

REAL ESTATE

# Downtown Yonkers: A Cleaner, Greener Place to Call Home

Living In

By JANE MARGOLIES JULY 19, 2017

On a recent Friday afternoon, Nathan Hunter, dressed in a carrot costume, supervised the weekly farmers' market on the grounds of the historical Philipse Manor Hall in downtown Yonkers.

Across Warburton Avenue, recent graduates of nearby Sarah Lawrence College gathered in a new art gallery, using computer modeling to design bike racks for the city.

And behind the bar at the Yonkers Brewing Company, Joe Minkler was preparing for the busiest night of the workweek. "I'm making sure everything is clean and organized," he said, "so when the chaos begins, I'm ready."

Some call it revitalization, others gentrification. But no one can deny that change is sweeping the once sleepy downtown of Yonkers, which lies directly north of the Bronx, in Westchester County, and has long been regarded as a blue-collar stepchild of New York City.

The changes started along the Hudson River a dozen years ago, with apartment buildings going up on old industrial sites.

And now another, smaller river — the Saw Mill, which meanders into the Hudson, but was paved over in the 19th century when it was fouled with industrial waste — is drawing development inland.

The river, now cleaner, is being uncovered, bit by bit, in a process called “daylighting,” and public spaces are being created around it. A parking lot across Buena Vista Avenue from the Beaux-Arts train station was peeled up; in its place is a park with cascading waters.

Developers are digging in on either side of the new Van der Donck Park, constructing high-rises and retrofitting old factories, adding residences to what was once strictly a business and government district, and banking on the greener look of downtown to lure people priced out of New York — or simply looking for a change of pace.

Brigitte Griswold, the executive director of Groundwork Hudson Valley, a Yonkers-based environmental group, moved to Yonkers with her Chihuahua in February, trading a studio in a Harlem brownstone for a studio in an apartment building on Main Street called 66 Main. She pays \$1,675 a month, which is \$300 less “for almost exactly the same square footage,” she said. Her building has a terrace overlooking the new park, as well as geothermal cooling and heating. Ms. Griswold, 40, likes the minimal “hustle and bustle” and enjoys being able to walk into a restaurant and know the owner, she said, citing La Bella Havana, a Cuban restaurant, as one of her favorites.

Granted, would-be residents may find downtown Yonkers lacking a few things — a good coffee shop, for one. Also, there are no health food stores or hip yoga studios — at least not yet. “Walking around,” Ms. Griswold said, “you get the sense that if it’s not here now, it will likely be here soon.”

## What You’ll Find

Downtown Yonkers is in the southwest part of the 18-square-mile city and stretches from the Hudson east to City Hall, perched on a grassy hill about five blocks inland.

On the Hudson — where the view across the water is the dramatic cliffs of the Palisades — there is an open-air pavilion, where jazz concerts are held Friday evenings, and a Victorian-era pier, where the celebrity chef (and Yonkers native) Peter Kelly has a restaurant, X2O Xaviars on the Hudson. The Science Barge, a floating farm and environmental education center, is docked nearby.

From the waterfront up to Warburton Avenue is the spiffiest part of downtown — referred to by some local boosters, intent on drawing comparisons with Manhattan, as SoYo. Along with civic landmarks like the post office and the public library are many restaurants, such as Zuppa, for Italian fare.

Follow Main Street, which runs roughly perpendicular to the Hudson, and you'll reach Getty Square — a seedy triangle, though city officials promise an upgrade is coming soon — from which streets radiate. One, North Broadway, is lined with businesses offering ethnically diverse menus and services, like Jamaican jerk chicken and African hair braiding.

Main Street turns into New Main Street, where small shops sell discount clothes and electronics. A larger, longtime enterprise, La Piñata Bakery, has glass cases filled with churros, conchas and tres leches cakes. Cecilia Zuniga, an owner, said the stretch east of Getty Square sometimes seemed forgotten, because much of the renovation has taken place closer to the Hudson. “We hope the improvement works its way to us,” she said.

## What You'll Pay

At the brick-faced Hudson Park complex, which sits right on the water, prices for one- and two-bedroom apartments range from \$1,750 to \$3,000 a month, according to Phillip Gesue, the chief development officer for Strategic Capital, the complex's developer. The construction of a fourth, taller (24 stories) glass-and-brick tower will add 213 studio and one- and two-bedroom rentals.

Indeed, most of the residential buildings in downtown Yonkers are rentals, according to Jane McAfee, an associate broker with Houlihan Lawrence. An exception is the Scrimshaw House condos, also on the Hudson. Prices for recently sold units range from \$225,000 to \$360,000.

Meanwhile, the National Resources development company has generated buzz with the “microflats” in its new Uno project, targeted at millennials. A hundred apartments have been built inside and on top of a 1923 Otis Elevator plant — some with steel-framed windows, all with ceilings that range from 14 feet to 22 feet high. Half of the units are as small as 405 square feet and are equipped with Murphy beds. Leasing for the apartments, priced at \$1,500 to \$3,400 (Wi-Fi included), began a week ago, with occupancy expected to start Sept. 1, according to the property director, John Porzio.

Joining the lineup on the Hudson, the Modera Hudson Riverfront, a 324-unit project, is expected to begin leasing this fall, with prices starting at \$1,850. Rising above the new Van der Donck Park is Larkin Plaza, which will consist of two towers with 440 rentals and a two-story retail structure. Leasing of rental units will begin late next year, according to Seth Pinsky, an executive vice president at RXR Realty, one of the developers.

## The Vibe

With a population of 200,000, Yonkers is the fourth-largest city in New York State and has some big-city problems: crime, poverty, homelessness and empty storefronts along some blocks.

Artists, who tend not to be put off by a little roughness around the edges, are moving in — some to live, others to rent space in which to paint and sculpt. For a long time there was a single art gallery in town; now there are five, four of which participate in “first Thursday” open houses. Murals embellish building exteriors, and public sculptures are seemingly everywhere you look.

Daniel Wolf, an art and photography dealer, and his wife, the artist and architect Maya Lin, thrilled local artists in 2013 when they bought the empty 1926 Yonkers City Jail. Although the couple initially considered holding public events

there, Mr. Wolf has found that he needs the entire building to store his collections, host visits by clients and curators, and do a little painting of his own.

“Yonkers today has a raw feeling that reminds me of Manhattan in 1971,” he said in a phone interview. “In 20 years, saying you live in Yonkers will be just like saying you live in Greenpoint today.”

## The Schools

The Yonkers public school district — one of the largest in the state — has a troubled history that includes court-ordered desegregation in the 1980s and, more recently, an accounting scandal that left an enormous deficit. The schools themselves are old and overcrowded.

But improvements have been made. The old neighborhood-based school system, which reinforced segregation, has been replaced with a system in which parents have a say in where their children enroll, and specialized magnet schools have proliferated.

There are 600 students in prekindergarten through eighth grade at the Eugenio María de Hostos Microsociety School, south of downtown. Twenty-nine percent met state standards in English in 2016, compared with 38 percent statewide, while 27 percent met math standards, compared with 39 percent statewide.

At the Pearls Hawthorne School, also serving pre-K through eighth grade, 72 percent of the 800 students met standards in English in 2016, while 73 percent met standards in math.

At Riverside High School, mean SAT scores in 2016 were 372 for critical reading and 363 for math, compared with 494 for critical reading and 508 for math statewide, respectively. At Yonkers Middle High School, which serves sixth through 12th grades, mean SAT scores in 2016 were 492 for critical reading and 502 for math.

## The Commute

It takes 28 to 39 minutes on Metro-North Railroad's Hudson line to get from the recently restored 1911 Yonkers train station to Grand Central Terminal. Trains run about every half-hour. One-way peak fares are \$17; monthly tickets are \$239. Amtrak trains also stop at the Yonkers station.

## The History

The Native Americans who first populated Yonkers called their village Napeckamack, meaning "rapid water settlement" — a reference to the forceful Saw Mill River. Gristmills and at least one stone mill also benefited from local hydropower.

In the city's industrial heyday, factories churned out carpet and hats. Kawasaki Rail Car still manufactures New York City subway cars in Yonkers, and is now part of a 24-acre commercial and industrial complex called iPark Hudson, whose tenants also include IAC Applications, a media and internet company that owns Ask.com and The Daily Beast.

### ***Correction: July 27, 2017***

An earlier version of a slide show with this article misspelled the name of a park in picture No. 10. It is Alfred B. DelBello Park, not Alfred B. Delbellow.

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