Beacon, about 60 miles north of New York City and about 90 miles south of Albany, was incorporated in 1913, a combination of the villages of Fishkill Landing and Matteawan. It was named Beacon to commemorate historic fires that blazed on the summit of the Fishkill Mountains and warned Revolutionary soldiers of the movement of the British troops.

"By the 1930's and 40's, Beacon was being touted as the biggest little city in America," said Ori Brachfeld, a locksmith in Beacon since 1987 and chairman of the Beacon Economic Development Task Force, which is affiliated with the Greater Southern Dutchess Chamber of Commerce. "Then it went into a period of serious decay."

While most communities in lower Dutchess County are attracting mainly a commuter population, Beacon is also seeking to fill another role, said William Ehrlich, a developer who helped to form the Beacon Cultural Foundation, a nonprofit group, in a former high school.

Although the first stirrings of new economic activity were felt in late 1990's, the strongest impetus for a rebirth came in the spring of 2003, when Dia:Beacon, a new 300,000-square-foot museum, opened on 31 acres next to the river. The Dia Arts Foundation located its shrine to minimalist and conceptualist art in a skylighted former Nabisco packaging factory, which was built in 1929, began shedding workers in the 1980's and ceased operations in 1991.
Heralding the changes taking place in the city, an article last month in The Beacon Dispatch, a monthly newspaper that recently began publication, reported: "There is a movement afoot in Beacon: factories are becoming museums; Main Street buildings are becoming art galleries; and the workers that once haunted the vast open spaces of the Nabisco box-printing plant have been replaced by artists of every stripe."

There has been more good news for the city, which the folk singer Pete Seeger has called home for 55 years. Developers recently submitted plans for Long Dock Beacon, a 160,000-square-foot mixed-use commercial development with a waterfront park on a 23-acre peninsula near the museum. The $40 million project, a joint effort of the nonprofit Scenic Hudson Land Trust in Poughkeepsie and Foss Group Beacon, a private group, is to include a 140-room hotel, three restaurants, stores and waterfront recreation like kayaking, among other things. It is scheduled to open in the spring of 2007.

Meanwhile, couples like Patricia and Ben Hiza, graduates of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., who had hoped to open a food-related business near New York City but were priced out of that market, have discovered the city.

Earlier this summer, the Hizas found 1,300 square feet of retail space in a turn-of-the-20th-century brick building on Main Street and opened Totis Gourmet, a food market and cafe, there. The couple, who have a 7-month-old son, Alonso, have also bought a two-family Victorian house in the city for about $250,000. "We had to gain a foothold somewhere," Mr. Hiza said. "And in many ways it's like SoHo here, only much less expensive."

He added that when he wants to visit New York City, "it's really not that far away." The train ride to Grand Central Terminal on Metro-North's Hudson Line takes about 72 minutes at peak commuter times and close to 90 minutes during off-peak hours.

The pair, who are in their late 20's, are typical of a new breed of residents moving to Beacon, said Charlotte Guernsey, the owner of Gate House Realty on Main Street. Miss Guernsey, 29, a fine arts graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, bought a turn-of-the-century brick building in the downtown five years ago. She gutted and renovated the dilapidated structure, and today apartments on the second and third floors that were renting several years ago for about $300 to $450 a month are going for about three times that amount, she said. Some financing for renovating the buildings' facades came from the city as a 10-year interest-free matching loan for $15,000.

The broker paid $225,000 for the three-story brick 1890's building with 8,000 square feet in two storefronts and six apartments.

Douglas H. Berlin, a New York City developer, has used federal money disbursed by the county to build both market-rate and below-market-rate apartments over stores along Main Street. Storefronts with 1,400 square feet of space, 12-foot-high ceilings, exposed brick walls and hardwood floors are renting for about $2,000 a month, he said, about twice what the space would have fetched five years ago.

Mr. Berlin also opened his own business, the Piggy Bank, a Southern barbecue-style restaurant, on Main Street in a building that was formerly used as a bank and before that as a flophouse.

"Even though much of Main Street was boarded up and a mess," Mr. Berlin said, "I fell in love with it." His tenants today include restaurateurs, art gallery owners and antiques dealers, among others.

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Nowadays, with train service to New York City and high-speed highways like Interstates 84 and 87 nearby, Beacon is hoping to tap into a general economic rebirth of the region, Mr. Brachfeld said. In Poughkeepsie, I.B.M. is thriving again, after a downsizing about a decade ago, and the company has opened a chip manufacturing plant in East Fishkill.

Also, reflecting renewed development in the Upper Hudson area, Metro-North has plans to begin ferry service for commuters from the west side of the river to Beacon, where they can board trains to Grand Central Terminal.

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The 130,000-square-foot yellow brick school building was purchased for $4.25 million and now has 45 artists working there. Studio space in former classrooms at the building, now known as Bulldog Studios, rents for about $6 a square foot a year,
including heat and electricity.

"We're not talking Chelsea here," said Mr. Ehrlich, who also owns two vacant former hotels, including one that was the Dibble Opera House in the early 1900's.

He added: "A postindustrial community like Beacon needs to have an identity and offer things that people can't find elsewhere. The best idea is to brand it as a cultural community."

[Photograph]
NEW LIFE IN THE DOWNTOWN -- On East Main Street, some abandoned factories and boarded-up storefronts are being fixed up. Ben and Patricia Hiza, shown with their son, Alfonso, opened Totis Gourmet, a food market and cafe, earlier this summer. (Photographs by Susan Stava for The New York Times)
Map of Dutchess County highlighting Beacon.

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