

CREATIVE RESILIENCY

PLACEMAKING IN THE HEART OF NEW YORK'S MOHAWK RIVER VALLEY

Final Report for Public Distribution
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Prepared by:

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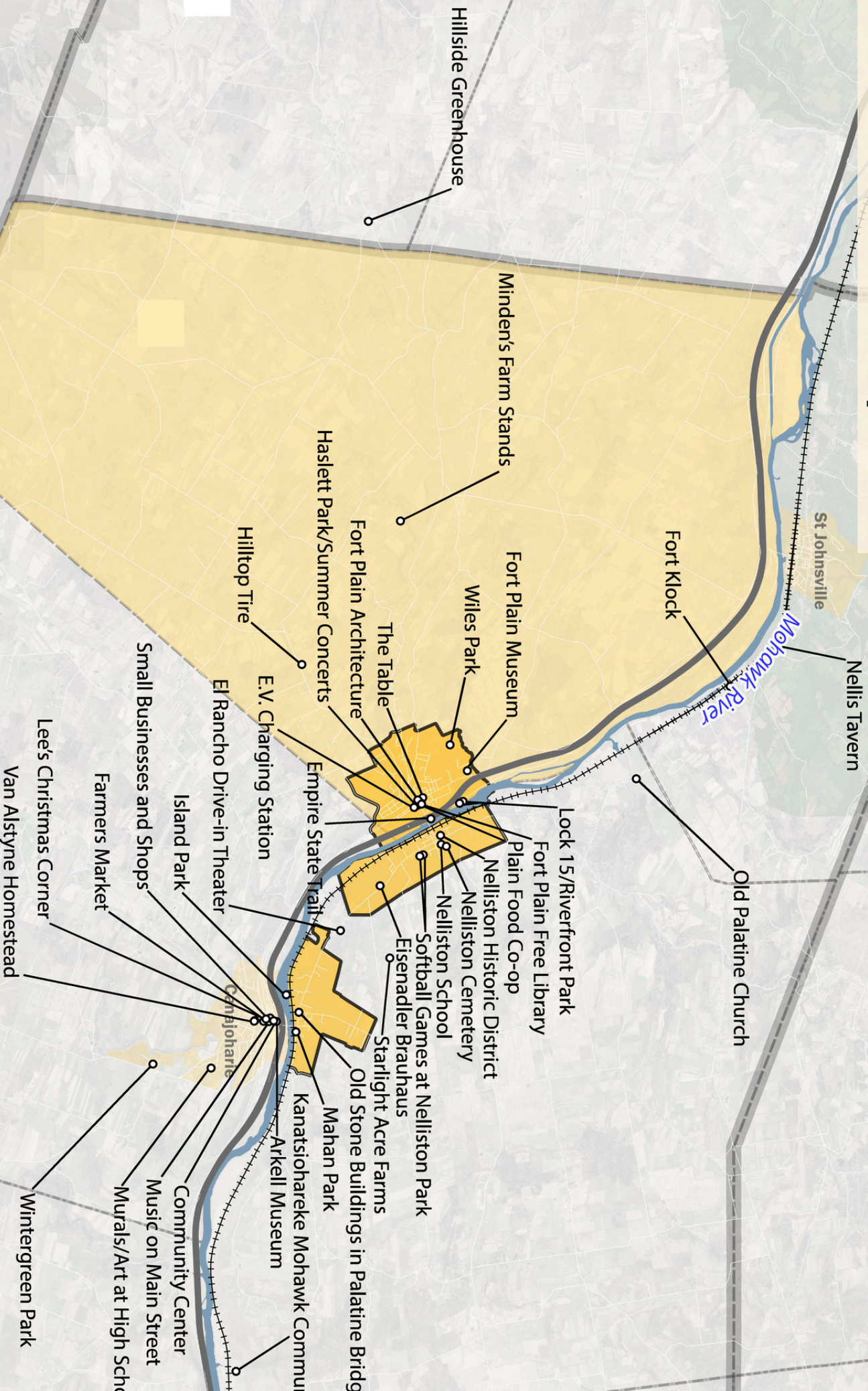
Dedicated to Heather Devitt & Mari Kate Mycek, who gave life to this work and bring with them to everything a loving commitment to the place they are from.



This page: Lock 15 on the historic Erie Canal & Mohawk River in the Village of Fort Plain.

Next page: a map produced through an early asset mapping exercise conducted at one of the first meetings of the steering committee. We used the exercise to generate consensus on and enthusiasm for protecting existing community assets (MVEDD 2022).

RPIC Asset Map



INTRODUCTION

Economically, places like western Montgomery County have for decades been caught between a rock and a hard place. It's a dilemma we grapple with daily at our regional development office not far from the geographic dead center of New York State — that is, the tension between fierce independence and the urgent need for access to resources and opportunities in a global marketplace.



The Kanatsiohareke community in the Town of Mohawk has long been a repository of knowledge and practices associated with the valley's indigenous people, the Kanien'kehaka, or Mohawk Tribe.

Since long before the arrival of European settlers, it has been a community of determined, scrappy people making efficient use of scarce resources. There is enormous pride in this legacy. Essential to the identity of any place that struggles with scarcity over the long-term, the notion of being routinely passed over or forgotten about is taken for granted as baseline reality.

That asymmetry serves an important social function: a common thread uniting and empowering community members across demographic lines. Having spent a good part of two years working within the community as an outsider, I experienced many moments that made me envy the familiarity and intimacy with which residents treat one another.

But though it can be tempting to romanticize, the lived experience of material scarcity is never glamorous. There is a perception among many in the area that help is frequently offered but rarely delivered. A well-meaning but aloof New York State government periodically announces new sources of funding, for which local leaders grudgingly submit the required paperwork, convinced that the bureaucrats reviewing it will remain oblivious to and indifferent about their problems whether they get the money or not.

As resources become available through grant programs and other initiatives, they can be left out in the cold, scrambling to figure out what the State wants while communities with more staff, funding, know-how, or sheer dumb luck sit poised and ready to interpret and adapt to changes in the availability of funding, timelines, program details, budgets, administrative requirements, and nomenclature. In municipalities where time is as scarce as everything else, leaders can't afford to become experts on every program that might serve their needs.

At MVEDD, we aim to serve as a partner to local leaders regardless of their community's administrative capacity or know-how. This requires an appreciation for this cultural context and the ability to help places adapt and innovate in the face of scarcity. We chose to pursue this unique source of funding with this in mind, using outreach and discussion as currency to build a wealth of knowledge.

THE RURAL PLACEMAKING INNOVATION CHALLENGE (RPIC)



PROGRAM GOALS

The Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC) was launched in 2020 by the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Development division. The program supports **small towns and rural regions in shaping their own future through arts, culture, and community-driven planning**. The program helps local partners create vibrant, inclusive spaces that strengthen economic resilience and quality of life.

MVEDD received an award funding two-years of boots-on-the-ground, grassroots placemaking outreach and kicked things off in October of 2022.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Our work focused on four municipalities in rural Montgomery County: the Villages of Fort Plain, Nelliston, and Palatine Bridge, and the Town of Minden. Framed under the title "Creative Resiliency in the Mohawk Valley," it was rooted in our belief that the future of our rural communities depends not just on new infrastructure and investment, but on the strength of individual relationships and the ability to work toward a common goal. Through an inclusive and highly visible process, the project generated robust discussion, a set of specific, actionable ideas, and crucially, the collective momentum necessary to bring them to fruition.

METRICS TRACKED OVER TWO-YEAR PERFORMANCE PERIOD:

6

New grant applications

55

Outreach events, workshops, stakeholder interviews & community meetings

191

Survey responses

400+

Total unique participants



An informal workshop in Fort Plain's Haslett Park. Passive activities like tabling were scheduled strategically to coincide with popular events. They often helped to generate thoughts and discussions with those who may not regularly attend public meetings.

In the first year, we focused on listening. Through a survey, targeted events & meetings, asset-mapping & capacity-building workshops, and countless informal conversations at parks, schools, gas stations, libraries, shops, and cafes, we developed a thorough and nuanced understanding of what residents value, what they miss from the past, and what they hope to see in the future. Our outreach data was analyzed qualitatively throughout the process, and shared openly with the community using tools like word clouds (survey responses were often accompanied by insightful handwritten comments), newsletters, and content posted through our local media partner, *Mohawk Valley Today*.



The Fort Plain Free Library, an essential resource and community hub.

In the second year, the generative energy we had hoped to spark truly came alive. The listening built a current of optimism and enthusiasm, and as priorities came into focus local leaders and residents stood ready to move from conversation to action. One of the clearest expressions of this was the collaborative development of a Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) application for the Village of Fort Plain — a bold bid to secure up to \$10 million in transformative investment from New York State. While ultimately unsuccessful, the application coalesced around specific, actionable ideas for projects that grew directly out of our outreach campaign. Fort Plain is already working on their application for the program's next round of funding.

As a planner, this energy was infectious. From the outset, the Fort Plain Free Library became my central vantage point and professional anchor. The director and her dedicated two-person staff offered me not just a place to work, but a bridge into the life of the community itself. Their critical feedback on early outreach materials was invaluable — offering a lens I could not have developed from the outside alone — and their insights into key community relationships helped me build trust where it mattered most. Perhaps most importantly, they brought a deep fluency with the nuances of government programs like the RPIC, helping me avoid the kinds of bureaucratic language that could have alienated the very people we hoped to empower. Their guidance made it possible to start strong and stay grounded, and was just one example of the extraordinary partners who made this work possible.

SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

Amish Community Outreach

A centerpiece of early engagement was a unique workshop hosted by Dr. Steven Nolt of Elizabethtown College's Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies. Migration from settlements in Pennsylvania and Ohio have brought hundreds of Amish residents to Montgomery County in recent years. While generally regarded as a positive change — especially in light of longstanding population decline — these new neighbors arrive within an existing social order and rarely have a need to interact with other residents. Left unaddressed, misperceptions and misunderstandings can persist indefinitely, creating unnecessary tension. And since the area's Amish population is expected to grow even more quickly in the coming years, it will be essential to develop pathways of mutual understanding and integration into the broader community and its economy.

Community Workshop

Join us to learn about the Amish Community in Montgomery County. Everyone is welcome!



Fort Plain High School
1 West St, Fort Plain

May 25, 2023
3 PM – 5 PM



Featuring Steven Nolt, Ph.D.
Nolt is a professor of history and Anabaptist studies at Elizabethtown College, and interim director and senior scholar at the college's Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies.

The workshop was designed primarily with a non-Amish audience in mind. Dr. Nolt delivered a presentation covering some commonly held misconceptions and half-truths about Amish people, and highlighting their values of stewardship, humility, and *Gelassenheit*, or “yielding” in English, as essential cultural touchstones. The intended takeaway was simply that there is no reason to settle for mere indifferent co-existence; on the contrary, creative entrepreneurial thinking rooted in the many shared values of these communities can be a pathway to mutual thriving.

47 Main Street (Diefendorf Hall)

The Historic Diefendorf Hall was constructed around 1860 and played an important role in the industrial development of Fort Plain. It hosted speeches by such notables as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places and owned by the Village of Fort Plain, a group of local volunteers has been working on the building since 2008. They are particularly focused on addressing damage caused by a catastrophic flood of the Otsquago Creek in 2013. A loan from the Preservation League of New York funded core stabilization and foundation work, as well as facade repair. There are many competing visions for how best to adapt and reuse the building, but they are all focused on providing a welcoming space for residents and visitors alike.

To capitalize on the momentum created by stabilizing and repairing the building's structure, we included a full interior renovation of Diefendorf Hall as the flagship project in our DRI application. This program encourages "transformative" development projects that are poised to catalyze additional investment when complete, and there is widespread consensus that this central, historic building represents such an opportunity. With more work being completed all the time, and valuable feedback in hand from the State representatives who assessed the funding application, the volunteers driving Diefendorf's revitalization are determined to take another swing at the funding an even clearer vision of its enormous potential.



Fort Plain's Diefendorf Hall at 47 Main Street in its historic downtown. Previously used as a gristmill, distillery, mercantile exchange, and as storage space for packet boat cargo with a music venue on the second floor, once a common commercial building configuration in communities located on the Erie Canal.

Kanatsiohareke Community

Just west of the Village of Fonda on State Route 5, there is a handsome collection of 19th century buildings overlooking a wide bend in the Mohawk River. Formerly a retirement home known as the Montgomery County Farm, the site occupies the ancestral land of a group of indigenous Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) people belonging to the tribe's Bear Clan. Long since resettled several hours north in the Akwasasne Territory on the St. Lawrence River, a few returned to their people's homeland and re-established a community called Kanatsiohareke (pronounced *Gah Nah Jo Hah Leh: Geh*). Named for a unique nearby natural feature translated in English as "the boiling pot" or "the pot that washes itself," it is the term from which the name of the present-day Village of Canajoharie is derived.

Kanatsiohareke's founder and spiritual leader is a respected Mohawk elder, Tom Porter (Sakikwenio'nkwas). Under his guidance, the community grew to include a cultural center, overnight accommodation, agriculture and aquaculture operations, and a thriving gift shop. Located on about 400 acres of land, the purpose of this reclamation effort is the preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages and traditions, and the education of all people about the history and culture of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois People).

Struck hard by the impact of COVID in 2020, the community has gone largely quiet since, and Porter retired with his family to Akwasasne in 2024. But the connections made between our work and the stewardship of this one-of-a-kind site will endure. While the property currently sits vacant, MVEDD is working with USDOT on their Thriving Communities program, which focuses on rural public transportation. The central conceit of this work is to create a dependable public transit link between the ancestral lands of the Mohawk Tribe, represented by Kanatsiohareke, and the land of the Oneida Indian Nation.

42°55'51"N 74°37'29"W

FORT PLAIN

Montgomery County, New York

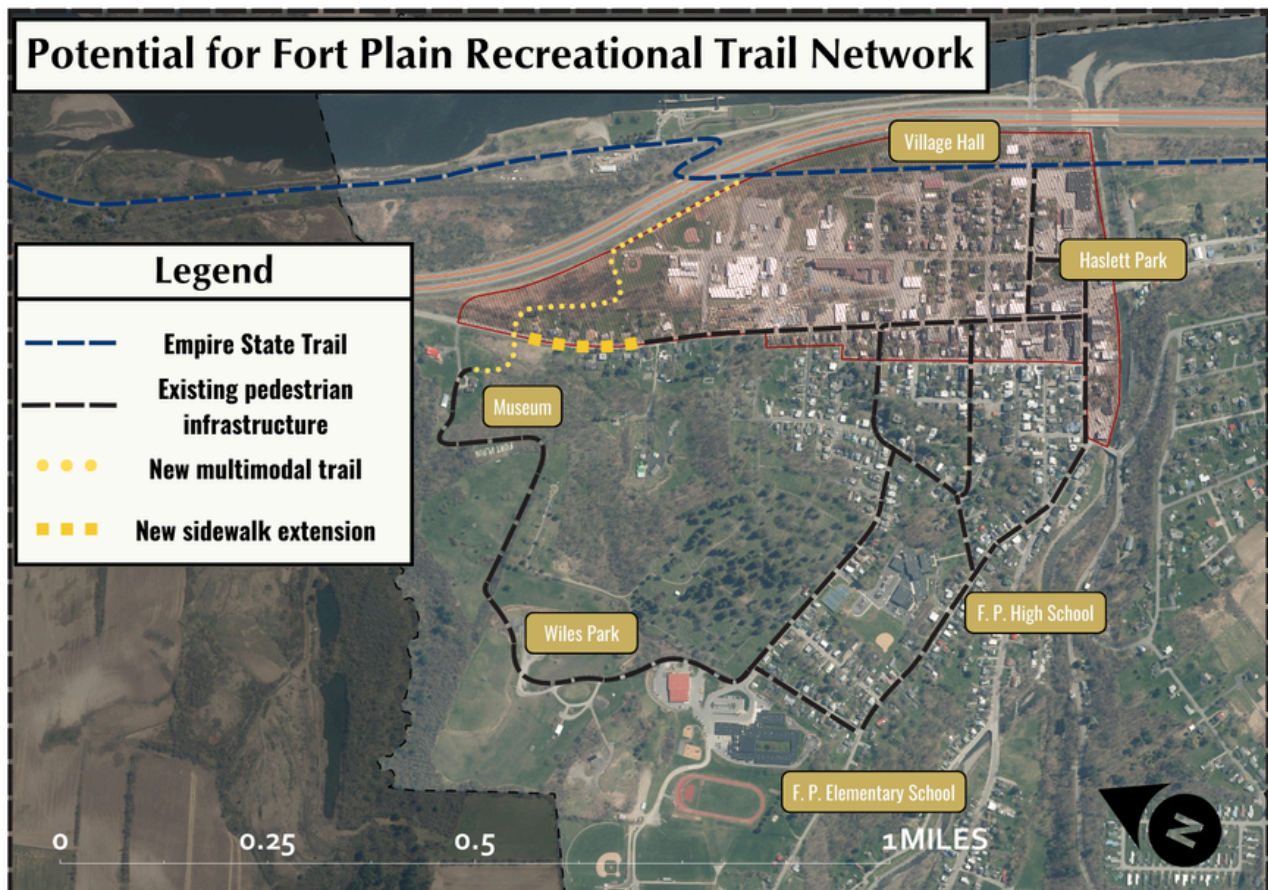


Background: a stylized map of Fort Plain used as a promotional tool (MVEDD 2023).
Inserts: outreach events were planned strategically to capture as much community input as possible.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

The work we have done together has generated more than plans and proposals — it has changed entire conversations about this community, from the way we discuss it in our office to the way residents talk to one another. We didn't create anything new; a foundation built on trust and a sense of shared destiny existed among the people there already. We did learn a lot about how to access the inherent value in that foundation in order to talk about what is possible, and about the steps it would take to get there.

But the most important change to point out is in the community itself. People who once wondered whether their voice mattered are now leading conversations. Organizations that once worked in parallel are now working together. There is a new energy, a belief that the future of these villages and towns is not something to wait for — it's something they can create, and are already creating. With stronger tools, stronger partnerships, and a stronger sense of identity, this community is ready not just to survive, but to thrive — and we hope to continue standing alongside them as they do.



A map created as part of the Fort Plain Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) funding application, showing the relatively small infrastructure investment required to create a trail system connecting every corner of the Village. This type of asset-based planning is key in scrappy communities with limited resources seeking to use what they have.

CONTACT

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