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COVER STORY

## The \$15 million plan to make this Hudson River town a destination

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Cossackie's downtown is tiny but has the essentials: bank, general store, post office, library, real estate agency, wine shop, Italian restaurant and apartments in renovated buildings.

It's all within a short walk of a public park along the Hudson River.

The Greene County village (pop. 2,900) also has the hallmarks of upstate's decadeslong decline: an abandoned manufacturing site and a blocklong dilapidated building that was an opera house in the late 1800s.

Today, the stairs are creaky, the stage and seats are gone, and the high-ceilinged auditorium is overrun by pigeons. A thick layer of droppings and feathers covers the floor, along with a dead bird or two. Only someone with vision and moxie could see a brighter future there.

Aaron Flach, 44, grew up in Cossackie, the youngest of four brothers. Each has their own local business or trade. They're also equal partners in Flach Development and Realty Inc., a company started by their father, John P. Flach, a pipefitter who branched into commercial real estate.

Aaron, who now leads the company, sees tremendous potential for his hometown to become the next Hudson Valley locale that draws day-trippers or second-home buyers from New York City and elsewhere.

Cossackie doesn't have the Instagram appeal of Hudson, its trendy neighbor 15 miles south, but judging by the number of new faces Flach and others see on the weekends, word is slowly spreading.

"Our intention is to create a destination to bring people here, and that's already starting to happen," he said.

### Where is the village of Cossackie?

Flach Development has experience with a variety of projects, including owning and managing more than 200 apartments, two shopping centers, commercial buildings, homes and land.

Aaron owns three laundromats and two car washes. He also has been buying and renovating historic buildings since 2003, when he converted a three-story building downtown into nine apartments and a lawyer's office.

He's passionate about preservation.

"I've always been interested in architecture and old buildings," he said. "In my travels, I always appreciated them."

Over the past 18 months, Flach Development paid \$975,000 to buy five empty buildings clustered on South River Street, encompassing six acres.

The properties were owned by the Twelve Tribes, a religious sect that for years controlled a big chunk of downtown but whose presence has greatly diminished. Just four members still live in the village, Aaron said.



DONNA ABBOTT-VLAHOS

Cossackie is located about 30 minutes from Albany — but similar to other places south of the state capital, many perceive the trip to be longer.

Flach Development has a four-phase, roughly \$15 million plan to convert the buildings into an event center with a glass atrium facing the water, a 40-room boutique hotel, a restaurant/brewpub, and storefronts at the old opera house with apartments and performing arts venue on the upper floors.

### Phases of the development

The roughly \$15 million in renovations and new construction that Flach Development and Realty Inc. wants to do in downtown Coxsackie would be completed in four phases.

The first two phases — The Wire event center and The Newbury Hotel, costing an estimated \$10.2 million— got critical support in mid-October when they were named one of 12 “priority projects” by the Capital Region Economic Development Council.

The council recommended Flach Development receive \$2 million in state assistance. The designation increases the chances the company will receive some funding when Gov. Andrew Cuomo announces the winning projects in December. A total of \$750 million in aid will be awarded statewide.

Aaron has been working closely with the Bank of Greene County and National Bank of Coxsackie, on whose board he sits, to secure financing.

He also submitted an application to the Greene County Industrial Development Agency for an estimated \$640,000 in sales and use tax exemptions and a \$100,000 mortgage recording tax exemption.

Rene VanSchaack, executive director of the IDA, said nobody else is pursuing the kinds of investments that Flach Development wants to make in the village. It's a longstanding frustration for him and others, the feeling that Coxsackie's charms aren't better known or appreciated.

### Inside the Flach's plan for Coxsackie

The village, which is in the town of the same name, has a good-sized riverfront unspoiled by the industrial relics or busy roads that divide so many upstate municipalities from the water. The downtown is quaint and easy to reach from the Thruway.

For many, though, Coxsackie is just another exit off the highway. They may know it's home to two state prisons. The village's name is also unfortunately linked to a virus that causes flu-like symptoms, first discovered there in 1947.

Coxsackie isn't that far from Albany — it's about 30 miles from Wolf Road in Colonie — but similar to other places south of the state capital, many perceive the trip to be longer. Those same people won't hesitate driving roughly the same distance to reach Saratoga Springs or other points north.

Mark Evans, who has been mayor of Coxsackie for 11 years, puts it this way: “There's like this invisible barrier at the end of Albany County. They think nothing exists beyond there. They think there's no jobs. It's frustrating because when we see data on the Albany region [in the newspaper], Greene County won't be listed. Or they misspell the county. There's an 'e' at the end.”

Evans doesn't sound bitter when he says this, just mildly exasperated. He's sitting in his office on the second floor of State Telephone Co. downtown, a phone and internet provider to about 4,500 customers in the area. In addition to being mayor, he's vice president of the family-owned company.

Much of his time as mayor has been spent finding ways to upgrade the aging infrastructure. A \$3.5 million water filtration plant opened in 2011. The village is in the midst of \$17 million in improvements to the sewer pipes and treatment system.

The work is evident downtown, where sections of roads that have been dug up are covered in gravel. It's not a pretty sight, but it's temporary. Everything should be finished in a year.

Evans is excited by what [Aaron Flach](#) is trying to do.

"We've waited for decades [to see redevelopment]," he said. "Ever since I was young, this area was in a state of disarray. There was no real anchor and no real future. For years, people thought and hoped somebody from the city would come buy it and develop it all, but it never panned out. I'm ecstatic that it's somebody local."

### What brought them to Coxsackie

At Manson + Reed, a small grocery store in downtown Coxsackie, you'll find honey, teas, coffee, pancake mix, ice cream, cheeses, eggs, beer, cider, meats and more — all locally sourced or from producers in New York and other northeastern states.

Behind the counter on a recent day, next to the newly installed espresso machine, was [Justine Host](#), who owns the business with her twin sister, Lia.

The Hosts took a chance on Coxsackie nearly five years ago.

Justine earned a Ph.D. in literature and creative writing at the University of Houston and graduated into a tough job market.

Lia owned an arts collective in Brooklyn but got priced out when rents shot up.

They both wanted to make a change. They were familiar with Coxsackie from the days during their gap year between high school and college when they volunteered as educators on the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater and docked in the village during trips on the Hudson River.

Real estate was more affordable in Coxsackie than in other Hudson Valley towns that are closer to New York City.

"It was a block of three [buildings] we could afford," Justine said. "We loved the town. It's so historic, with the park and the river right there."

They took another plunge in May 2017 by opening the grocery store. Business has been good, with a steady stream of local residents and, in the warm months, out-of-towners on a weekend trek or attending a wedding in the area.

The pace has picked up lately.

"It's come alive a little bit," Justine said.

A table with chairs is next to each of the two front windows. [Gail Marowitz](#) was seated by herself, reading a magazine.

She divides her time between Manhattan's Meatpacking District and her place in Coxsackie, a 200-year-old church a block away from the general store that she converted into a home.

Marowitz is an art director who has designed vinyl album covers for artists such as Panic! At The Disco and Bacon Brothers. Her LP package designs for Aimee Mann received three Grammy nominations and an award in 2006 for best recording package.

The beauty and solitude of Coxsackie appeal to her. She has mixed feelings about others discovering the village.

Technology enables her to work in the city or country.

"As long as there's internet, I'm good," she said.

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