

## **(In)equitable Planning for a Sustainable Future in Port Jefferson, New York**

**By Adam Charboneau, SACRPH Conference 2024**

While delivering the 2017 State of the Village Address at Willow Creek, Mount Sinai, then Mayor of Port Jefferson, Margot Garant, discussed the importance of the looming Upper Port Revitalization Plan.

Riffing on a popular Bruno Mars song, the mayor playfully relayed the revitalization plan's nickname, "Uptown Funk," suggesting it was fitting for an area in need of a "very different vibe," of "something really exciting."<sup>1</sup> Garant stated frankly, "really, it's about getting a new population in where you have a blighted area."<sup>2</sup> A blight study had been conducted, the mayor conveyed, which was then used as a means to grant the Village of Port Jefferson the powers of eminent domain through the application of urban renewal—the most powerful tool in the Village's gamut for incentivizing wholesale redevelopment throughout Upper Port. The term urban blight itself held (and holds) a certain power over the public imagination, portraying a metastasizing disease, incessantly spreading unless gutted in full. This understanding has been further entrenched by New York State's legal definition of urban blight, codified as a "serious and growing menace" that is "injurious to the public safety, health, morals and welfare" of a community.<sup>3</sup> As of 2024, this framework for understanding Upper Port, Port Jefferson, as well as adjacent areas of Port Jefferson Station, has been the controlling narrative, guiding a series of developments that are rapidly transforming former businesses—some well-used, others long vacant—into a bevy of apartment buildings ranging from affordable living to living in luxury. Absent from these winds of change have been the voices of those communities most vulnerable to displacement as the scaffolds rise.

The Upper Port revitalization zone is unique, relative to the larger village, in its concentrated Latinx population, which is accompanied by a spate of buildings with Spanish signage indicating what's to be found inside—Latinx delis and bodegas offering Central American cuisine, a billiards (*billar*) hall and a *dentista*. Perched above are Latinx households nestled in small, but affordable, apartments. But all

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<sup>1</sup> "Mayor Margot Garant: *State of the Village Address*," Port Jeff Chamber General Meeting, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. The mayor noted that Upper Port is the main entrance for visitors coming to the Village from Long Island. Route 112, known as Main Street, runs down the heart of Upper Port as serves as the main conduit to Lower Port.

<sup>3</sup> Village of Port Jefferson Urban Renewal Plan (2016).

of this, stretching from the train tracks to the south to just above Perry Street to the north, is encircled by a familiar color in the Revitalization Plan—red. Within the red demarcation are properties slotted for future demolition and repurposing. For some, the “future” is now the past. The Crossings—a 45-unit affordable apartment complex which begin leasing to tenants in mid-2023—sits upon land once occupied by La Bahia. Just outside the revitalization zone, at the crossroads of Upper and Lower Port, is One North, a soon to be completed set of luxury apartment rentals. In an area littered with pockets of abandonment, appropriate development, with real community input, is needed. But the red encompasses all, including those places of work and residence that are still vibrant. Slowly, though, even these places that function as a cultural hub for an underserved community are forming to the dominate narrative of blight as absentee landlords curb maintenance in a district slated for urban renewal.<sup>4</sup>

Only a few blocks east of these developments is another site of proposed change—Six Acre Park, which if completed, would bring a much-needed environmental amenity to the region. The park has been promoted as a living laboratory where residents and nearby university students can learn about natural ecosystems as the invasive species running amok are replaced by native flora. This too is promising as native flora could mitigate the contamination of local aquifers while better absorbing stormwaters that otherwise course down the hills of a topographically challenged village. Replete with native species, the proposed park might create a sense of uniqueness with an attending stronger pride in place. As important, it would act as a magnet, attracting visitors and stimulating nearby restaurants, pubs, and shops. Local parks also appreciate property values—a reality not lost on the Village of Port Jefferson’s Six Acre Park Committee. But in the swirl of development—development portending potential demographic and cultural changes to Upper Port—several questions arise: will this park serve as one means toward a just

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, former Village of Port Jefferson trustee, Bruce Miller, stated, “It’s an open secret that the properties were very poorly maintained up there...In my opinion, property owners have allowed their buildings to deteriorate so that they would be able to sell the properties to — in this case — subsidized developers.” Raymond Janis, “Uptown Port Jeff Undergoes Transformation,” *TBR Newsmedia*, October 28, 2022. The author has also had conversations with members of the Port Jefferson Station/Terryville Civic Association who noted similar developments in Jefferson Plaza, owned by Staller Associates. Staller Associates is seeking a zoning variance and plans to redevelop the 10-acre site with mixed-use market-rate housing and commercial space. Several leases have not been renewed to former and current businesses. This makes the plaza look blighted as vacancies grow.

sustainability, or will it be an environmental and economic enhancer of new communities? Port Jefferson's Latinx community, which makes up about 10 percent of the village's population, is disproportionately concentrated in the Upper Port Revitalization zone—will the demolition of their businesses and residences effectively work to displace them from the fruits of these improvements?

### **The Village of Port Jefferson—an Abbreviated (20<sup>th</sup> Century) History**

The Village of Port Jefferson incorporated in 1963 to provide its residents with greater local control over the fate of Port Jefferson Harbor and nearby beaches. Historically, the harbor front has had numerous industrial lives, first serving as a major shipyard with smaller accompanying manufactories. In 1920 the Bayles Shipyard was sold to the New York Harbor & Dry Dock Company, with shipbuilding effectively ending. Three years later, the new owner of the old shipyard sold the property to Standard Oil, which soon demolished all buildings aside from one.<sup>5</sup> By the 1940s, the harbor was home to both Standard and Mobil Oil storage facilities, with views of the water increasingly affected by larger tankers.<sup>6</sup> The harbor was also home to gravel and sandmining industries, the latter which had taken its toll on local beaches and bluffs. The late-1940s witnessed the construction of the Port Jefferson Power Plant on the harbor's western shore. With industrial decline setting in during the 1960s, negatively impacting the hamlet's socio-economic fabric, incorporation offered a path toward a new tourist-based economy.<sup>7</sup>

Today, the incorporated Village Port Jefferson is a vibrant tourist attraction, particularly during warmer seasons. Visitors arrive from across Long Island by train (LIRR) and car, and from New England by ferry—Port Jefferson is home to the Bridgeport (CT) – Port Jefferson Ferry. The commercial heart of the village is in Lower Port (often referred to as Downtown, or Down Port). Pubs, restaurants, bakeries, boutique retailers, Theater Three, and a host of cultural centers and parks define the landscape closest to the harbor. The five-acre Harborfront Park now sits upon the old Mobil Oil site. While apartments—many

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Maggio and Earlene O'Hare, *Images of America: Port Jefferson* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2013) 26.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>7</sup> To meet New York State's land area requirements for village incorporation, Port Jefferson annexed Upper Port, then known as Echo, from the Hamlet of Port Jefferson Station.

located above first-floor storefronts, with other complexes recently developed unto themselves—are a growing presence in the area, much of the housing stock is made of turn-of-the-century Victorians. For residents, especially property owners, the maritime village represents beautiful views and much to do. The Village is also only a few miles from Stony Brook University, a major player in the local economy. As noteworthy are the Village’s low property taxes—since its incorporation, Port Jefferson has benefited from the power plant’s high tax assessment. But not all is perfect in the 11777. Upper Port, Port Jefferson, has long been in a state of economic decline. Most of the buildings along the east side of the main drag in Upper Port are vacant—only one is still actively in use. The west side of the corridor, which is home to a concentrated spate of Latinx businesses and residences, has its own share of vacant storefronts. And Lower Port, originally named Drowned Meadow, is prone to flooding, especially considering its elevated water table, subsurface streams, and tidal setting in an era of climate change and extreme storms.<sup>8</sup> But most troublesome is a new looming threat—the downward assessment of the Port Jefferson Power Plant.

### **The Village of Port Jefferson and the Port Jefferson Power Plant: A Complicated Relationship**

A defining feature in the quaint Village of Port Jefferson is the power plant located within its incorporated borders. The plant’s two chimneystacks entered service in 1958 and 1960, respectively. First run on coal, then diesel, today, power generation is achieved through a hybrid of natural gas and oil. As an older peak plant, generating electricity only when the grid is peaking, the power station operates annually at about 11 percent capacity.<sup>9</sup> The plant is owned by National Grid, a UK-based company, with all energy production contracted to the Long Island Power Authority (LIPA).

In 1986, New York State enacted the Long Island Power Authority Act, which created LIPA, “a not-for-profit public authority with broad powers to effectuate the legislation’s purpose”—i.e., “primarily

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<sup>8</sup> The Village of Port Jefferson is currently involved in a flood and flood mitigation study conducted by the USGS, entitled “Assessment of Compound Flood Risk from the Combined Effects of Sea Level Rise on Storm Surge, Tidal and Groundwater, Flooding, and Stormwater.” See Peter Sloniewsky, “Port Jeff Civic Meeting Address Flooding Concerns,” *TBR Newsmedia*, August 17, 2024. “According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Long Island’s sea level has risen 13 inches from 1880. Just to put that figure into perspective, the global average is 8-9 inches.” See “Editorial: Water Surrounds Our Island, But Ever Heard of ‘Too Much of a Good Thing?,” *TBR Newsmedia*, August 18, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Kyle Barr, “PJ Power Plant Displays Suspicious Emissions At least Twice in Two Months,” *TBR Newsmedia*, August 20, 2020.

to...replace the investor-owned Long Island Lighting Company (LILCO) as the provider of electric and gas power on Long Island, and to reduce power costs for Long Island ratepayers.”<sup>10</sup> As a public authority, LIPA would acquire LILCO’s equity and refinance its taxable debt with tax-exempt debt, therefore lowering the costs for ratepayers. LILCO would still run the plant while LIPA bought and supplied the power to Long Islanders (the plant’s operations eventually fell to National Grid in 2007, while in 2014, New Jersey-based PESG contracted to operate LIPA’s electric infrastructure). To ease residents’ fears in the towns, villages, and school districts where LILCO’s power stations were located, LIPA, in its 1997 Power Supply Agreement (PSA), promised to not seek reductions in tax assessments—and the revenues they generated for local municipalities—and to discontinue any *tax-certiorari* proceedings previously launched by LILCO.<sup>11</sup> Lasting fifteen years, the initial PSA expired by its terms in May 2013. This was followed by the implementation of an Amended Power Supply Agreement between LIPA and National Grid containing new language. “It eliminated the restrictions on commencing tax challenges contained in §21.16 of the original PSA and allowed [National Grid] to initiate such challenges ‘where appropriate.’”<sup>12</sup>

The Amended Power Supply Agreement set off protracted court battles which eventually ended in a settlement between LIPA, the Town of Brookhaven, the Village of Port Jefferson, and the Port Jefferson School District in December 2018. As the Mayor of Port Jefferson, Margot Garant, noted in a February 2019 message to the village, “Life within the 11777 Zip Code is about to get real.” For decades, villagers had been heavily subsidized by the over assessed power plant, the mayor acknowledged. Formerly billed at over \$1 billion, experts argued that it’s worth was closer to \$300 million. As Garant explained, “the plant represented upwards of half of the assessment roll which in layman’s terms means that half our tax revenue each year came from the power plant property.” The full brunt of the depreciated

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<sup>10</sup> Case 20180816 (Index no: 15186-11), Decision, Supreme Court of New York, July 19, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. “Moreover, in a letter to the Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association and state senator LaValle, [LIPA Chairman Richard Kessel] assured them that pending tax-certiorari cases would be discontinued and no new ones commenced.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Before the 2018 settlement between LIPA, the Town of Brookhaven, and the Village of Port Jefferson, the power authority sought recuperation for overassessments beginning with the year 2010.

value of the property will be realized at the conclusion of an eight-year glide path.<sup>13</sup> With New York State’s Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act’s (2019) strict emissions reduction mandates, combined with offshore wind development gaining speed off Long Island’s southern shores, further devaluation—if not outright decommissioning—of the Port Jefferson Power Plant is possible.

### **Port Jefferson’s Pro-Growth Machine: (Re)Development as Panacea for the Revenue Problem**

Reflecting on her time in office, former mayor of Port Jefferson, Margot Garant, stated that in 2009, at the commencement of her 14-year tenure, she was told by a Board of Trustees member, “[the] biggest issue is going to be LIPA and the school [district].”<sup>14</sup> The trustee’s prescient observation proved true. With Garant at the helm, and the plant’s reassessment looming, the Village embarked on a course of development.

“That’s why I felt it was so important to build...because we [couldn’t] rely on the plant forever,” explained Garant in an April 2024 interview. She added, “My residents are spoiled,” regarding villagers’ historically low property taxes relative to other areas within the Town of Brookhaven.<sup>15</sup> While recognizing the inevitability of tax hikes within the Village, keeping them lower than surrounding (unincorporated) hamlets has been of paramount importance.<sup>16</sup> Between 2017 and 2024, six major apartment complexes have been, or are being, developed—three in Lower Port and three along a small corridor in Upper Port. In Lower Port, all three developments—The Shipyard (2018), Overbay (2018), and Brookport (2021)—are market rate, with a combined 208 units. Redevelopment in Upper Port is now gaining speed, with The Hills—the first major real estate testing ground in the district—constructed from 2017-2018 (with 74 market rate units across two complexes). In January 2023, The Crossings, resting next to the LIRR train station, began renting through New York State’s affordable housing lottery

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<sup>13</sup> Margot Garant, “Mayor’s Message: LIPA Tax Settlement and What’s on the Horizon,” February 1, 2019. LIPA’s original lawsuit sought a 90 percent reduction in the power plant’s tax assessment. In terms of the “glide path,” in year two, the school district and Village prepared to offset losses upwards of 7-8% of the annual revenue.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Margot Garant by Craig Chen and Carla Randolla, April 2, 2024. Chen and Randolla were both students enrolled in SUS487, Research in Sustainability, with me. The project was entitled, “Analyzing Revitalization in Upper Port, Port Jefferson Through the Lens of Sustainability and Environmental Justice.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. The lowered property taxes in the Village of Port Jefferson largely stemmed from the nearly \$15 million annually the over assessed PJ power plant brought into the Port Jefferson Union Free School District.

<sup>16</sup> In a 2010 survey conducted by the Village titled “What are the Most Important Issues Facing Our Village as a Community in the Next 10 Years,” out of 27 categories, “Controlling Taxes” was rate the most important issue. 2030 Comprehensive Plan and Update, Incorporated Village of Port Jefferson, November 2014.

system.<sup>17</sup> Presently, One North, advertised as thirty-five “luxury apartments,” is nearly complete at the northern entrance to Upper Port. Together these three complexes represent another 154 units, each huddled along the main thoroughfare over a couple blocks. Another Upper Port development site, adjacent to The Crossings, is under review.<sup>18</sup>

Each of these apartment complexes, some with mixed-use commercial space, have been subsidized by the Brookhaven Industrial Development Agency (BIDA), which has the authority to grant payments in lieu of taxes (PILOT) to encourage development. Writing in *The Port Times Record*, former Village trustee, Bruce Miller, stated, “Years of hard work and research done by our Port Jefferson residents have been discarded in favor of developers’ plans for future intensive, and not always attractive, development.” Regarding the transformation of Upper Port, Miller was blunter. “It’s an open secret that the properties were very poorly maintained up there. In my opinion, property owners have allowed their buildings to deteriorate so that they would be able to sell the properties to—in this case—subsidized developers.”<sup>19</sup> When it comes to the properties in the Upper Port Revitalization Zone, which are subject to condemnation through eminent domain via the Village’s Urban Renewal Plan, patterns of ownership lend themselves to Miller’s accusations. From property tax map assessments, out of the 28 properties in the Revitalization Zone recommended for demolition in the Village’s 2016 Urban Renewal Plan, at least 15 are owned by LLCs located outside the county, with 6 owned by an LLC registered in Texas.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> According to Margot Garant, there were about 3,000 applicants for The Crossing’s 45 apartment units. Interview with Margot Garant by Craig Chen and Carla Randolla, April 2, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> See Village of Port Jefferson Planning Board Meeting Agenda, October 12, 2023, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Janis, “Uptown Port Jeff Undergoes Transformation,” *TBR Newsmedia*, October 28, 2022. Miller has also suggested that “current leadership has permitted blight to be exploited in order to extract concessions for larger zoning—zoning not recommended by our residents’ committee.” See Bruce Miller, “Perspective: Raising the Stakes for this Year’s Village Elections,” *The Port Times Record*, March 26, 2023. The Village’s 2030 Comprehensive Plan Update corroborates Miller. A survey conducted by the Plan, entitled “Survey Results for How Much the Should the Village Encourage the Following,” is telling. Out of thirty-four categories, the four lowest ranked were “Clustered Housing (31),” “Multi-Family Dwellings (32),” “Low-Income Housing (33),” “Apartments (4 or More Units) (34).”

<sup>20</sup> Property Tax Assessment Map, with Listed Owners, Contact/Agent Names, Principal Address, and Land Use. Compiled by Craig Chen.

## **The Transformation of Upper Port: Urban Renewal and the Discourse of Blight**

In preparation of the Village's 2030 Comprehensive Plan, multiple community surveys were conducted.<sup>21</sup> The surveys quantified residential perceptions on issues ranging from environmental quality to housing and transportation needs to tourism and economic development. 575 surveys were returned, which, if assuming each came from a different household, represented 18 percent of the Village's 3,117 residential units. Table 1-1 is telling. Titled "How Would You Rate Your Village?" with twenty-eight categories in rows ranked from "Very Satisfied" to "Not Satisfied," "Appearance of Uptown Area" came not only in last place, but was the *only* row completely highlighted in bold.<sup>22</sup> In late 2015, the Village commenced a Blight Study for Upper Port to identify properties that could potentially, if successful, be seized through eminent domain. Village attorney Brian Egan explained that "the Port Jefferson government could use the coming analysis of blight uptown as ammunition to make a case for applying eminent domain."<sup>23</sup>

The use of "blight" in the pursuit of urban renewal has a long and troubled history.<sup>24</sup> To designate an area as "blighted" is to suggest it is injurious to anything it touches—that it will metastasize unless eliminated in full. Rehabilitation, in this context, is not possible. Condemnation, razing, and repurposing are, in this discourse, the only options available. And in its codified form, "blight" further suggests that more than physical deterioration is involved. Utilizing the State's official language, the Village's Urban Renewal Plan (2016) deemed Upper Port's "blight" as constituting a "serious and growing menace, [and] is injurious to the public safety, health, morals, and welfare...thereby threatening the source of public revenues."<sup>25</sup> While the bottom line here is economic, "blight," in this rendering, has a moral component that is social in nature. In the public consciousness, the residents are often assumed the agents of blight.<sup>26</sup> Missed are the profit motives and incentivizing policies that make "blight" attractive to property owners

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<sup>21</sup> The Village's last Master Plan was approved in 1965. An update was prepared in 1995 but was never adopted.

<sup>22</sup> 2030 Comprehensive Plan and Update, Incorporated Village of Port Jefferson, November 2014. When it came to "Appearance of Uptown Area," the responses were as follows: 13 "Very Satisfied," 99 "Satisfied," and 433 "Not satisfied." "As a Place to Live," "Public Amenities" and "As a Place to Raise Children" topped the list.

<sup>23</sup> Elana Glowatz, "Village Takes Closer Look at Uptown Blight," *The Port Times Record*, November 19, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, see Themis Chronopolous, "Robert Moses and the Visual Dimension of Physical Disorder: Efforts to Demonstrate Urban Blight in the Age of Slum Clearance," *Journal of Planning History* 13 no. 3 (2014): 207-233.

<sup>25</sup> Village of Port Jefferson Urban Renewal Plan, October 2016, 1.

<sup>26</sup> A good example of this can be found in Chad Freidrich's documentary *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* (2011).



who stand to gain from eminent domain induced buyouts.<sup>27</sup> After an area is declared “blighted,” buildings are not what are desired—it is the land upon which they stand.

In Upper Port, on the west side of Main Street, there are three Latinx delis, two barbershops, a billiards hall, and a dental office, all of which serve the Village’s Spanish speaking residents. In the eight-block area comprising the Upper Port urban renewal zone, those identified as “Hispanic” made up over 60 percent of the population.<sup>28</sup> According to Father Francis Pizzarelli, who has long served Port Jefferson’s most vulnerable, there are far more Spanish speakers residing in these tracts than listed in the census.<sup>29</sup> Yet from an analysis of local property tax maps, most of the buildings are owned by distant landlords.<sup>30</sup> The recommendations provided in the Upper Port Urban Renewal Plan make clear the winners if eminent domain is pursued: “It is proposed that all structures in the Area be acquired and demolished.”<sup>31</sup> Property owners, who according to Bruce Miller, “allowed [the area] to deteriorate in order to extract consideration for larger zoning,” will profit. The owners of the Latinx businesses, who rent space, and the Spanish speaking residents perched above, will likely be displaced. Local media, civic association meetings, and Village Hall make no mention of this. When asked whether there were any anti-displacement measures for Upper Port’s Latinx community, Margot Garant, the former mayor, answered, “No.”<sup>32</sup> These changes—what the Village terms a “renaissance”—are combined with similar developments in nearby Port Jefferson Station. Located only a couple blocks south of the train station, Jefferson Plaza, which has the area’s only predominately Spanish speaking, Latinx-oriented supermarket (Ideal), too is slated for

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<sup>27</sup> In the case of Upper Port, former trustee, Bruce Miller, stated in *The Port Times Record*, ““The area was pretty blighted and the people who owned the property there allowed it to deteriorate in order to extract consideration for larger zoning, which they got.” Raymond Janis, “Uptown Port Jeff Undergoes Transformation,” *The Port Times Record*, October 28, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> According to the Upper Port Jefferson Revitalization Planning and Urban Design Study (December 28, 2012), the area that designated for urban renewal contained eight blocks huddled around the Main Street corridor stretching from the LIRR train station to the south to just above Perry Street to the north. In 2010 the population of these tracts was 184 residents, of which 111 were defined as Hispanic by census data. This was up from 63 defined as Hispanic out of 150 residents in 2000.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Pizzarelli (Charboneau/Chen), April 10, 2024. Father Frank, as he is known, founded Hope House Ministries in 1980, which runs Hope House close to Upper Port and Pax Christi Hospitality Center in Upper Port.

<sup>30</sup> Property Tax Assessment Map, with Listed Owners, Contact/Agent Names, Principal Address, and Land Use. Compiled by Craig Chen.

<sup>31</sup> Village of Port Jefferson Urban Renewal Plan, October 2016, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Margot Garant by Craig Chen and Carla Randolla, April 2, 2024.

demolition. Staller associates, which owns the plaza, has just been granted Suffolk County’s first Commercial Redevelopment District (CRD) rezoning, which will allow for the strip mall’s conversion to 280 apartments and mixed-use commercial space. Eighty percent of the units—which rise higher than what has traditionally been allowed—are set to be market-rate.<sup>33</sup> According to prominent members of the Port Jefferson/Terryville Civic Association, Staller has long denied new leases to the plaza’s commercial tenants and allowed its infrastructure to deteriorate to gain the CRD status.<sup>34</sup>

### **Upper Port, Port Jefferson as Distinct**

The fact that Upper Port is part of the Village of Port Jefferson is somewhat technical. In 1963, as the hamlet of Port Jefferson sought to incorporate as a village, it ran into a problem—it did not meet the minimum land area required by the state.<sup>35</sup> To meet New York State’s mandate, it was decided to annex the Upper Port area (then known as “Echo”), which at the time was part of Port Jefferson Station, an unincorporated hamlet in the Town of Brookhaven. Upper Port thrived until the early 1980s, when the Ronkonkoma line of the LIRR was electrified. The Port Jefferson line, still run on diesel and therefore requiring passengers to transfer on their way to NYC, took “a heavy loss of railroad commuters” and entered a “serious and continuous decline.”<sup>36</sup> According to Father Frank, as the hardware store and “five and dimes,” along with the bakeries, a butcher, and a diner folded or relocated, a Latinx population began to develop and open shops amid depreciated, but affordable, properties.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Carl MacGowan, “New Lease on Life: Zoning Change for 1950s-era Shopping Center Allows Redevelopment, Additional Apartments,” *Newsday*, October 1, 2024. The town board voted 6-0 in favor of the rezoning. Renderings of the proposed project have what many locals feel to be too “urban” of a feel, and many believe the 280 units will create additional congestion problems. Local Civic Associations (e.g., Port Jefferson/Terryville Civic Association and Three Villages Civic Association), fought hard to have Staller Associates’ plans modified to maintain the area’s dominant suburban feel. For instance, see Raymond Janis, “Letters to the Editor,” *TBR Newsmedia*, October 3, 2024. The author has attended many Port Jefferson/Terryville Civic Association meetings, witnessing heated exchanges between representatives of Staller Associates and local residents.

<sup>34</sup> According to prominent PJ/TCA member Paul Sagliocca, Port Jefferson malls—in all—have an 87 percent tenancy rate—Staller Associates’ Jefferson Plaza now has only a 48 percent tenancy rate. And that too has further dipped, as the Family Dollar’s lease was recently allowed to expire.

<sup>35</sup> Upper Port Jefferson Revitalization Planning and Urban Design Study, December 28, 2012, 1. Upper Port is still in the Comsewogue School District, which serves Port Jefferson Station/Terryville.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Father Francis Pizzarelli by Adam Charboneau and Craig Chen, April 10, 2024.

Beyond Upper Port's concentrated Spanish speaking community and high rate of vacant buildings and abandoned properties—particularly on the east side of the Main Street corridor, opposite the spate of Latinx businesses—setting it apart from Lower Port's demographic makeup and tourist-based economy, Upper Port is also, relative to Lower Port, bereft of park space.<sup>38</sup> Texaco Avenue Park, the neighborhood's only park, is a small recreational area nestled behind The Hills' market-rate apartments. Its immediate proximity to The Hills' makes it seem the private playground of that complex. This lack of green space has not gone unnoticed—in recent years, Village officials have begun the process of converting a roughly six-acre patch of land along Highlands Blvd., north of the LIRR train station, into Six-Acre Park.<sup>39</sup> When completed in 2028, this new park, envisioned as a living laboratory and passive green space, will not only help manage stormwater runoff while serving to recharge the local aquifer, it too will appreciate property values in the Urban Renewal Zone.<sup>40</sup> In its May 2022 proposal to the Village Board of Trustees, the Six Acre Park Committee noted that “The park would also add to the attractiveness, safety, and opportunities for recreation in the area, which all increase nearby property values and appeal.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, Lower Port has Harborfront Park, Rocketship Playground, and Joe Earland Park, as well as a community center. The three Lower Port parks total nearly 9 acres. In contrast, Texaco Avenue Park is 0.53 acres. Access to park space has been shown to have many beneficial effects, from reduced stress and better mental and physical health to cooler temperatures from urban heat island effect, better air quality and management of stormwater runoff. See Roland Strum and Deborah Cohen, “Proximity to Urban Parks and Mental Health,” *The Journal of Mental Health Policy and Economics* 17, no. 1 (2014): 19-24.

<sup>39</sup> “Once a field of daisies and home of an asphalt plant, the parcel was purchased by developer John McNamara who deeded the 6 acres to the Village of Port Jefferson in the late 1980s as part of an agreement regarding the development of the adjacent Highlands Condominium Complex. In 1986, covenant plans entailed a pool complex, followed by a second covenant in 1987 freeing the parcel from any restrictions. The 2014 Upper Port Revitalization Plan documented an array of suggested passive and active uses including: passive park; arboretum; community gardens; recreational park; community facility- YMCA and park; and housing and park. When another developer suggested a swap of the land with the Village to build apartment buildings on these six acres, a “Designate it Parkland” petition was initiated by Kathleen Riley and Christina Giacomazza to preserve the open green space. Once 1,500 signatures had been collected, Mayor Margot Garant officially designated the parcel as Parkland in 2015 for passive and active use for all residents of the Village.” See Six Acre Park Committee Proposal to the Port Jefferson Village Board of Trustees, May 16, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> For more on the park's completion date and funding, see [Six Acre Park Planning | Regional Economic Development Councils \(ny.gov\)](#)

<sup>41</sup> Six Acre Park Committee Proposal to the Port Jefferson Village Board of Trustees, May 16, 2022. In the resources section of the Committee's proposal, under “Effect of Trees on Property Value,” great attention was given to the potential of parks and trees to appreciate nearby real estate.

While the proposed park is desperately needed in Upper Port, it will likely be an amenity for new populations. In her 2017 State of the Village Address, Margot Garant stated that “Uptown Funk,” the name applied by her administration to Upper Port’s revitalization, was “about getting a new population in where you have a blighted area.”<sup>42</sup> And the 2016 Urban Renewal Plan recommended the demolition of all buildings in the renewal zone. Though the lots and buildings were somewhat irregularly shaped (they are particularly small, a vestige from their pre-zoning makings during the late-19<sup>th</sup> century), they have unique histories and architecture—many have western “false front” facades, and they are today the spaces of a Latinx cultural hub. These are places of social infrastructure for a historically marginalized community that function as much for their use-value as exchange-value.<sup>43</sup> Yet their razing in full, through eminent domain, if necessary, allows for greater logistical ease and profitability for developers. Further signs—literally-speaking—also portend a demographic change. Recently, signs proclaiming “Welcome to Seawolves Country,” a nod to the Village’s new official partnership with nearby Stony Brook University, have been fastened to Upper Port electric poles.<sup>44</sup> From the start, the Village’s 2030 Comprehensive Plan indicated that revitalization meant the introduction of a new, professional community—one with a close connection to the University.<sup>45</sup> Recent advertisements for Village Board of Trustees candidates further the point. Marie Parziale, who lost in the June 2024 election, took out an ad in the *Port Times Record* stating, “I am committed to enhancing the relationship between Port Jefferson Village and Stony Brook University, bringing more graduate students and young professionals to live in our uptown area.”<sup>46</sup>

The final key for Upper Port’s transformation, in the eyes of many Village officials, is the full electrification of the Port Jefferson LIRR line. As a Village announcement from then-mayor Garant noted

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<sup>42</sup> See “Mayor Margot Garant: State of the Village Address,” Port Jeff Chamber General Meeting, n.d. (circa 2017).

<sup>43</sup> For more on the multilayered effects of gentrification (esp. when it comes to a new emphasis on exchange- over use-value regarding space), see Themis Chronopoulos, “African Americans, Gentrification, and Neoliberal Urbanization: The Case of Fort Greene, Brooklyn,” *Journal of African American Studies*, 20 (2016): 294-322. “Building on his work on whiteness, George Lipsitz argues that ‘the white spatial imaginary views space primarily as a locus for the generation of exchange-value.’”

<sup>44</sup> “Port Jefferson is Declared ‘Seawolves Country,’” *Stony Brook University News*, April 25, 2024.

<sup>45</sup> “Generally, development in Uptown should consist of housing geared to hospital employees, seniors, and Stony Brook students, faculty, and staff.” Appendix G: Demographic and Economic Analysis, Village of Port Jefferson 2030 Comprehensive Plan Update Market Analysis, January 13, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> “Marie Parziale (Johs) for Port Jeff Village Trustee,” *The Port Times Record*, June 13, 2024.

in December 2019, “We remain confident that, as electrification of the LIRR line continues on the MTA track, the redevelopment of Upper Port will follow.”<sup>47</sup> In this effort, the Port Jefferson Civic Association passed a motion in June 2024 to write a letter, framed in the discourse of climate change, to Governor Hochul asking for the rail line’s electrification to meet NYS’s Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act’s (CLCPA) mandates for carbon emission reductions.<sup>48</sup> With Sunrise Wind being developed off the island’s southeastern shores, this line of argument—of renewable energy provided to electrified tracks within a site of Transit-Oriented Development—is powerful. Whether or not this was a case of economic development masquerading as environmentalism, the civic association’s underlying emphasis was on the revitalization of Upper Port, only one LIRR stop from Stony Brook University.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

What becomes of Upper Port, and Port Jefferson as a whole, is not yet history. Offshore wind, which could spell the outright end of the fossil fuel burning Port Jefferson Power Plant, has been slow to fully emerge.<sup>49</sup> And the electrification of the Port Jefferson LIRR line is anything but certain.<sup>50</sup> Developers have been pitching proposals to the Village’s Planning Board and attending area civic association meetings, but incentives to build, and the will of residents to promote growth, are not necessarily a constant. Perhaps hardest to ascertain is the voice of those most vulnerable to the forces of change—Upper Port’s Latinx community. And “community” may not be the best choice of terms, as area Spanish speaking residents come from multiple nationalities and concerns.<sup>51</sup> Moving forward, an oral history project is needed—I’m hoping to incorporate the Latin American Student Association at Stony Brook

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<sup>47</sup> December 5, 2019, Update from Mayor Granat.

<sup>48</sup> Samantha Rutt, “Port Jefferson Civic Addresses Village Issues Going Forward,” *TBR Newsmedia*, June 14, 2024.

<sup>49</sup> For instance, see Ivan Penn, Stanley Reed, and Brad Plumer, “What Ails Offshore Wind: Supply Chains, Ships, and Interest Rates,” *New York Times*, December 11, 2023. For ideas as to retrofitting the Port Jefferson Power Plant, keeping it relevant, see Kyle Barr, “PJ Report Says There’s Benefit to Retrofitting Power Plant,” *TBR Newsmedia*, August 14, 2020. This was in response to LIPA study hinting at decommissioning the PJ power plant.

<sup>50</sup> Electrification, and an added rail line, will prove enormously expensive to an MTA LIRR that’s consistently deep in the red. For instance, see Larry Penner, “Will We Ever See Electrification of the LIRR Port Jefferson Branch?” *Messenger Papers*, June 13, 2024. [Will We Ever See Electrification of the LIRR Port Jefferson Branch? - Messenger Papers](#)

<sup>51</sup> In a March 29, 2024, interview with a student of mine, Mia Dominguez, one Latina woman working at an Upper Port deli noted that she was from the Dominican Republic and that there was a disconnect between the different Latino nationalities in the area. Even the use of “Latinx” may prove inappropriate and overly academic.



University in the project, fostering greater connection between this research and those most affected by development. Finally, this work needs to be more fully contextualized within larger developments (e.g., the social and political wrangling associated with Governor Hochul’s proposed Housing Compact, which emphasizes the creation of affordable housing units in close proximity to public transit hubs, which will further serve the goals of NYS’s CLCPA).



Above is Upper Port, facing southwest off Route 112 (Main Street). Pictured are two Latinx Delis (to the left is Seven Brothers Deli, which is separated from El Limeño Deli by Linden Place. Right of El Limeño is a barber shop. Many of the buildings photographed here have western style false front facades. Photograph by Adam Charboneau.





Above are numerous vacant buildings in Upper Port on the west side of Route 112 (Main Street). Recently, the Halal City moved into what was once a Chinese takeout restaurant. Photograph by Adam Charboneau.





Pictured above is an abandoned building on Perry Street just off Route 112 (Main Street). One can see the unique false front architecture on the buildings located on Route 112 (in the background). Photography by Adam Charboneau.





Above, to the left, is The Crossings, a new affordable housing complex adjacent to the train station in Upper Port on the east side of Route 112 (Main Street). To the right is another abandoned property on the east side of Route 112 (Main Street). A proposal to redevelop the abandoned property (by Conifer, which developed The Crossings) is in the review process. To the west of 112 (not pictured here) are three Latinx Delis. Photo by Adam Charboneau.





Though hard to see, the small, one-story building (with neon signage) sandwiched between the two red buildings with false fronts is the *Denista*. Photograph by Adam Charboneau.





This is Village owned land, nestled just northeast of the LIRR train station (about a block west from Route 112). It is expected to be developed into Six Acre Park. Photograph by Adam Charboneau.





One North, on the east side of Route 112/Main Street, will soon begin leasing. It serves as the new skyline and entry point to Upper Port, Port Jefferson. Photograph by Adam Charboneau.





A “Welcome to Seawolves Country” banner can be seen hanging on the electricity post to the far left—this symbolizes both Port Jefferson’s new official designation with Stony Brook University and the likelihood of this area becoming future housing for University faculty, staff, and students. Photograph by Adam Charboneau.