

Hudson Valley Affordable Housing & Conservation Strategy

Surging demand for Hudson Valley real estate is exacerbating the already acute lack of housing options and straining the region's precious open spaces. Healthy Hudson Valley communities need both abundant, high quality, affordable housing and protected land that supports clean water, food production, climate resilience, and access to the outdoors. As a highly desirable area close to New York City, the region has long suffered from a dearth of housing, with few developments, urban or rural, designed and built for low and moderate income residents. This is the result of various challenges, including zoning that doesn't enable smart growth development; a lack of affordable land near infrastructure, transit, jobs, and schools; and a legacy of unjust public policies.

At the same time, land trusts increasingly are being sidelined or outbid for properties with the highest conservation values, and despite efforts to be strategic and targeted, are challenged by scattershot development, competition, and high prices to assemble parcels large enough to achieve lasting results. Furthermore, existing public programs have led to siloed spending that limits the potential for collaboration and leveraging of resources.

Action Plan: The region has few if any examples where land conservation and affordable housing groups have collaborated to achieve mutual success. Both sectors have increased their focus on equity, racial justice, public health, and climate goals. Yet a strategic framework hasn't been created to point the way to meaningful collaboration across both sectors with respect and support for each other's goals.

Land is the common denominator; neither affordable housing nor conservation goals can be achieved without access to it. The day-to-day pressure to respond opportunistically as potential projects present themselves leads to a project-by-project approach, sometimes generating local opposition or even pitting affordable housing and conservation interests against one another. A collaboration-based, regional strategy has the potential to create more just, equitable, healthy and climate-forward housing opportunities, and to more land being conserved for the benefit of all.

Brought together by project co-leads Rebecca Gillman Crimmins and Steve Rosenberg, ten of the region's leading land trusts and affordable housing organizations are partnering to advance the effort: Columbia Land Conservancy, Community Preservation Corporation, Dutchess Land Conservancy, Habitat for Humanity of Columbia County, Habitat for Humanity of Greater Newburgh, Hudson Highlands Land Trust, Hudson River Housing, Kingston Land Trust, RUPCO, and Scenic Hudson.

The groups have been engaged in monthly meetings facilitated by the Consensus Building Institute (www.cbi.org) to build relationships and trust, share information, learn from experts in both sectors and related fields, and begin to think about what they can undertake together. They have developed a statement of shared purpose that encapsulates the values and goals that bind them in this work. The groups are being supported by the Regional Plan Association (www.rpa.org) in identifying geographic areas that may be well-suited to collaborative projects.

Outcomes: The initial phase of the strategy will become a launching pad for:

- on-the-ground collaboration among the stakeholders to advance projects in areas with the greatest potential for success;
- specific ideas for state and local policy that propose new approaches to program design, project funding and permitting; and
- a more mutually-supportive environment for both interests to communicate about their goals with their own constituents, elected officials and the public.

Ultimately, this has the potential to result in: appropriately-scaled and designed, energy-efficient housing adjacent to village and hamlet centers, surrounded by conserved and accessible land; former industrial and commercial sites transformed into a mix of housing, conservation land and renewable energy; and urban buildings and sites redeveloped with affordable housing with easy access to parks, jobs, and locally-grown food – all contributing to the region becoming a more equitable and climate-forward place to live.

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Shared Purpose Statement

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The Current Context. The Hudson River Valley region that we call home is becoming an increasingly unsustainable and inequitable place to live. A variety of factors have contributed to the present reality: single family sprawl over denser, smart growth development; the COVID-19 real estate boom; vulnerable existing rental housing, and the perception that affordable housing brings unwanted change to communities. These factors have contributed to untenable real estate appreciation, the displacement of low-income and Black and Brown communities, and dwindling housing stock for families with modest incomes. Natural assets such as the Hudson River and its tributaries, hunting and fishing areas, and informal community open spaces are increasingly at risk due to unfettered real estate development. Climate change is threatening the environment. The loss of biodiversity, threats to sustainable agriculture and local food supply, urban heat islands, storm surges, and flooding are impacting our residents, infrastructure and resources. These challenges affect us all.

Affordable housing and land conservation organizations have made progress addressing these issues within their own sectors. Yet, the problems we face are too urgent, massive and intertwined to be solved alone. The current siloed approach is not accomplishing enough.

Our Vision. The Hudson River Valley is a sustainable and inclusive home to an economically and racially diverse community. Our work helps the region develop a holistic, equitable and proactive approach to housing, climate change, and land conservation.

Our Work Together. We are banding together to take a holistic approach to these complex and urgent problems, and have a larger-scale impact. Collectively, we can better serve Hudson Valley residents and communities by meeting the need for affordable housing, conserving important lands for human and ecological benefit, and adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change. This collaborative approach allows us to leverage and learn from each sector's successes, resources, methods, and constituencies. We hope that our collaboration will drive progress, serve as a model for change within and across sectors, and result in increased collaboration among our organizations and stakeholders. Our network makes us more nimble, equitable and expansive in serving our collective constituencies and realizing our vision.

We expect our work to include:

- Learning about each sector's best practices and outcomes;
- Identifying shared interests and opportunities for collaboration;
- Leveraging our collective strength to pilot new approaches;
- Advocating for changes in public policy; and
- Communicating our shared priorities to our respective organizations, constituents, policy makers, and the public.

We hope that our collaboration will contribute to a thriving Hudson River Valley region that is more welcoming, inclusive, affordable, accessible, and sustaining all who live here now and in the future.