

## Flood takes final look at changing commerce

By John Mason Columbia-Greene Media | Posted: Wednesday, July 6, 2016 12:00 am

Ken Flood's last day as Columbia County's planning and economic development commissioner was Thursday. He came to Columbia County at the beginning of the recent recession, in December 2008, and is leaving at a time of relative prosperity.

"When I got here, there were a number of vacant buildings," he said. "I focused on filling those vacant buildings."

During his eight years here, he had a hand in filling three of the biggest.

The largest of these was the former Kaz factory on Route 9G, whose 200,000 square feet had recently been vacated when its jobs went south of the border. In October 2011, the Flanders air filtration company moved in. It employs about 240 people to make furnace filters that are distributed throughout the Northeast. "They're a good corporate resident," Flood said.

When Wal-Mart left its original 100,000-square-foot home to build an even bigger store a few hundred yards up Route 9, the fear was that the old building would follow the pattern of other former Wal-Mart sites and remain vacant and desolate. But according to Flood, the building now provides work for about 40 employees, between Premier Personal Products, Periodical Services Corporation and others.

At 2986 Route 9 in Livingston, there was the former Entenmann's building, a 40,000-square-foot warehouse. The county was able to lure Groupe Eurial, a European goat cheese producer, to buy the building and turn it into a processing plant, Hudson Valley Creamery. And this is the accomplishment Flood is proudest of.

"We are the North American headquarters for a \$5 billion French company," he said. "It's going to grow, double its workforce in the next few years, start taking raw milk from goat farms. In 10 to 15 years, we'll be the center of dairy goats in the country."



Ken Flood

John Mason/ Columbia-Greene Media  
Ken Flood enjoys his last day at the helm of Columbia County's planning and economic development efforts, in his office at 401 State St., Hudson.

The county has an initiative to develop the supply of goat milk to the plant. They estimate they'll need 10,000 goats within a couple hours' drive to supply their plant.

We're working on stimulating the development of goat farms," he said. "Of the cheese industry, goat cheese is the fastest-growing, double digits every year."

The county has received a \$75,000 grant for a nonprofit farm that would develop the most productive goats and supply them to for-profit farms.

This emphasis comes from nowhere strange: Flood grew up from the age of 13 working on a farm in Latham almost year-round, from greenhouse work in March to cutting and selling Christmas trees in December.

Although he doesn't have deep local roots, his wife, Valerie Flood, does. The circulation desk at the new Hudson Area Library is named for her mother, Rachel Scheffer, who was a Common Council member and an avid reader. Valerie Flood's grandfather, Elmer Scheffer, was the mayor of Hudson, and her other grandfather ran the pool hall at 223 Warren St., now the address of Tanzy's.

In his seven-plus years, Flood made his mark here. He is the only person ever to hold the job of commissioner of planning and economic development, which will probably not be filled with his departure. Although it was a two-part job, the two parts were not that different, he said.

"Planning and zoning are so connected to economic development," he said. "Good planning and good zoning gives businesses certainty as to where they can go and what they can do. They're intertwined; you've got to have them together."

Since he started in December 2008, he said the biggest changes he's seen have been for the good: Increased involvement and interest of the residents, whether in power lines, the need for broadband, Internet, Ginsberg's or the new retail out in Greenport Commons.

"With the increased digital information, everybody became more aware," Flood said. "There was a nexus of projects and digital information for the good, (satisfying) the desire of the public to have as much information as possible."

Ironically, Flood came on when the former Ockawamick School had just been purchased to be repurposed as the county office building; after that plan fizzled, then-Board of Supervisors Chairman Pat Grattan recently directed Flood to sell the building. He also saw the plan to repurpose the St. Charles Hotel as transitional housing and the plan to expand the Pine Having Nursing Home bite the dust. Meanwhile, the county bought the Social Services building, instead of moving it into the more spacious Ockawamick.

“Instead of expanding, they’re becoming more efficient and focusing on the services they need to focus on,” Flood said.

The years 2008 and 2009 were the depths of the recession, he said. “People were hurting. As the economy improved, the stress lessened quite a bit. I’m proud that Columbia County continues to have one of the lowest unemployment rates in New York state. The focus by the Columbia Economic Development Corporation and myself on small business is the biggest reason. We give a lot of small business loans, technical assistance to entrepreneurs and guidance on the regulations.”

Flood said the biggest economic issue facing the county is the continued aging of its population.

“We need a solution to keep young people and attract them,” he said. This is a problem that stems from two lacks, the lack of affordable housing and the lack of jobs. Flood said the private sector is starting to rent good-quality apartments, citing The Falls on Route 66 as an example. And, he said, jobs are starting to emerge, as young entrepreneurs start businesses that attract young people.

“But the best thing we can do is grow the existing businesses,” he said, through communicating with them and keeping taxes stable. The county has a number of different types of businesses, from Etsy’s to Ginsberg’s to Richmor Aviation to Taconic Biosciences. Each has different needs and requirements.

In Greenport, the Hudson Valley Fish Farm has replaced Local Ocean, and Flood believes this one will last.

The Fish Farm’s great,” he said. “They made a substantial investment before they got any help from New York state.” The company is receiving benefits from Gov. Cuomo’s Startup NY program because of its close proximity to Columbia-Greene Community College. The effectiveness of that program is still to be proven, but, he said, in talking to the fish farm, “they’re excited – it will help them for sure.”

Although the Greenport Crossings development, which includes an A&W, a wine and liquor store, and a convenience store/gas station, as well as an envisioned hotel, has had a troubled start, Flood believes it still qualifies as a success, because it took an abandoned factory and began to develop it as a site.

I firmly believe that once they have finalized their plans they will move forward with developing the site, including the hotel,” he said.

Flood added that he’s very excited about the Wick, the hotel that will go into the former Stageworks building.

Laura Margolis [Stageworks executive director] has put in multiple hours working on this project,” he said. “I look forward to Stageworks getting back into the production of plays. Laura Margolis is a very important woman in Hudson.”

As to his future plans, Flood said he and his wife will move to Elizaville from Schodack, now that she’s retiring from 36 years teaching remedial reading. Travel is also in the offing, and he will be doing private consulting work, as well as volunteer work with small communities who can’t afford the money needed for planning such things as parks. He will also continue to be involved in certain tasks for the county, such as serving on the Board of Supervisors Broadband Committee.

To reach reporter John Mason, call 518-828-1616, ext. 2500, or email [jmason@registerstar.com](mailto:jmason@registerstar.com).