



INSIDE HUDSON POLITICS: A DECADE REVIEWED, AND RECONSIDERED

BY SAM PRATT

TEN YEARS AGO, before the ink was dry on your first Hudson lease or mortgage, the political players would pounce, seeking to enlist you in their hydra-headed causes. Within weeks you'd receive a comprehensive primer on who was who and what was what, plus a stern admonishment to attend meetings—as many as three to four per week.

Today, it's easier for new people to slip into town unnoticed. This newfound privacy is mostly welcome: Hudson's incestuous, claustrophobic social circles at times transform the "Friendly City" into a panopticon, in which everyone knows the minutest details of everyone else's personal lives.

The downside is a loss of political awareness, cohesion, and historic perspective. Many just "discovering" Hudson are unaware of how much turmoil, struggle, and expense went into creating the City of today—and how easily old threats could rear their heads again, if citizens become apathetic.

Without watchdogs, local powers-that-be can freely work the levers of their well-worn rackets. And without a feel for the political landscape, newcomers are more easily duped into supporting dubious candidacies. (Recent examples include the over-the-top campaign of attorney Brian Herman, who failed to win any of four judicial primaries in 2008, or Linda Mussmann's futile third run for Mayor in 2007.)

An ounce of political experience is worth a pound of misdirected effort. Thus the following overview of a tumultuous decade seeks to help others benefit from tactics and strategies which succeeded, and avoid mistakes already made. When I arrived ten years ago, I was fortunate to get a sketch of the local landscape from pioneers such as David Kermani and Carole Clark, jumpstarting my own intense interest in community organizing—that dastardly calling lately derided by Sarah Palin. While not everyone will agree with this interpretation, my aim is to return that favor to another generation of activists.

1998-1999

The Concerned Citizens of Hudson sprung up when Mayor Richard Scalera broke a campaign pledge never to appoint James Dolan Jr. to any position in his administration. Dolan, the former police chief, had been sentenced to a short jail term in 1992, following allegations of obstructing drug investigations. As the new boss of the Hudson Community Development and Planning Agency, Dolan fiercely defended his reputation—and fiercely assailed the "newcomers" in CCH as pawns of his rival cousins, the Grandinettis.

Scalera's first two terms had been relatively uncontroversial. But Dolan's re-emergence caused a reassessment, as the pair launched a divide-and-conquer strategy of pitting

longtime residents against those not-always-newcomers, especially antiques dealers. Blasting an article I wrote for *New York* magazine, Scalera declared Hudson "not ready" for tourists, and bashed those investing hard-earned dollars and sweat equity to revive Warren Street. Despite such official discouragement, fifteen new shops opened in the summer of '98, including several in the then-sketchy 300 block.

The pugnaciousness of the Democrats allied with Scalera drove newer progressive residents into the arms of Republicans such as Daniel Grandinetti (who once assaulted Dolan in a bar fight, but seemed to have moderated his politics) and Vassar-educated State Assemblyman Patrick Manning. Many area Democrats turned out to be more conservative than their Republican counterparts; indeed, a number of the local GOP leaders had switched from Democrat to Republican due to personal animosities, rather than ideology. Thus in Fall of '98, an uncomfortable alliance of progressives and Republicans backed the GOP choice, John Porreca, in his successful run against the Scalera-Dolan candidate for Alderman, Conservative Dean Melino, in a special election.

1998 was also consumed by challenges to new HUD grants. Citizens alleged that the City cooked its application numbers to secure funds for cronies' businesses and properties, with few actual intentions of provid-

ing poorer residents with better housing. Though opponents objected solely to misuses of funds, Scalera slammed critics as out-of-touch elitists callously seeking to displace the poor.

Tempers really began to boil over in early '99 as Scalera joined with the Columbia-Hudson Partnership to propose a \$600,000 grant to lure toxic dry cleaning waste processor Americlean to the Hudson River, at the site of a former glue factory (today known as Basilica Industria, though its current owner gives little credit to those who safeguarded his future investment).

The Hudson culture wars were on, with Alderman Robert (Doc) Donahue declaring that Americlean opponents "don't have children, they only have pets"—an apparent dose of homophobia which would carry over to the coming cement plant debate. This simplistic "us vs. them" script was belied by the many longtime residents who also opposed the waste project. Citizens eventually maneuvered hapless company spokesman Brett Walker into an embarrassing public presentation, and Scalera grudgingly scuttled the project in April 1999. Schisms soon emerged within the Partnership as Scalera tussled with Bernadina Torrey, the wife of another former Democrat who had switched parties and was working for right-wing Republican Congressman John Sweeney.

These intense skirmishes brought

progressive Democrats and moderate Republicans even closer together, with Kenneth Cranna winning the mayoral race over Scalera loyalist Carmine Pierro on a “Renaissance” platform of government reform and support of the Warren Street revival.

The Americlean fight instigated the formation of Friends of Hudson, the organization I co-founded and directed for six years (but which sadly no longer functions in any meaningful sense as either a local watchdog or a community organization). That four-month crash-course in environmental activism would serve citizens well in the coming years, as St. Lawrence Cement began to aggressively promote its massive, coal-burning plant proposal

2000-2001

Controversy after controversy erupted during these rowdy two years. Another police chief resigned after billing the City for time spent in a “love nest” next door to the station. Public Works Superintendent Charles Butterworth tore up the old red pavers shoddily installed during Urban Renewal to make new sidewalks, causing an uproar when dozens of mature trees were removed without notice to property owners.

But mainly these were the years when people talked about little besides St. Lawrence; even the 9/11 attacks resulted in only a 20-day respite from the SLC debate. The life-or-death, fight-or-flight nature of this struggle turned literally the driest topic imaginable—cement production—into the all-consuming topic of countless conversations, meetings, meals and emails.

Within weeks of taking office, Renaissance Mayor Cranna cut a ribbon at SLC’s headquarters, swiftly becoming the limp arm of County Republican policy. While some on Cranna’s team kept the faith, others (such as new 1st Ward Alderman Judy Meyer, once a strong advocate for reform) also flipped, becoming carbon-copies of those they had just replaced.

Overcoming initial reluctance to take a stand, nearly everyone in Hudson became politicized. Residents unaccustomed to activism became experts on obscure regulatory processes, the presence of mercury and lead in cement emissions, and the price-fixing activities of SLC’s Swiss billionaire owners. The company saturated the region with flyers saying “don’t let a bunch of millionaires from New York keep jobs away” (though opponents actually represented a cross-section of the community, and the project would have netted only a single new job, due to the intended transfer of existing workers). Retired ad exec and Allen Street resident, Tom Mabley

described the company’s propaganda as “commercialized hate mail”.

Lawn signs sprouted like weeds, broadsheets were circulated, marches were held, anti-plant billboards went up—and were torn down by vandals one Thanksgiving morning. Cement dust seemed to cover every issue, from the new Comprehensive Plan (whose consultants were also working for SLC) to the formation of a tourism task force. But even the virulently pro-plant Register-Star conceded that opponents were “picking up momentum”, as awareness grew of plans for an 1,800-acre mine, a 406-foot smokestack burning 500 million pounds of coal annually, and the company’s atrocious track record.

The issue hit nearly every edition of the local papers, as well as the regional press and national outlets such as CNN and The New York Times. Meanwhile, Friends of Hudson mounted an intense grassroots outreach and fundraising push to pay for lawyers and consultants, along with scores of meetings and house parties and 500-person rallies. A State comment session held in June 2001 lasted eleven hours in a sweltering gymnasium, drawing over 1,000

DESPITE SUCH SEVERE GROWING PAINS, HUDSON HAS IMPROVED MARKEDLY— BUT NOT FOR EVERYONE.

attendees. “FoH” grew by leaps and bounds, from an initial 40 members to 400 by the end of 2001, to an eventual 4,000.

Scalera ran for Mayor again, establishing a pattern of dropping off the scene whenever he became too controversial, then reappearing two years later once his trespasses had been forgiven. Linda Mussmann, co-founder of the arts/community organization Time & Space Ltd., ran on her own “Bottom Line” and received 400 votes. Republican candidate Mary Anne Lemmerman’s supporters complained that faithless progressive Democrats were to blame for allowing Scalera to retake City Hall, a complaint which ignored the GOP’s own role in undering a once-promising alliance.

Scalera closed out 2001 by condemning the Preservation League of New York for designating Hudson one of “Seven to Save” sites Statewide, a sign of more combat to come during his fourth term.

2002-2003

The cement wars raged on. SLC was required to hold the first of two alarming balloon tests which exposed

the visibility of its vast proposal. Opponents cheered a strong interim ruling from DEC Commissioner Erin Crotty, along with help from neighboring states and dozens of newly-allied organizations (some of which, such as Scenic Hudson, had initially held back, considering the cause hopeless). The tide shifted dramatically when business leaders, such as Nancy Gordon and Paul Swedenberg of HAVE, Inc., spoke out about the economic downside of the plant, and the doctors of Columbia Memorial Hospital independently concluded that the plant would cause increased asthma, cancer and heart attacks.

Other controversies piled fresh fuel on the political pyre, such as the sale of Hudson’s backup water supply to the Colarusso gravel company, and property tax reassessments by 11th-hour Cranna appointee Rev. Kim Singletary. The assessor justified these new levies by noting sharp rises in property values, while others countered that the whopping increases had fallen disproportionately on new residents and their businesses, sparing political insiders’ friends and family. The first of several lawsuits was lodged by Willard Place’s Don

Christensen, who also mounted an impressive Hudson Opera House exhibition about the history of South Bay, and unearthed evidence of land title problems related to SLC’s Waterfront landholdings.

The 2003 election was especially nasty, even by Hudson standards. Running head-to-head against Mussmann, Scalera not only secured (with the help of SLC-funded lawyers) all four major party ballot lines, but also stole her own Bottom Line party name. The once and future Mayor freely admitted that he took this approach out of “spite”.

However, reformers had become canner about the ins-and-outs of electoral politics, running a full slate of twenty-nine candidates and stunning Scalera’s team by taking over the local Democratic Committee. The “New Dems” were becoming old pros—training poll watchers and inspectors, and using election law to ensure that absentee and affidavit ballots did not get tossed out. Mussmann doubled her previous tally, but couldn’t overcome Scalera’s five-line advantage. Still, there were bright spots: Several more progressives joined the Council, and

Hudson’s growing Bengali community became intensely engaged in politics—leading to Alderman Abdus Miah’s election in the following cycle.

2004-2005

The uproar continued, as heads butted over the cement proposal, and Butterworth supervised the bulldozing of protected South Bay wetlands by an SLC contractor. There were more assessment outrages, bitter arguments at Democratic Committee meetings, and new disputes over the ersatz architecture of developer Eric Galloway.

And then 2005 seemed to bring one big victory after another.

In April, after a record-setting 14,000 written comments (87% of them opposed), Secretary of State Randy Daniels ruled that SLC was inconsistent with coastal policies intended to foster thoughtful waterfront development. Daniels said the project would incur unacceptable environmental and visual impacts, and *also* damage the long-term economic viability of Hudson. He called on the City to secure rights to SLC’s properties along the River, and to “immediately” create a new Waterfront Zone for recreation, habitat restoration and appropriate commerce. Opponents’ raucous bring-your-own-champagne celebration was captured in the PBS documentary *Two Square Miles*, but FoH also moved to heal the community by immediately taking down all Stop The Plant signs and reaching out to company supporters.

That fall, a “Unity in the Community” coalition led by Richard (Dick) Tracy and Robert O’Brien beat out Scalera’s hand-picked successor, Grandinetti, whose rocky tenure as Youth Commissioner and alleged double-dealing on the cement issue squashed his once-promising political future. Progressives solidified their grip on the Democratic Committee (with FoH co-founder Peter Jung beating out Scalera in the conservative 5th Ward) and earned enough weighted votes to pass reform legislation on the Common Council. But disappointments and disillusionment were to follow.

2006-2007

High hopes for the Tracy administration were soon dashed, as an unhealthy stew of naïveté, inaction, lack of principle and flagrant corruption tied City Hall’s stomach in knots.

Though newly-minted Council President O’Brien and Democratic Chair Mussmann fretted that the Mayor’s Office was occupied as much by Alderman Quintin Cross and Superintendent Butterworth, as by the Mayor himself, the New Democratic leaders did little to halt the malleable Mayor’s retrograde drift.

This leadership vacuum led to eyebrow-raising decisions like Butterworth's \$91,000 golden parachute, with the acquiescence of new Public Works Commissioner and future Mayoral candidate Michael O'Hara. Infighting caused Butterworth's forward-thinking successor, Michael Sassi, to become a casualty of Tracy's estrangement from his supporters. Meanwhile, \$20,000 in credit card abuse landed Majority Leader Cross in jail.

A sense of betrayal also marked Mussmann's waterfront tenure. Seeking to fulfill Tracy's pledge to pass a Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan after decades of City inaction, the effort began promisingly. Hundreds of residents attended public meetings and responded to surveys, and the new Waterfront Advisory Steering Committee worked with State officials to untangle Hudson's web of riverfront grants.

But Mussmann, once a staunch critic of SLC's behind-the-scenes influence on City politics, met furtively with cement company representatives, producing a draft plan far out of step with public input. Ignoring Daniels' ruling, Mussmann sought to legitimize the cement company's waterfront presence, and to help the company transport materials from its Becraft Mountain mines through Federally-protected wetlands.

Privately, Mussmann and attorney Cheryl Roberts acknowledged the City's many legal and political tools for wresting property from SLC and creating a greener, more expansive public waterfront—yet they stubbornly refused to deploy those tools. With the State receiving more than 1,000 comments opposing their retrograde plan, and Mussmann estranged from the Mayor and Council, the LWRP stalled for the remainder of Tracy's administration.

The New Dems' control of the Democratic Committee was similarly neutered. As chair, Mussmann failed to build consensus or operate with the transparency she had demanded of predecessors. Meetings became acrimonious again, with key tasks such as fundraising and candidate development falling by the wayside. Small fissures widened into a vast chasm when, after the Committee completed its candidate interviews, Mussmann belatedly announced her own plans to make a third quixotic run for Mayor. That decision likely cost Democrats the election, as a wasteful primary sapped progressive energy, funds and solidarity. With Mussmann receiving four times fewer votes than her 2003 run and stealing votes from O'Hara, Scalera recaptured City Hall for the fifth time.

Reassessing a Decade

For a city of fewer than 7,000 souls, Hudson politics seem unnecessarily complicated. The sheer number of personalities and positions, along with the endless parade of controversies, can make the level heads spin.

During the past decade, external threats and internecine feuds have repeatedly seized center stage, with too many politicians willing to exploit controversies to hold onto power. Independent energy and local capital need breathing space to keep improving Hudson. City Hall would do better to stop resisting change, and refocus on the basics: *limiting budgets and crime, encouraging fairer assessments, providing key social services, keeping the infrastructure humming*. Hudson might be better off with a boringly competent Mayor, instead of a domineering or visionary one.

Despite all the dysfunction, Hudson is mostly better off than ten years ago. Warren Street occupancy is several times higher than in the days of boarded-up storefronts and substandard street-level apartments. Homes become restored, instead of falling victim to the wrecking ball. Delinquent properties have returned to the tax rolls. Rather than a town shuttered at sundown, there are more and more dining and nightlife options. Shopping has diversified beyond antiques, while the better dealers have survived. Democratic enrollment rose by 700 voters, while Republicans lost 150.

Despite such severe growing pains, Hudson has improved markedly—but not for everyone. Campaign promises to alleviate poverty are rarely kept, with much of the Second Ward still neglected. One wonders what broader achievements and more shared prosperity would have been possible had there not been so many urgent threats to fight off, and so much official resistance to progressive change.

In a 1960s masters thesis about political corruption in Hudson, an NYU grad student reviewed a century of local politics, noticing how each generation's reformers would make gains, only to revert inevitably to politics-as-usual. Maybe a reader (or ten) will be inspired to break that cycle, and drag Hudson politics into the 21st Century.

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TEN TIPS FOR COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS

Expressing outrage is easy; making measurable change is hard. Today, yet another wave of volunteers (such as the new Democratic Chair Victor Mendolia and former Main Street Manager Hilary Hillman) is boosting awareness, while stalwarts such as Carole Osterink and Carrie Haddad bring continuity to Hudson's long struggle for rejuvenation. Here are ten key principles to keep in mind, learned the hard way over the past decade, if you're thinking of getting involved in Hudson, or anywhere else:

1. LEARN THE ROPES

You can't win without a playbook, so it pays to read the City Charter, master Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) requests, learn Common Council procedures, understand local zoning and planning regulations, and download the State Election Law.

2. MAP THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Many activists have been burned by jumping on some fast-moving bandwagon. Take your time getting to know the players, and don't just rely on the opinions of those closest to you. A citizen army can't be raised in one night before a big decision, so map your terrain by building a database of voters, volunteers, donors, allies, reporters and other key contacts—then maintain these relationships constantly.

3. DO YOUR HOMEWORK, THEN FOLLOW THROUGH

Sloppy facts and dilettantish efforts are common ways that activists discredit their own work. Success requires rigorous research and a commitment to seeing issues through. Never overstate your case, as eventually the truth will out. Don't stick to a position just to save face; make adjustments when there is new information. Better to take one small, measurable, weekly step forward than to stumble, rushing to do everything at once.

4. MAKE YOUR OWN BEST CASE

Don't wait around for someone else to wave your flag—or for allies to come forward spontaneously. Rarely has the regional media been a friend to activists, failing in its role of serving as a check and balance on the establishment. Establish relationships with reporters and editors, but don't hesitate to call them out on errors or biases. Meanwhile, go around the media with direct means, such as emails, websites, flyers and events.

5. A WINK IS NOT A PROMISE

Candidates who don't commit to addressing your concerns before an election rarely change once elected. Incumbency only tends to make people more risk-averse. So secure promises up front, and help to identify and encourage more honest, reliable and courageous candidates.

6. BUILD COMMUNITY

Events such as the FourthDown festival and the traditional Warren Street bed races helped build trust among warring factions, but have sadly disappeared. Look for opportunities to bring together residents who don't normally mingle. Don't just hang with friends at your favorite restaurant; go to spaghetti suppers and chicken dinners at churches and service organizations, too.

7. BE GENUINE

Outreach to a new social circle or political faction has to be sincere, not merely self-interested. People always sense when someone is just pretending to be tolerant or "down with the people". Value neighbors as individuals, not as pawns in a campaign. Be open-minded and be yourself.

8. KEEP LINES OPEN...BUT KNOW WHEN TO SAVE YOUR BREATH

Even during past controversies, conversations continued with those on "the other side". Key conversions were eventually made, e.g. before the final Council vote on the cement plant. But don't fail to recognize when the object you're trying to move simply won't budge. Focus instead on those still undecided, or only moderately opposed to your goals. Start new conversations with those yet to be included in the debate.

9. PREPARE TO BE SURPRISED

Some you mistrust at first turn out to be good eggs (e.g., former Council President Michael Vertetis, who showed increasing independence each year in office), while staunch supporters may turn out to be utterly untrustworthy. The loudest talkers often prove flaky, while the quiet person in the corner turns out to have a hidden talent which can greatly aid your cause. And "principled" partisans may be unable to resist the allure of wealth. So keep a watchful eye on allies, even as you watchdog your adversaries.

10. PRACTICE MAKES LESS IMPERFECT

Success in activism takes persistence, and a certain amount of trial-and-error. A defeat can teach you how to prevail the next time, and builds new capacity for a long-term movement. But note the Mussmann Corollary: If you've tried and tried repeatedly to get elected, and the results keep getting worse, know when to move on—and stick to things you may do better.