot zoning may arise if the comprehensive plan is revised at the same time as the local zoning ordinances. Spot zoning refers to the rezoning of a parcel of land to a use category different from the surrounding area, usually to benefit a single owner or a single development interest. This does not mean, however, that the village is unable to amend the local zoning ordinances to "respond to changed conditions in the community...." (See Gernatt Asphalt Products, Inc. v Town of Sardinia, 87 N.Y.2d 688 (1966)). The fact that a rezoning will benefit a landowner will not on its own invalidate the action, so long as the action accords with a comprehensive plan and the rezoning also furthers some clearly identified public interest.

In the case of the village, Brewster's zoning code allows multi-family residential uses on the upper stories of buildings in the B1 zone in the core of downtown. This is ideal for artists seeking a gallery downstairs with loft-style homes upstairs. In addition, the Niche Mark Plan: village of Brewster-March 2009, correctly states that by expanding this type of use to the neighboring B3 zone, it would create a stronger market for local businesses. This type of use must be balanced against the village's desire to expand and implement single-family homes in this neighborhood.



In contrast, if the village amends local zoning ordinances while simultaneously revising the master plan, the laws may lack a vision for the community's long-range needs and goals. In addition, it may turn off potential investors because the governmental actions may seem arbitrary and capricious.

In summary, it is in the best interest for the village to make amendments to its local zoning ordinance in accordance with a well-considered or comprehensive plan. This will allow the community to meet its long-term goals and considerations.

### **Core Anchors**

Another fundamental aspect of successful community development initiatives is the development or enhancement of core anchors to increase interest and economic activity in city, town and village centers. Anchors may include critical transportation hubs to facilitate mobility as well as destination anchors providing arts, culture, entertainment, recreation, education and related opportunities and activities.

In the case of Main Street in Brewster, the key existing asset is clearly the Metro North train station. The Brewster train station boasts a 1 hour and 15 minute commute to Grand Central Terminal in New York City. From a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis perspective, this transit hub located in the heart of Main Street is the village's primary strength and the leverage needed to spur further development.

The challenge for Brewster's Main Street is the current lack of attractions to draw visitors and foot traffic from outside communities. Outside of the train station and the small local diner, there is a considerable dearth of attractions such as theatres, art studios, shops and boutiques, restaurants and recreation. In short, the primary goal for the redevelopment of Main Street should be to initiate focused development, establishing a core niche market, which will support further revitalization of the village center.

As mentioned earlier, the adaptive reuse of the Garden Street School represents an incredible opportunity for both the village and the Brewster Central School District. It is important to note that there are state laws, deed restrictions, existing zoning and environmental hurdles to clear. However, the Garden Street School lends itself to a variety of adaptive reuse opportunities, including: affordable senior housing, assisted living, film production studio, the performing arts and a variety of educational purposes, including, but not limited to, the development of a private or charter school, satellite campus of a four-year college, development of a business incubator, utilization of the cafeteria as a catering/restaurant training facility. Regardless of the end use, the property, if at all possible, should contribute to the local tax base.

In the case of the city of Poughkeepsie, efforts are ongoing to further the revitalization of the waterfront (train station) area and tying it to the broader downtown business district. It is well known that that the redevelopment of the Poughkeepsie-Highland Railroad Bridge, now the Walkway Over the Hudson, was a critical spark to city revitalization. Outside of the Walkway, the city has the benefit of attractions from the Bardavon Opera House, the Children's Museum, Cunneen Hackett Theatre, Dooley Square and the

numerous restaurants that have anchored lower and upper Main Street. While revitalization efforts are far from complete in Poughkeepsie, the success realized to date may serve as a model for Brewster. Leveraging the anchor of the train station and tying in related aspects of the development plan will support the goal establishing Brewster's Main Street as an attractive destination for the village and surrounding communities.

### **Retail**

An additional key to the revitalization of Main Street in Brewster is a fresh perspective regarding the role that retail plays in attracting and retaining economic growth and stabilization. The lack of major retailers in and around the Main Street area coupled with a strong retail presence in local shopping centers that are within a 5- to 10-minute drive creates the need for specialty retail and commerce that will draw visitors for unique wares that fit a need that cannot be met in other locations.



While analyzing current need and comparing it to available retail and geographic location, the most logical location to begin a “retail revitalization” is the intersection of Main Street and Railroad Avenue. The Metro North train station located at this corner is an economic draw, and retail based around an area of high traffic in town centers typically thrives. With this in mind, there are several recommendations for retail growth for Brewster:

- Seek out and attract establishments that are locally owned and offer locally produced artisanal gifts or foods that cater to the core value of the “Think Local” movement and are attractive to families invested in the future of the community. These can include: art dealers or galleries, local groceries, farmers markets, butchers or delis, or bakeries.
- Harness the geographic location and proximity to natural destinations and attract eco-tourism/adventure-based retail and businesses. This would play to local rivers, the blossoming demand for fitness-based attractions and outdoor living and could include: sports stores (particularly bait and tackle), bike shops (rentals included), health food stores, or high-quality second hand shops.
- Attract high-end “Main Street” retailers to take advantage of traffic flowing into the Brewster train station from Fairfield County in CT and Dutchess and Westchester counties in NY. These could include typically mall-based retailers that have begun populating Main Street locations in recent years, including the Gap, Banana Republic or The Children’s Place.

It may be to the village’s advantage to hire a Main Street Coordinator to manage the marketing and growth strategies outlined in this proposal. This position will need to be financial and retail savvy and have a background in marketing and sales.

## Arts and Culture

Brewster is dubbed the “Hub of the Harlem Valley” on its own webpage. In order to truly be a “hub,” Brewster must be well rounded. We believe that one aspect significantly missing from the village is a visible arts scene. Urban blight could be remedied by changing the perception of the village’s downtown core as a place where performance, exhibits and unique cultural offerings could be found. Empty storefronts could become display areas for art, while performances and readings could take place in restaurants, train stations and public buildings. More activity within this Main Street corridor, with people strolling, shopping and enjoying the sights will increase the length of visitors’ stays, allowing people a feeling of safety and enjoyment as they drive and walk through the area. This will ultimately increase property values and decrease vacancy rates.



### **Landscape of the existing arts and cultural assets for the village of Brewster:**

**Brewster Theater Company:** 26 Prospect Street. <http://www.brewstertheatercompany.org/> Includes a cabaret series, teen theater workshop, Armchair Actors and local theater season.

**Brewster Public Library:** 79 Main Street. With existing programs for the public and a public room, the Brewster Public Library is a great place to launch more localized arts and cultural events. Given that 76 percent of the downtown population is Hispanic, we suggest bilingual story times for children that would also include an arts component.

**Cultural Arts Coalition (TOSCAC):** An organization that exists to promote and raise funds for the development and effective management of affordable, accessible performance space that will provide citizens of the town of Southeast opportunities to participate in and appreciate cultural arts, including lectures, theater, dance, film, music, visual arts and inclusive community events.

TOSCAC wants to renovate the Southeast Old Town Hall, a historic landmark within the village of Brewster to use as a cultural hub. The plans to renovate this structure include a performing art venue on the third floor. A grassroots citizens’ group attempted to pass a \$3.8 million bond to renovate the structure, but was narrowly defeated in 2010.

**Putnam Arts Council:** Outside of the village of Brewster, the Putnam Arts Council should be able to provide technical assistance, links to artists and resources to improve a building infrastructure in Brewster. It calls itself “a voice for the arts in Putnam County, and maintains a leadership role in promoting, fostering, and perpetuating the visual, performing and literary arts in the county and environs.” They represent the county for the New York State Council of the Arts: <http://putnamartscouncil.com/contactus.html>

**Seven Stars Dance School:** [www.sevenstarschool.com](http://www.sevenstarschool.com) Multiple specialties of dance forms taught and classes in acrobatics and drama for many age groups.

**Southeast Museum:** 67 Main Street. “Established in 1963, the Southeast Museum offers exhibits on the history of the Town of Southeast, including the early American Circus, the Harlem Line Railroad, the Tilly Foster mine, the Borden Milk Condensery, and the Croton Reservoir System. In addition, the museum

presents various changing exhibits, drawing on its extensive collection of antique farm and household implements, quilts, clothing and assorted Americana reflecting 19th century material culture. The museum is located on Main Street, Brewster in one of Putnam County's largest landmarked buildings, the 1896 Old Town Hall, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.”

## **Recommendations**

### **Increase Community Engagement:**

By utilizing existing empty spaces to create vibrant windows along the downtown area, the goal would be to change the perception of Main Street as a place to leave and change it into a place to live. For instance, by inserting arts exhibits in windows of empty buildings, exhibitions could be rotated every three months, providing local artists with a venue for the public to see their work. Informational signage inside the buildings, readable through the windows would accompany the work. In some instances, it could provide a place to see artwork in an open building, such as a restaurant in a nearby location. This would cross-pollinate foot traffic to encourage people passing through to stop into existing businesses. To help bridge the cultural gap between the Latino and Anglo-American demographic groups, cross-cultural artistic and performance events could be curated into this programming, symbolizing an effort by the community to publicly educate the rich heritage across the Americas.

### **Launch Brewster Arts & Community Week:**

Every month, collaborating arts groups could schedule events and exhibits such as the windows project mentioned above during one week, with a publicized timeline and promos that inform local residents and commuters coming through the train station. During unseasonable weather, events could be hosted in several locations around Main Street, including the Southeast Museum, the Brewster Public Library, the train station lobby and by pop-up events in empty buildings. An organization with a 501(c)(3) and liability insurance can get a temporary certificate of insurance to protect property owners, and property owners can provide lights, empty space and heating for performances, exhibits and literary readings. During the spring and summer, events can spill out onto the sidewalks and side streets, promoting a lively arts scene and encouraging commuters and locals to linger and enjoy their time in the Main Street corridor.

### **Encourage and Strengthen Collaborative Efforts:**

This would entail inviting local groups, such as Seven Stars Dance School, Brewster Theater Company, Brewster Public Library, and leaders from the Southeast Museum to collaborate on themed exhibits, performances and competitions, resulting in increased impact and visibility for all. This should also include local government officials and business representatives sitting together at the planning table with cultural groups. Reaching out to the Putnam Arts Council may lead to community volunteers and artists wishing to become involved. Drilling down to a micro level, reaching out to local residents in the Hispanic community through invitations to exhibit cultural objects, such as embroidery, music and art will increase local residents’ interest in downtown as an area important to them and their family. Food

events highlighting cultural and artistic themes combined with these collaborative efforts could also help increase audience and multi-generational participation.

### **Cultivate NYC Artists:**

As the village's website indicates, Brewster sits in the beautiful Harlem Valley, and New York City artists wishing to live more affordably while working on their art would see living and working in Brewster as an opportunity. In the village of Brewster, along the Main Street corridor, a few select blighted buildings could be set aside as special incentive arts-investment buildings, allowing artists to purchase them with little or no money down and use sweat equity to improve the property. Artists have a history of being urban pioneers, buying and improving property most recently in Detroit, but this phenomena has occurred with much documentation in the NYC areas of DUMBO and SOHO. Allowing artists to buy property and become stakeholders would instantly make Brewster a magnet for more artists, and allow them to stay as permanent residents when the downtown area of Brewster becomes fully developed. Outreach and partnering with socially active groups such as Not An Alternative and Occupy Sandy or more formalized organizations like Creative Time might broaden the reach of this suggested initiative.

### **Management and Leadership:**

To increase community engagement, collaboration with existing cultural groups and local business and government, Brewster could hire a "Community Engagement Specialist," whose focus would be to provide the organizational support to link these grassroots efforts together. The person ideally would have a strong arts/cultural background with experience working with community groups and be highly organized. It would be advisable that this person also be fluent in Spanish in order to make connections with the large population of native Spanish speakers living and working in Brewster. The high concentration of Guatemalan people that have settled in Brewster creates a great opportunity for Brewster and this "Community Engagement Specialist" to establish a "sister city" in Guatemala such as Antigua or elsewhere to create a formalized cultural exchange with residents and students in the village.

In this report we have suggested in different places that Brewster hire a Main Street Coordinator or a Community Engagement Specialist. Ultimately, these recommendations are one and the same. The village needs a dedicated staff person to facilitate its long-term vision, in terms of retail, the arts, culture and planning. This investment, whether called a Village Planner, a Main Street Coordinator or a Community Engagement Specialist, would go a long way toward building stronger relationships and bringing fresh energy and vision to the village, beginning with Main Street.

While there are no recent examples to draw from regarding a Community Engagement Specialist position being created by local governments in the Hudson River Valley, we believe such a move would be a bold statement that would offer great benefits to the village of Brewster. Such a dedicated staff person could be charged in the beginning with relatively simple tasks to enhance Main Street—jobs like the management of public bulletin boards (timely removal of flyers), perhaps the installation and painting of public benches on Main Street and other appearance-based efforts.

In time, a Main Street Coordinator would take on more involved projects, such as: the creation of a downtown business owners' association; the creation of a committee aimed at attracting "appropriate or desirable" businesses; the institution of some standard of uniformity for new and existing businesses on Main Street.

If the village is not able to fund the position entirely on its own, we suggest looking into an intermunicipal agreement (IMA) and perhaps sharing a staff person with Putnam County or another municipality. An AmeriCorps volunteer could also potentially be taken on as a low-cost supplement to either a full-time staffer or an IMA.

After this position is created, we envision it evolving into something of a "local champion" for the village of Brewster. This person will help improve the aesthetics of Main Street and, ideally, the economic viability of the town as well. This could create a domino effect—although it will understandably take time—which continues to attract new businesses and consumers, creating the need for improved housing and infrastructure as well. We believe a Main Street Coordinator and the work he or she does will result in an improved quality of life for the village and residents of Brewster.

There are two roads that are directly adjacent to Main Street in Brewster: Prospect Street and Progress Street. We believe in the village there are both. Despite its current issues, Brewster has great prospect, and ultimately, by using its resources wisely, it will make tremendous progress. The village needs to create a vision for its future and dedicate time and staff to seeing that vision through.