

Flower Power

Catskill Gardens

Sullivan County was commonly known as the Borsht Belt during the heyday of the resort hotel industry.

While some signs of recovery have been evident for several years, up until last summer most county residents or visitors would acknowledge that it had been in a state of decline since the late 1960s. The last of the big resort hotels, The Concord, closed in 1999 in bankruptcy, leaving the county in a quagmire of debt for back taxes owed, and the new owner with a cleanup bill for an illegal dump that the hotel had operated on the property for many years. And, despite some of the most beautiful natural landscape in the Catskills, visitors to the area (approximately the size of Rhode Island) often were focused on deteriorated summer camps, vacant main street businesses, derelict farms, and large areas with no obvious building code enforcement.

During the first half of the, 1990s, county legislators and civic and business associations struggled with overtaxed budgets and the dilemma of how to build a broad and sustainable tax base. Initiative programs to stimulate the local economy to attract more tourism were ongoing, as in many parts of New

York State. Typical of many economically depressed areas throughout the United States, casino gambling (most recently Indian casino gambling) was looked to as a possible remedy to restore a healthy tourism industry and to bring revenue to state and local coffers. While ongoing debate continues on the pros and cons of gambling, little was done initially, outside of an annual "litter pluck" every spring, to attack the most obvious problem of all - aesthetics.

Finally in the middle of the last decade, a group of county leaders formed Sullivan First, the first serious and broad-based effort to address the county's appearance. This grassroots organization included groups in almost 30 communities, planting small seeds in what would prove to be fertile ground. Several local municipal governments joined the initiative to create supportive programs like the Main Street Redevelopment Center, a landfill credit to tear down unsafe and abandoned buildings, and summer "clean team" to remove trash from public roadways.

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Photo by Otto Hillig

One of Liberty's Beautiful Rose Gardens.

By Maria Grimaldi



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