

Villa Rezoning Hangs on Election in Saugerties

By Karlyn Knaust Elia

In Saugerties, New York, citizens are standing up for lawful, balanced, and responsible land use—not merely through protest signs on front lawns or speeches at Town Board meetings, but by invoking the law itself. Their goal: to prevent the re-zoning of the Villa St. Joseph property, a Hudson River landmark at the end of Spaulding Lane, from low-density to high-density residential use—a change that would open the door to a large-scale housing development.

Known also as *Falling Waters*, the Villa St. Joseph property is a living chronicle of American history. Its centerpiece, the c. 1735 Van Leuven stone house, still bears the scars of British cannon fire from the 1777 invasion of the Hudson Valley. Brothers Andrew and John Van Leuven, who lived and are buried on the property, fought in the First Ulster Militia during the Revolution. Their land witnessed the British Army's final advance up the Hudson—part of the same campaign that culminated at Saratoga, a key turning point in America's fight for independence.

For nearly a century afterward, the Dominican Sisters made Villa St. Joseph a place of quiet service and reflection. Long before that, Indigenous peoples lived on this land and early settlers relied on this same stretch of the Hudson for ferriage, sloop transport, and trade. Every era has left its mark here.

Now, developers operating under the name *Grow America*, a non-governmental organization, seek to demolish these buildings and rezone the property for high-density housing—paving over meadows, erasing historic foundations, and threatening sensitive archaeological and ecological areas that have endured for generations.

Under New York Town Law § 265 (1)(c), property owners have the legal right to protest a proposed zoning change that would significantly alter the character of their neighborhood. When owners representing at least 20 percent of the affected land area file such a protest, any zoning change must be approved by a *supermajority*—four of five Town Board members—rather than a simple majority of three.

This safeguard exists for precisely these moments. It ensures that sweeping changes to land use—especially those that would transform rural, historic, or conservation zones—cannot occur without broad consensus and demonstrable public benefit.

On May 21, 2025, Saugerties residents formally exercised this right, submitting a PROTEST document to Supervisor Fred Costello and the Town Board under § 265 (1)(c). Their message was clear: any rezoning of the Villa St. Joseph property requires a *supermajority* vote. As of October 2025, no such vote has been taken. It appears that Supervisor Costello is waiting until

after the November election in the hopes that Zack Horton, a board member who honors preservation, will be ousted.

In August 2024, citizens also filed a request to designate Villa St. Joseph as a Historic Landmark. The Saugerties Historic Preservation Commission voted in favor of designation in April 2025—but in June, the Town Board overruled the Commission's decision, clearing the way for demolition. As *The Lincoln Eagle* reported in its June/July 2025 edition, that reversal was clouded by procedural irregularities and a troubling disregard for the Town's own preservation laws.

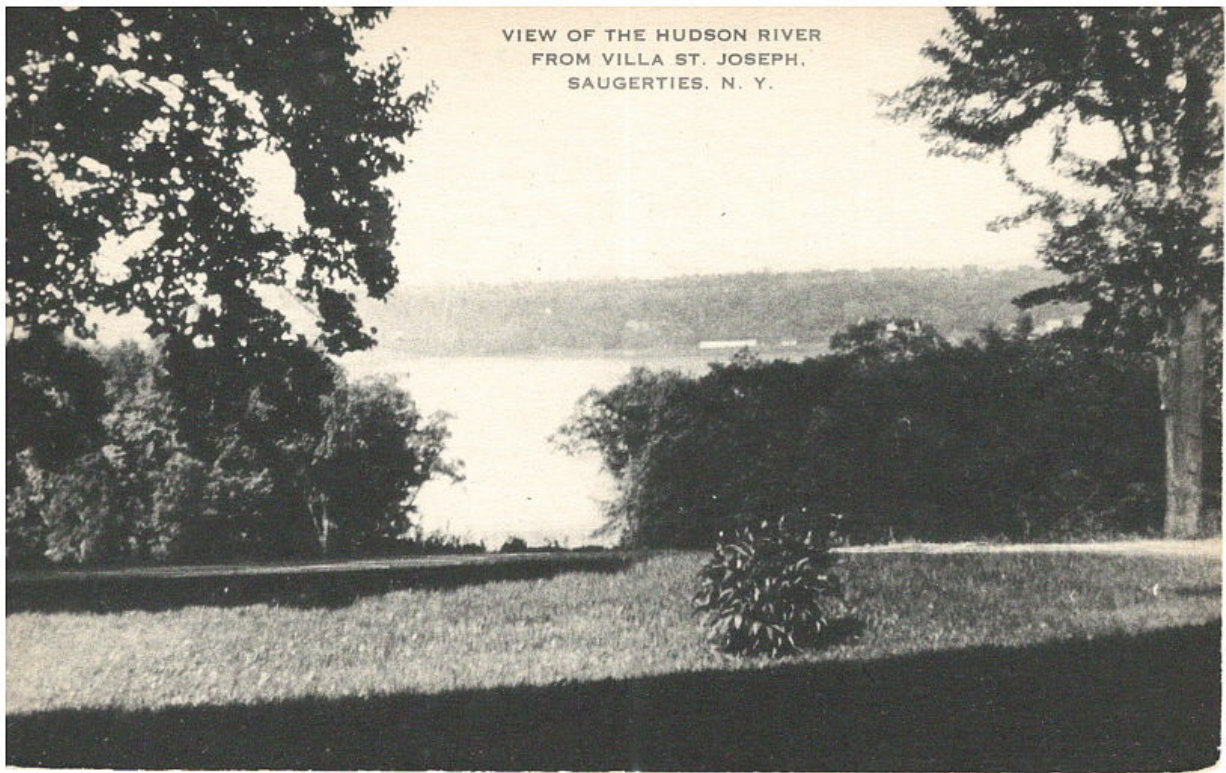
The citizens' stand is not an act of obstruction, but one of civic faith. They do not oppose growth; they oppose inappropriate and *lawless* growth. By insisting that the Town Board honor the supermajority requirement, residents can be confident that proper procedures are being followed.

Their cause is both local and national. As the United States prepares to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Saugerties must ask itself a defining question:

Will we celebrate that milestone by demolishing the ancestral home of the very soldiers who fought for our freedom?

This movement is rooted in respect—for the land, for due process, and for the shared legacy of community. It reminds us that lawful participation is not resistance—it is responsibility. In using the tools of democracy as they were intended, the people of Saugerties are showing that the law itself can be an act of stewardship.

Whether the Saugerties Town Board chooses to preserve its legacy or pave it over will reveal more than the fate of a single property. It will define what kind of independence Saugerties still believes in. Protecting Saugerties means protecting its laws, its landscape, and its legacy.



View of the Hudson River from Villa St. Joseph, Saugerties, NY. Following the burning of Kingston in 1777, a British flotilla, consisting of more than 1,500 soldiers sailed north to Saugerties at this point. It was here where they cannonaded the c.1735 Van Leuven house. British raiding parties also burned sloops on the ways on the Esopus Creek at Saugerties, multiple homes and barns, and burned the homes of Margaret Livingston and Robert R. Livingston, and the buildings of General Peter TenBroeck on the east side of the Hudson River.

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