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City Flags and the Politics of Urban Revitalization: The Case of Syracuse, NY

By

Grace E. Risinger

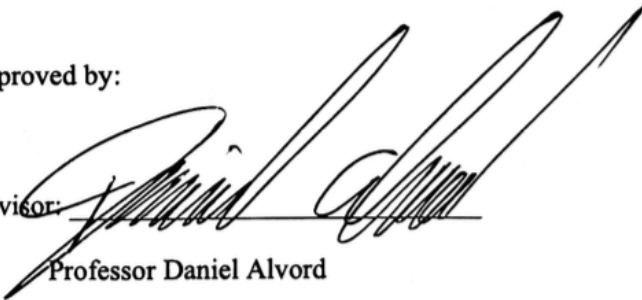
A Thesis Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in Sociology

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Approved by:

Advisor:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Daniel Alvord', written over a horizontal line.

Professor Daniel Alvord

Visiting Assistant Professor of Sociology & Anthropology

Second Evaluator:

Professor Matthew Baltz

Assistant Professor of Sociology & Anthropology

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....1

Table of Contents.....2

Abstract.....3

Chapter 1: Introduction.....4

 Literature Review.....5

 Methods.....13

Chapter 2: Syracuse.....17

 A Brief History of Syracuse.....17

 The Flag Redesign Effort.....20

 How the University Matters.....23

Chapter 3: Civic Pride.....27

 Cause and Effect.....27

 Contention Turned into Pride.....30

 Symbols.....32

Chapter 4: Economic Growth.....36

 Growth Machine Theory.....36

 Adapt CNY and the City.....41

Chapter 5: Conclusion.....43

Bibliography.....47

Abstract

People tend to care about flags, but are not aware that their city has a flag. A recent wave of flag redesigns has been happening in the United States since a 2015 TED Talk was posted widely criticizing city flags. This subject prompted my professor, Daniel Alvord, to ask for a research assistant for his project to understand this phenomenon. For my thesis, I focus on a specific flag redesign initiative in Syracuse, NY, through an ethnographic case study. By applying previous urban sociological literature to my focus on flag redesigns, I can connect the Syracuse community member's increased civic pride to the city's ability to generate growth. I find that the Syracuse community members want to create a new identity that they have control over, which they feel represents their city. I find that the flag is a way for Syracuse to create a community and promote an aesthetic image to stimulate economic growth.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Recently, the United States has been in a flag redesign renaissance. Since 2015¹, hundreds of cities across the U.S. have started to redesign their city flags.



By all accounts, the impetus of this wave of flag redesigns was a 2015 TED talk that went viral for widely criticizing many city flags. Roman Mars (2015), the host of the TED talk titled “Why city flags may be the worst-designed thing you’ve never noticed,” humorously attacked the designs of city flags. Mars critiqued flags purely from a design perspective and used a set of guidelines by Ted Kaye (2006) in the short book *Good Flag, Bad Flag* to determine which flags were considered better or more aesthetically “correct” than others.

While it is undoubtedly true many flags that Roman Mars shows in the video are indeed uninspired and dull or even ugly, city flags usually are not well-known or even prominently

¹ North American Vexillological Association. “2022 New American City Flags Survey - North American Vexillological Association.” North American Vexillological Association. Accessed March 30, 2023. <https://nava.org/2022-survey>.

² Daigneau, Elizabeth. 2023. “Ranking the Best and Worst City Flags - Route Fifty.” Route Fifty. Retrieved May 1, 2023 (<https://www.route-fifty.com/management/2023/02/ranking-best-and-worst-city-flags/382589/>).

displayed in many cities. Most people do not care about flags unless they feel strongly connected to the symbol. Further, cities usually are not motivated to act for purely aesthetic reasons. It does not make sense that all these cities are redesigning these flags purely for a more aesthetically pleasing image.

So what are cities getting out of this? And what are residents getting out of this? These are the questions I am answering in this thesis. I uncover what may be behind this wave of redesigns. To understand why these flag redesigns are happening, I draw on different theories from sociological literature, such as aesthetic improvement, flag redesign as a means to economic ends, and flag redesign as an identity and community-enhancing activity. I focus on Syracuse, NY, which is undergoing a flag redesign initiative. This case is interesting because the city has been failing for decades, and the population has declined rapidly. We can understand why the initiative is happening by understanding the functions of Syracuse's history, the flag redesign process, and Syracuse University.

The two main themes that have emerged in my research are civic pride and economic growth. They function alongside each other as to why the flag redesign process is happening and why community members decide to get involved. Community members want to redefine their city and their identity. They also want to see Syracuse grow economically because of the city's poverty. The flag is a symbol used as an identity and a branding opportunity—the community views this opportunity as a beacon of hope for the city they love.

Literature Review

While the viral Ted Talk may explain part of the reasoning behind this flag redesign initiative, the findings of various literature may indicate other drivers of this phenomenon. The

first is aesthetics, more specifically related to creative districts of cities. Cities are always thinking about growth. By creating an aesthetically pleasing image, they can draw in the creative class. Through this process, they can also distinguish themselves from other cities, creating a place identity and a place branding. Place identity refers to how residents give meaning to their place, and place branding refers to how people view the place from the outside. A flag is used as a symbol to represent something; for city residents, it represents their identity and brands their city.

While it is true that cities usually are not motivated purely by aesthetics, art (and artists) have become extremely important for urban growth and urban cultural policy (Florida 2002; Whitt 1987; Clark 2004). In other words, cities realize that by promoting arts and attracting creative people while enhancing their image aesthetically, cities will see economic growth. An example of this is the city hall building in New York City. By the end of the 18th century, New York needed more buildings to keep up with the city's population growth (Architectural History). In 1802, the City of New York decided to hold a contest to build a new city hall, and over 20 people entered. This construction became historic as one of the first major aesthetic architectural projects. This example points out that cities have been focused on aesthetics for centuries, even if it is less overt. By holding a contest, the city was able to give its residents a chance to exercise their artistic expression while also improving aesthetically. Contemporary examples include art fairs, community arts centers, and open mic events. Aesthetic opportunities allow community members to come together to be creative. The flag redesign initiatives across the country exemplify previous sociological literature embodying these ideas: aesthetic improvement as a way for community members to express their creativity, economic growth through improving the city's brand, and enhancing the identities of residents while promoting community.

Growth is something that cities strive for, specifically economic growth. Molotch (1976:310) explains, “The clearest indication of success at growth is a constantly rising urban-area population – a symptom of a pattern ordinarily comprising an initial expansion of basic industries followed by an expanded labor force, a rising scale of retail and wholesale commerce, more far-flung and increasingly intensive land development, higher population density, and increased levels of financial activity.” By defining cities as growth machines, Molotch analyzes what cities are trying to do to grow and what they believe is helping them. He further argues that a coalition of actors works within a city to promote growth which is cities’ primary goal. Urban decision-making often is made based on these actors. Molotch gives an example of this and says, “A stadium filled with thousands (joined by thousands more at home before the TV) screaming for Cleveland or Baltimore (or whatever) is a scene difficult to fashion otherwise. This enthusiasm can be drawn upon, with a glossy claim of creating a ‘greater Cleveland,’ ‘greater Baltimore,’ etc., in order to gain general acceptance for local growth-oriented programs” (1976:315). Civic pride is the groundwork for stimulating economic growth in a place. Molotch explains this and says, “the growth-machine coalition mobilizes what is there, legitimizes and sustains it, and channels it as a political force into particular kinds of policy decisions” (1976:315). The growth machine theory creates the framework that explains how cities can stimulate growth.

Richard Florida (2002), in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, argues that economic development comes from creative people, including artists, professors, poets, and architects. His research on the rise of the creative class won many awards, including the *Washington Monthly* Book of the Year award in 2002 and the Harvard Business Review Breakthrough Idea of the Year award in 2004 (About Richard Florida 2023). Florida states, “If you are a scientist or engineer,

an architect or designer, a writer, artist, or musician, or if your creativity is a key factor in your work in business, education, health care, law, or some other profession, you are a member” (2002:). He explains that, more broadly, creativity or originality drives the creative class. Richard Florida’s ideas had a significant impact on cities. Cities have always focused on growth, and Florida pointed out a way to hone in that focus to attract a new kind of people that would create growth. Richard Florida’s (2002) work helped to identify targeting growth strategies for the “creative class.” Cities of all sizes have established art or creative districts to create amenities that will attract developers and members of the “creative class.” An example of this is the borough of Brooklyn in New York City. Sharon Zukin explains how Brooklyn “became cool” and states, “For most of the twentieth century Brooklyn had a sorry reputation as a place where artists and writers were born but were eager to escape from” (2010:39). Zukin explains that writers and artists later came back to Brooklyn and were attracted to the borough because of the change in aesthetics. They believed the “new” and “changed” borough represented their identity (Zukin 2010). The creative class did not identify with Manhattan’s high-paced lifestyle, stating that Brooklyn felt more personal. Zukin states, “Together with the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s adventurous policy of sponsoring avant-garde performances to establish niche among the city’s major cultivations, these artists and writers created an unusual buzz about the borough” (Zukin 2010:41). The borough felt like a place where these creative people could express themselves artistically, therefore expressing their identity. People want to feel connected to their place, and aesthetics play an essential role in making people associate their home with their identity.

Arts strategies suffer from a problem common to all growth-machine strategies. As Whitt observed, “to the extent that an arts strategy becomes common-place as a method of interurban

competition aimed at attracting mobile capital, local advantages would tend to be canceled out” (1987:30). In other words, embracing cultural strategies for growth only works if places can leverage what is unique about a location’s identity. Otherwise, places would lose their advantage over other cities pursuing similar strategies. Sebastian Zenker and Suzanne C. Beckmann (2013) explain that “since an effective brand communication is based on the existing positive images of the city brand, it is crucial to assess the existing brand associations of the various target groups and then to highlight the distinct advantages of the place” (2013:14). By targeting specific groups, such as the creative class, cities can stand out by highlighting aesthetics and arts. Zenker and Beckmann find that there is a need for “stronger resident involvement and participation in the place branding process” (2013:14). In the context of inter-urban competition, enhancing place distinctiveness is an advantage. Cities are very competitive with one another, as are the residents. When a Chicago and a New York citizen argue about which city is better, they will distinguish their place from the other by stating unique characteristics. A symbol such as a flag expressing pride can be a mechanism used to represent the dignity people feel in their city. My research finds much support for this theory. As I will show in the thesis, the flag redesign initiative in Syracuse, NY, targets the creative class through an artistic symbol, the flag, and incorporates the community. By creating an aesthetically pleasing image of a city and including its residents through the process, city leaders hope to draw in residents creating an area where the creative class wants to live. The flag redesign allows Syracuse to show what is unique about its city.

There are at least two ways to understand place distinctiveness: place branding and place identity. Place identity as a form of place distinctiveness ties more to individuals, how they understand the place, and the meanings they give to the place. Identity, as opposed to branding,

emerges more organically and is situated in shared understandings of what a city or neighborhood means to its residents (Brown-Saracino and Parker 2017; Martucci 2019). Identities, then, are by and for residents and are about how those within the city understand their city. By contrast, place branding generally refers to the process promoted by tourism boards and other growth actors to forge an “urban imaginary,” meaning a coherent place-based identity that influences visitors' impression of the city. Branding exercises can emphasize any number of place-specific attributes; however, the critical point about place branding is that it is fundamentally outward-looking and outward-focused (Brown-Saracino and Parker 2017). It portrays the city to visitors and those outside it. As Harvey Molotch, William Freudenburg, and Krista E. Paulsen state, “For reasons of building local economies and civic cultures, or just enhancing real estate profits from new developments, ‘character’ and ‘tradition,’ albeit in different versions from our own, have conspicuously entered wide realms of city-building and place marketing” (2000:818). Especially for cities coming out of a disaster, such as a financial crisis, branding is vital for cities with negative place reputations.

The fact that flags need to perform these dual functions – providing meaning for residents while also signifying a brand for visitors – is what makes flag redesigns a compelling case. These dual functions are potentially even more pronounced at the level of cities and especially when a city is designing a new flag. Through observing the process of flag redesigns, I understand how residents and growth coalition actors navigate the relationship between identity and branding. Place identity and reputation have tensions, which can be applied directly to the Syracuse community members and how they respond to a failing city they call home. Christina Marie Chica defines place as “a geographical location (Entrikin, 1994) or built environment (Habraken, 1998) invested with meaning and value (Soja, 1996)” (2021:1). Chica wants to

understand placemaking and how individuals imbue a place with meaning (Chica 2021). She defines placemaking as “a dynamic process that happens through multiple relationships at multiple spatial scales within and beyond a neighborhood” (Chica 2021:3). In her research, she finds that placemaking requires a cooperative effort. From the outside, when people think of Syracuse, NY, they think of Syracuse University. From the inside, Syracuse community members view their city as their home and want it to represent who they are. Syracuse community members want to redefine what Syracuse is. Using community members to create a flag as a symbol representing their identity, Syracuse can promote community while building a brand to stimulate growth.

Flags are an artistic expression and important symbols imbued with meaning (Medway et al. 2019). Robert Shanafelt’s (2008) research focuses on why flags invoke such emotional responses among citizens who stand by or against them. Robert Shanafelt explains, “Just as patriotic citizens feel as if they have transcended their individuality and merged with the nation and the national ethos when they look on their flag, so, too, Australian Aborigines feel bonded to each other and their beliefs when they see their totemic symbol displayed on wooden boards, on poles, on stone objects, or on other items of ritual” (2008:14). He explains the connection that human beings have towards a symbol they share with others who they identify with. Through Shanafelt’s explanation of flags as being “linked with primate dominance displays” we can understand how even as Americans, we feel a sense of dominance when seeing our flag being raised or raising it ourselves (2009:24). This link between our country and identity with a sense of feeling of dominance can explain just how powerful the symbol of a flag can be. People are extremely protective of their identity and who they are, and a flag that represents their identity can trigger an emotional response. As Karen Cerulo has observed, “national symbols [such as

flags] provide perhaps the strongest, clearest statement of national identity. In essence, they serve as modern totems (in the Durkheimian sense) - signs that bear a special relationship to the nations they represent, distinguishing them from one another and reaffirming their identity boundaries” (1993:244). Flags need to accomplish both functions performed by “branding” and by “identity,” that is, they need to be symbolically meaningful to those for whom the flag represents while also identifying the place and people represented by the flag to others. An example would be nation-states and flags such as the American flag. That powerful symbol means something to Americans – though it can mean different things to different Americans. Yet it is a ubiquitous symbol of the “American brand” and is stamped on many products. Flags are a design language that, like signage, contributes to the branding or theming of a place. So flags, in general, must perform these dual functions.

Christina Marie Chica defines place as “a geographical location (Entrikin, 1994) or built environment (Habraken, 1998) invested with meaning and value (Soja, 1996)” (2021:1). Chica wants to understand placemaking and how individuals imbue a place with meaning (Chica 2021). She defines placemaking as “a dynamic process that happens through multiple relationships at multiple spatial scales within and beyond a neighborhood” (Chica 2021:3). In her research, she finds that placemaking requires a cooperative effort. From the outside, when people think of Syracuse, NY, they think of Syracuse University. From the inside, Syracuse community members view their city as their home and want it to represent who they are. Syracuse community members want to redefine what Syracuse is. By using community members to create a flag as a symbol that represents their identity, Syracuse can promote community while building a brand to stimulate growth.

As I discuss in more detail in the next section, my observation of the flag redesign process in Syracuse allowed me to understand better how residents interact with the possibility of growth and the role that city leaders play. The fact that flags need to perform these dual functions – providing meaning for residents while also signifying a brand for visitors – is what makes flag redesigns a compelling case. This idea is potentially even more pronounced at the level of cities and especially when a city is designing a new flag. Through observing the process of flag redesigns, I understand how residents and growth coalition actors navigate the relationship between identity and branding. I soon discovered that place identity and reputation have tensions, which can be applied directly to the Syracuse community members and how they respond to a failing city they call home.

Methods

My research began in the Spring of 2022. I worked alongside Professor Daniel Alvord as a research assistant on his research on the politics of flag redesigns. The main question we were trying to get background information on was why these flag redesigns were happening. The North American Vexillological Association had a database listing cities across the United States that redesigned their flag. I went through the cities and looked them up on Google for more information on their specific flag redesign initiative. Over about five months, I coded around 120 articles for themes. I completed the Human Research Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative in September 2021. At the end of March 2022, Professor Alvord and I received approval from the Institutional Review Board. I conducted semi-structured interviews alongside Professor Alvord from May 2022 through July 2022 to understand how this process worked by speaking with the people involved. I decided to focus on one specific city for a case study to

complete my research. Through background research, I found that Syracuse, NY announced they would go about a flag redesign in early 2022. I also quickly learned about the history of Syracuse and how the city is in decline. Syracuse has been failing due to the loss of employment opportunities leading to a decrease in population. This opportunity became perfect for a case study to understand what community and committee members working on redesigning the city flag wanted to get out of this process.

I conducted an ethnographic case study of the Syracuse, NY, flag redesign effort. As Ashley Rubin defines, ethnographic observation “involves embedding yourself in a particular place for some period of time...interacting with people while you are observing them as opposed to lurking from the edges” (Rubin 2021:15). My methods included participant observation and semi-structured interviews, or asking questions based on the respondents answers and not having explicit questions (Rubin 2021). Between January 2023 and March 2023, I conducted participant observation in Syracuse, NY, by attending flag redesign workshops and visiting local stores and restaurants. The two flag redesign workshops I attended were places for community members to learn more about the process and design flags. I also visited Syracuse twice and visited the local mall and restaurants to learn more from community members by observing and asking questions. While attending the flag redesign workshops, I talked informally with the committee members and community members who attended and also spent time watching and taking notes on the conversations. While visiting the local mall and restaurants, I approached various people, asking, “Hi, this is such a random question, but do you live in Syracuse? I heard that they are redesigning their city flag. Do you know anything about that?”. Participant observation was essential to analyze the types of people attending the flag redesign workshops and watch their behavior. I also was interested in knowing if the community members were aware of the flag

redesign and, if they were, what their thoughts were on the project. I collected in-depth field notes to record my observations. I observed and took photos of Syracuse as well.

I conducted eight semi-structured interviews, including six flag committee members, one Adapt CNY³ volunteer, and one community member. The committee members consist of people in charge of the process and those just on the committee as judges. The Adapt CNY volunteer played a prominent role at the beginning of the flag redesign initiative. The community member works as an editor for Syracuse.com, the leading newspaper in Syracuse. I contacted the participants I interviewed by meeting some of them at flag redesign meetings and reaching out afterward through email and, in addition, snowball sampling to find new participants. Snowball-sampling is “the well-known practice of asking interviewees to recommend other interviewees (Weiss, 1994)” (Small 2009:14). Five of my interviews were on Zoom, and three were over the phone. I video and audio recorded them all with the participants' consent. I transcribed and coded all the interviews for themes. I used pseudonyms for all my participants because one participant asked not to be referred back to in their quotes. In my thesis, I specify if the person I am referring to is a committee member, Adapt CNY volunteer, or community member. I reached saturation, finding that each interview replicated the last one (Small 2009). For the flag to represent the different kinds of people living in Syracuse, it comprised a diverse group. Doing participant observation and semi-structured interviews allowed me to get different perspectives. I observed participants involved in the flag redesign process and asked them questions alone in interviews.

I present my findings in the following three chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the historical context of Syracuse's redesign initiative, covering the background information needed to understand the redesign fully. Chapter 3 covers how civic pride can be represented in the flag

³ Adapt Central New York is the non-profit organization which organized the Syracuse flag redesign initiative.

redesign initiative through various symbolism to conjure a sense of dignity to lay the groundwork for potential growth. Chapter 4 discusses economic growth and how it exists less overtly to sway community members to get involved in the city's growth. I conclude my findings in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2 - Syracuse, NY

To understand the story of the flag redesign, it is crucial to recognize the city's history, the initiative's timeline, and Syracuse University. I create the framework to understand why the project is happening in three subsections. The city's history explains what has led to population decline and, therefore, citizens' feelings of needing to redefine their identity and rebrand their city. A non-profit organization created the flag redesign effort, which exists as a project of Adapt CNY. The University contributes minimally to the city and simultaneously is why so many people know of Syracuse, NY. This framework is essential to understanding why this flag redesign project is happening and why people care about it.

A Brief History of Syracuse

Syracuse, NY, is in central New York in Onondaga County. Syracuse became a Village in 1825 and a city in 1848 (Syracuse Flag Initiative). The Onondaga people live in central New York and can be traced back to the 14th century before Syracuse (Starna 1990). According to the Onondaga Nation website's "About Us" page, The Onondaga Nation is a member of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, "also referred to as the Iroquois or the Six Nation Confederacy" (About Us 2014). Onondaga Nation is located south of Syracuse and is not referred to as a reservation because the tribe has always lived there (About Us 2014). The Onondaga Tribe plays a large part in the history of Syracuse, even though the American Indian and Alaska Native alone population percentage in Syracuse today is 0.9%, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau 2022).

Syracuse is frequently called the "Salt City" because of the area's history of the salt industry. The city of Syracuse proliferated nearly three centuries ago due to the development of

the salt industry (Murphy 1949). In the early 18th century, the English became highly interested in the springs in Onondaga because they heard about the salt, which was at the time scarce. The salt available in Syracuse made the city thrive for centuries, and by 1815 people knew of the salt nationally. The salt shipped across the country, especially after the Civil War. Joseph Hawley Murphy explains the salt industry's quick demise in the early 20th century. Hawley says it was due to “the ascendancy of the Michigan industry, the discovery of salt in other parts of the country, and the reduction of the tariff on salt” (1949:312).

Manufacturing also played a role in the success of Syracuse. On the Syracuse government website, in the history section, it states, “During the second half of the nineteenth century, a multitude of factory buildings were constructed in the western half of the city near the Erie Canal, particularly along South Geddes and West Fayette Streets” (Historic Syracuse). Many large companies in Syracuse helped create job opportunities for the citizens and grow the city's economy. General Electric began defense work operations in Syracuse during the 1940s, and employment at GE peaked in 1966 (Croyle 2019). Eventually, General Electric started laying many people off, finally moving locations. In the early 1990s, the Syracuse community almost forgot General Electric entirely. In 1955, the city removed the large GE sign that had been in Syracuse since 1955, and General Electric is no longer considered a part of the city.

Due to the closure of many large businesses in Syracuse, as well as the decline of the salt industry, Syracuse began to decline. The New York State Education Department ranked NY school districts by 2022 graduation rates, and the Syracuse district was ranked 647 out of 670 (Tampone 2023). Syracuse has a median household income of \$40,076 and an employment rate of 49.9%, according to the United States Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). Syracuse, by various measures, falls under the category of a “failing city,” with population decline being an

especially significant indicator. Syracuse's population peaked at 220,583 residents in 1950; in 2010, that population reached a low of 145,170 (Weiner 2021).

Despite the long-term population decline, Weiner suggests reasons for optimism. In an article on Syracuse.com, he explained, "Syracuse's population increased by 3,450 people to 148,620, up about 2.4 percent from 2010, according to an analysis by the Empire Center for Public Policy. While it's a small increase, it represents a dramatic milestone for a city that lost almost a third of its population over a 60-year period" (Weiner 2021). This milestone represents that the city is also in a period of revitalization. This increase in population is so tiny but is a beacon of hope for the residents of Syracuse. Similarly, in early 2022 Micron Technology decided on a suburb of Syracuse as a place to build their new manufacturing building (Weiner 2022). Weiner explains that this "would be the largest single private investment in New York history" and is hopeful to provide over 9,000 jobs within the next few decades (Weiner 2022). This event is another representation of the reasoning behind this revival of Syracuse. The flag redesign effort is one of the revitalization strategies the city hopes will regenerate a sense of pride, resulting in growth.

The Flag Redesign Effort



The current flag was designed in 1915 and chosen through a contest. The flag consists of the city seal on a blue and white background. Roman Mars specifically called out Syracuse, NY, among other cities, for having a lousy flag in his TED Talk, criticizing that it was simply its city seal (Mars 2015). Mars even stated that vexillologists have a term for these flags: "SOBs" or "Seals On a Bed Sheet," making fun of the designs. Roman Mars quotes Ted Kaye repeatedly, laying out the proper guidelines that consider a flag "good." The TED Talk caught the attention of many. Many people in Syracuse did not recognize the Syracuse flag before this video went viral, which now has 4.9 million views. As I will address in further chapters, four of my participants mentioned the TED Talk catching their attention. The TED Talk is listed on the Syracuse flag website and on the committee's flyers.

While doing initial background research, I found that a nonprofit organization, Adapt Central New York, decided to embark on a flag redesign initiative. The flag redesign initiative came to life in 2019, but the pandemic postponed it. Adapt Central New York is a "nonprofit organization dedicated to providing creative professionals with a platform to engage, create, and connect within Central New York," according to their website (ADAPTCYN). Three task forces split up these committee members: the Public Arts task force, the Civic Engagement task force, and the "It's All Here" task force. An example of what Adapt Central New York had done before

the flag redesign initiative was painting street murals, starting a bike share program, hosting events to clean up the streets, and hosting networking opportunities. The idea behind the flag redesign initiative fell under the Public Arts and Civic Engagement task forces, so Adapt Central New York members loved the idea. Adapt Central New York’s mission is to unite people and make Syracuse more beautiful. There are some indicators of success, for example, the “rack pack,” which consisted of the organization creating colorful bike racks around Syracuse⁴.

The idea was brought back to life in early 2022 by Adapt Central New York announcing that they sought nominations from individuals interested in serving on the Syracuse Flag Committee. This citizen-led group would guide the flag redesign process throughout 2022. There was an application and an interview process to ensure they had the right people for the committee⁵. The in-depth process of finding community members was essential to make sure the committee represented the entire community. The committee was formed in mid-2022 and comprises a diverse group of thirteen members. The selected members represent different neighborhoods in Syracuse to have diverse feedback⁶. They worked together for months to devise a plan to figure out how to redesign a flag. They discussed how they would do a contest, whom they wanted to include, and how to explain the flag redesign process to the community members. To get backing, they needed to get the community behind the idea. They developed a website with information about the redesign “syracuseflag.com.” On the website, they explained

⁴ Adapt Central New York. “Adapt Central New York.” *ADAPTCNY*. Retrieved March 23, 2023 (<https://adaptcny.org>).

⁵ Syracuse Flag (@syracuseflag). 2022. “Syracuse: we need your help to create the city’s new flag!... We’re looking for a diverse group of people to join the Syracuse Flag Committee and help lead the process to determine what the city’s new flag should look like. The committee will directly assist Adapt CNY, the City of Syracuse, and the Syracuse Common Council in developing guidelines to submit ideas for a new flag. No prior experience is required, all you need is a love for Syracuse and passion to make change — visit [syracuseflag.com](https://www.syracuseflag.com) (link in profile) to get involved today!”. Instagram, February 17. https://www.instagram.com/p/CaFr6x_vPmn/.

⁶ Syracuseflag. 2022. “Meet some of the local judges who will be narrowing down design submissions for the Syracuse City Flag Redesign! Stay tuned for more. Visit [syracuseflag.com](https://www.syracuseflag.com) to learn more about the flag redesign process.”. Instagram, November 10. https://www.instagram.com/p/CaFr6x_vPmn/.

that “there has been a growing movement to improve city flags,” and they attached links such as a link to Roman Mars’ TED Talk, Ted Kaye’s book “*Good*” *Flag*, “*Bad*” *Flag*, as well as other cities who went through redesigns (Syracuse Flag Initiative). The website also included the original flag, with suggestions on symbolism that the committee members want the new flag to include.

The committee began accepting potential designs in November 2022 and received designs until February 17, 2023. They hosted multiple flag workshops which were open to the public. These workshops allowed community members to learn more about the process, ask the committee questions, and design a flag. During these workshops, the committee would present a short presentation explaining the process and why they were doing this, and they even showed some other city flags that they thought were considered “good.” The committee listed the suggestions for the redesign, which included keeping it simple, using symbolism, using two to three colors, no seals, no lettering, and being distinctive. These guidelines are on the Syracuse flag website, pamphlets handed out at the flag workshops, and in the committee members' presentation at the flag workshops. The committee came up with a schedule for the flag redesign initiative. They were going to go through a process of narrowing down the designs to three to five finalists, flying those three flags somewhere in Syracuse so the public could view them, and then hosting a public vote to narrow the decision to one flag, which they would present to the city council. They will even host community workshops where people can voice their opinions on the submissions. The committee plans on introducing a final flag to the city council in early June.

How the University Matters

Syracuse University plays a significant role in Syracuse. It is a massive University, bringing in thousands of students and faculty members. Most people across the country now only know of Syracuse because Syracuse University is there. The University creates tension among the community members. On the one hand, community members recognize that without the University, Syracuse would be in an even more significant decline than it already is. The University contributes approximately \$1.8 billion annually to the central New York region (News Staff 2017). On the other hand, community members resent that Syracuse University is private which grants privileges. The University is exempt from federal and New York State income tax, and has a city property tax exemption (Tax Compliance). The tensions grew when the University built the Carrier Dome, the home for significant athletics at Syracuse University. Donald J. Kirby analyzes this tension in “The Carrier Dome Controversy: Rewriting the Town-Gown Relationship” (1988). When the Dome was built, the taxable value was “\$6,242,200” (Kirby 1988:45). Kirby explains that the city wanted to tax the Dome because public events were occurring there unrelated to the University. The controversy lasted for years, the University trying to avoid the taxes, repeatedly publicly stating that they “will litigate” (Kirby 1988:45). The University’s lack of contribution to the community of Syracuse continued for years. While interviewing a member of the flag committee, I asked them about the University and how the community members of Syracuse view the city. On the pamphlets handed out to community members during flag workshops and on their website, it states that they want to create a flag representing all of Syracuse, not just the University.

Officials from Syracuse University know the tensions exist, and have taken time to address them. Nancy Cantor, former chancellor of Syracuse University from 2004 through 2013,

presented a talk at the University titled “Academic Excellence and Civic Engagement: Constructing a Third Space for Higher Education,” where she stated, “I want to make the case that civic engagement is not one more thing on the plate. It *is* the plate” (Cantor 2010). She laid out ground rules for how she wanted Syracuse University to invest in the community. She explained the city’s economic decline and that the University has been working with the Gifford Foundation. As mentioned on their website, the Gifford Foundation works to foster growth and encourage change by raising money for Syracuse. Cantor said many opportunities would be available for students and faculty members to be involved and help Syracuse. During her time at Syracuse, the University developed “the Connective Corridor,” which is transportation between the school and downtown Syracuse (Andrews 2007). Cantor visited other universities, such as the University of Virginia, to express the importance of civic engagement (Andrews 2007). In an interview done by Julie Zeilinger, Cantor stated that doing community work is “real citizenship building, it gives people a sense of communal responsibility,” and “there are experts in the community that may not be in the classroom but they know enough about what their working on” (Zeilinger 2009). Cantor worked very hard for almost a decade to show the University how crucial civic engagement is, and it meant a lot to the community.

After Cantor left and Kent Syverud took over, things changed. He has focused on everything but community engagement, and the community members of Syracuse noticed. There is even a petition on Change.org for his resignation, which states, “We deserve a Chancellor who values the experience of students and faculty over breaking fundraising goals or completing massive infrastructure projects” (A Concerned Student 2020). This massive change has made the community members feel even less heard. Out of the six committee members I interviewed, 5 mentioned the contention between the University and the city. During an interview with Steve,

he explained, “The succeeding chancellor, is sort of, the opposite of Nancy Cantor, and is, you know much more interested in really protecting Syracuse as its own entity... And has much less community involvement. And I think that makes people resent the University in some respects. I mean, it’s a major institution that brings people who do not have roots to the city. Most of the people who graduate at SU go back to wherever they came from. And, people have varied attitudes about it... What do we say... The joke that we make is if it weren’t for SU, we would just be Utica... Everyone kind of has that recognition... So there’s a bit of resentment, I think, on the part of many residents... Kind of like an ambivalent attitude... On the one hand, we resent the complexity it brings and, on the other hand, recognize it’s a major part of our economy.” The flag redesign meant a way to separate themselves from the University and create an identity they feel is their own. They want to do this for themselves and their community.

During a flag redesign workshop I attended, I experienced similar sentiments. The flag redesign committee held various workshops to get community input and offer community members an opportunity to design a flag. One of the community members asked about Syracuse University. She was an older woman and raised her hand to ask, “Are we going to be incorporating symbols from private institutions that really are not involved in the city?” Everyone in the room laughed, but I did not quite understand until a committee member said, “We have been discussing whether to incorporate orange and blue, we decided that if people want to they can.” Syracuse University brings in visitors and residents, which is why so many people know Syracuse exists. However, on the other hand, residents resent that the university is heavily associated with the city. So part of this process is to develop a place identity not associated with the University. Although the community has ambivalent attitudes to the University due to the dominance that the University has over the city, intense feelings of civic

pride exist through that resentment. In the next chapter, I will discuss how civic pride was shown in several ways by my participants.

Chapter 3 - Civic Pride

In this chapter, I explain how civic pride can be represented in the flag redesign initiative as a cause and effect, through the community member's feelings toward the University and in the symbols chosen to represent the city. Civic pride is critical to the Syracuse flag redesign initiative. The confidence behind what the flag will eventually do for the city and the success it will bring comes from the initial feelings of civic pride. People who believe in their city will believe in the revitalization efforts because they want their city to grow and think it can. One of the reasons why specifically a flag redesign was the project chosen is because it generates a feeling of civic pride in residents. When residents see their city as a part of their identity, it creates an environment that the city can utilize for growth. The contention between the University and the city creates a sense of competitiveness for the community members. The community members want the change to come from within the city, not from the University. There is a sense of pride in the idea that the community members can do this by themselves and eliminate, or reduce, the University from being a critical factor in the growth. The flag allows community members to create symbols representing their home and identity. It is a way for the community members to create something. Even if community members do not necessarily agree on what they believe should be on the flag, they show civic pride even then because they want a say in which symbols are on the flag.

Cause and Effect

In a presentation given by one of the committee members at one of the flag redesign workshops, on a slide titled "Framing the Initiative," one of the reasons for the initiative stated,

“The flag represents the city and its people...Community cohesion and civic pride.”⁷ The committee members are blunt when explaining that civic pride is important for understanding the initiative, thus showing community members why they should get involved. They believe in Syracuse, and this opportunity is one where they can show their civic pride while helping their city. Committee member Matthew explained as he smiled, “I should say that I was particularly pleased, at one of the workshops, there was a grandfather who brought his 9-year-old grandson who was particularly interested in submitting things.” This quote represents that everyone involved values civic engagement and pride in their city. And they are creating an identity and a new community of people who love Syracuse. This committee member was thrilled that someone young was excited to join the project. Because Syracuse is a part of the community’s identity, community members enjoy it when people express interest in Syracuse.

When the residents understand why this is happening, they are more likely to get behind the idea themselves. Because this is a redesign of a city flag, initially, most people will hear that and think it is strange. Most people do not know if their city has a flag. While doing participant observation in Syracuse, only one out of the ten community members I spoke with even knew they had a city flag. There are very few city flags that people know exist. The city of Chicago is an example of a city that has a recognizable flag. The city created a symbol that people can rally around and identify with. As a resident of a suburb of Chicago, I can attest that the flag is everywhere, even in the suburbs. I even have friends with flag tattoos, and I brought a Chicago flag to college even though I am not from the city. Part of why the Chicago flag has become so successful is that people feel a sense of pride when they see the flag that represents their identity. A symbol to rally around is an important part of feeling like you are a part of your community.

⁷ Committee Member. 2023. “Syracuse Flag Redesign Initiative.” PowerPoint presentation presented at a Flag Design Workshop, Syracuse, NY, January 24.

When talking with Committee Member David, he explained his interest in flags and how he got involved. He stated, “When you get to a city flag it becomes more complex, or a little bit more deep and more nuanced about the actual history or people or weather or whatever... So it’s almost like when you see the flag of... I do not know... Tulsa, it talks about the founding of Tulsa, the race riots, it gives the history of the entire city in one image. You do not get that with a lot of country flags... People can be then proud of that history.” Because a city flag comprises a series of meaningful symbols, the city can use it to showcase its pride while creating an identity that the community can rally around.

One central theme I found was that civic pride was a large part of why people became involved with the flag redesign initiative. After coding my seven interviews with flag redesign committee members and a member of Adapt CNY for themes, I found that 100% of my participants see the flag redesign effort as a way to articulate an identity for the city that stands on its own and represents the community. Committee member David explained, “It’s just something that I have always thought was important for the city, to have a separate identity to have a separate reason of pride than the University that was inside of it.” Committee member James stated, “I think that cities all over the country, not just Syracuse, struggle sometimes with, you know, their own identity... you know, something like a symbol or something to rally around... I would love to see that, there’s a symbol really for the city.” Adapt CNY member Frank said, “It creates a sense of community coming together and rallying behind this one symbol and representation of the city. This is an opportunity that we wanted Syracuse to be the next city doing this.” My participants all identify with civic pride, specifying its importance for the project.

Contention Turned into Pride

The Syracuse Flag Redesign Fact Sheet that the committee was passing out to community members states, “Google ‘Syracuse Flag’ and see how many orange and blue ones with Otto show up...Our community deserves a well-designed flag that represents the city as a whole.” The committee is making it clear what they are trying to accomplish. They want to have a community symbol that represents the entire city. When David talked about why he got involved with the flag redesign initiative, he said, “But even in Syracuse, how do you represent being from Syracuse? If you’re from Syracuse, you have to go to the bookstore and, buy an orange Syracuse University shirt. And that’s the only way you could ever get Syracuse apparel... But, there’s the nice little flower for Rochester. Buffalo has, their little lightning bolts, there’s lots of things that distinguish those cities as individual institutions... you can be Buffalo without being the Bills... But there’s nothing that does that for the city of Syracuse.”

Committee member James stated something similar: "Philadelphia has their Eagles and they love them, and you know, there’s more in Philadelphia than the Eagles.” Having a way to express pride in your home is essential. The people living in Syracuse can do that, but it only comes from the University. Since the University has focused on itself and not the city of Syracuse for so long, the community members do not feel they can use the University merchandise as their only way to express their identity. Adapt CNY member Frank said, when explaining the contention that is happening between the University and the city, “What we view, is that no one institution should be directly physically present or directly present more than other institutions... the city and our community is so much more than just Syracuse University.” Similarly, committee member Steve explained, “We just really wanted to make sure that it was a city flag and not a University flag, and we wanted to make sure we communicated that in a way

that was, you know, sensitive to people's attachment to the University. I mean, it's a major employer, we couldn't be like, 'We hate the University,' ya know?... We were not interested in a blue and orange flag... without alienating, you know, people's attachments to the University."

Committee member Steve brings up that even though this contention might exist for some, it does not exist for all. Because of this, trying to create a symbol that encapsulates the entire city does not cut out the University from being included somewhere on the flag. It just creates a new opportunity for the Syracuse community members to have a say in what they believe should be included, aside from the University being the sole symbol that represents them. This possibility creates an open environment for everyone living in Syracuse. Identifying the University as a reason behind the flag redesign incentivizes Syracuse community members to get involved. The tension between the community members and Syracuse University has been ongoing for decades. The University has been going back and forth on whether to integrate within the city or improve its ratings. Five of the six committee members I spoke with mentioned the University as a point of contention. All six committee members talked about how separating the University from the city when creating a new flag is vital to ensure the flag represents the whole city. When speaking with committee member Paul, he stated, "a lot of people were not very interested in having orange on the flag because the university. They felt like they were two distinct entities... And it's not the only, most significant part that we should be known from."

Committee member James brought up the idea that the University probably would not want the city to have a flag solely based on the University's symbols and colors. Committee member James stated, "You know, but they also have their own sort of traditions and colors and everything else associated with them that they necessarily wouldn't want to, you know, have the city as a whole, be represented by their colors. In fact, they probably wouldn't want that. They

are very strict with their IP.” This statement acknowledges that it is probably a two-way street. Both entities want to have their own identity that encapsulates everything about them.

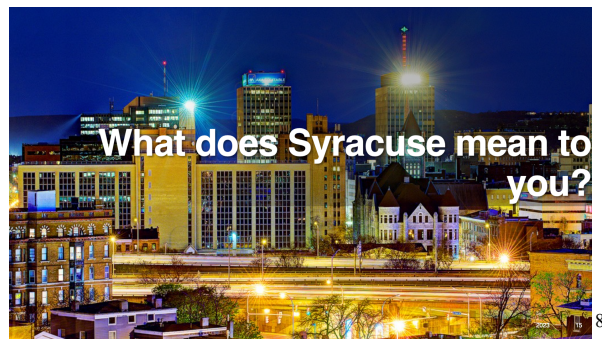
Symbols

Through marketing the flag redesign as a way for Syracuse community members to regain control over Syracuse's identity, they can get community engagement because they care about their city. People often identify with where they are from and the community they are a part of. Committee member James stated, “We had over like, you know, probably between fifty and one hundred people interested in joining this committee as judges.” Committee member Steve explained, “I was just looking for ways to get involved in civic life,” when explaining why he decided to get involved with Adapt CNY, which eventually led to the flag redesign project. Other committee members had similar reasoning for joining the committee. Committee member Matthew stated, “This is kind of a nice way I can serve the community... I definitely wanted to do some form of volunteering and community service for Syracuse, and this seemed perfect.” Choosing the committee meant deciding who they wanted the committee to represent and discussing how that would help their initiative. Additionally, it showed that even at the beginning of the process, community members wanted to be a part of it. They wanted to be involved somehow in the symbolism chosen to define their city. According to the committee members, there were around 200 submissions of redesigns when they reached the end of February and closed the contest. The fact that around half of that number was the number of people interested in joining the committee shows the significant number of people interested in being a part of the decision. The community members getting involved alone, as committee members, or by submitting designs suggests that civic pride exists and is a significant factor in this process.

Committee member Matthew stated, “I’d like to see a flag that can be widely adopted by the community. That folks see themselves and see the community represented.” Similarly, Adapt CNY member Frank stated, “We want the final option to be something that the community really embraces and rallies behind and supports.”

When speaking with committee member Steve, I asked him about choosing members to join the committee. Steve explained, “What we wanted were people who could communicate the aims and scope of our project to people that they were in community with. Like we wanted people who would really be ambassadors for our initiative to their communities... so that people would feel included in the process.” Having a diverse committee of members representing different neighborhoods in Syracuse allows each committee member to represent each community within Syracuse. When the committee votes on the flag, they can vouch for the symbols they feel are crucial. While attending the flag redesign workshop, I noticed a significant focus on the symbols seen on the flag. Committee member James explains that there was a dialogue about letting community members devise their symbols or the committee giving examples for people to get inspiration from. Committee member James stated, “One of the first activities we did with the committee as a whole is basically had them fill out ‘What does Syracuse mean to you? What do you think of when you hear Syracuse? What are important places in the city to you that matter?’ ... we put those all on the board and we went through them to say what are the things that show up again and again, what are the things that we should really emphasize... the way the conversations were really happening were we do not want to fence people in... let people design and we’ll see what comes of it... that was a pretty hard decision that the committee made early on in the process.”

The committee decided to open up a section on the “syracuseflag.com” website where people can submit symbols, and it says, “What places or events in Syracuse's history resonate with you? Feel free to share!” Encouraging community members to think of symbols and colors that they feel are important and represent their home generates a strong sense of civic pride. When speaking with committee member Paul, I asked him about the flag submissions he has seen so far, and they stated, “I’ve noticed there’s a lot of interesting symbolism, I would say.” Committee member James said, “We saw a lot of imagery...” and he gave me examples of the various symbolism he has seen so far in the submissions, such as symbolism involving the Onondaga nation, Syracuse as “Salt City,” and the fact that there are 26 neighborhoods in Syracuse. The variety in symbolism represents every community member who has submitted. Even though they may have differing views on what Syracuse represents to them, they still express their civic pride by showing those symbols in their flag redesign. In the presentation explaining the flag redesign initiative to community members, a slide asked, “What does Syracuse mean to you?” The committee members knew that asking questions, which invokes envisioning what community members’ home means to them, conjures a sense of civic pride. These symbols will eventually create the flag, and the committee members ask these questions to help community members think of potential designs.



⁸ Committee Member. 2023. “Syracuse Flag Redesign Initiative.” PowerPoint presentation presented at a Flag Design Workshop, Syracuse, NY, January 24.

During one of the flag redesign meetings, I observed a tense exchange between the committee and a 79-year-old man attending the workshop expressing his concern about creating a new flag. He angrily told the committee members repeatedly, “Stop destroying history.” Despite repeated explanations by the flag committee that what they were hoping to do was to create a new symbol for Syracuse, this older man associated the flag redesign effort with other instances, such as a failed effort to remove the Christopher Columbus statue, which he saw as “erasing” the history of the city. This episode highlights the contentiousness associated with articulating symbols of place identity. Yet, even though this older man was clearly expressing his dissatisfaction with the project, he still showed up and participated in the process, expressing his civic pride. Thus, while community members disagreed on which identity, this episode illustrates how different community members have attempted to influence which symbols ultimately will come to define and be associated with the city.

Chapter 4 - Economic Growth

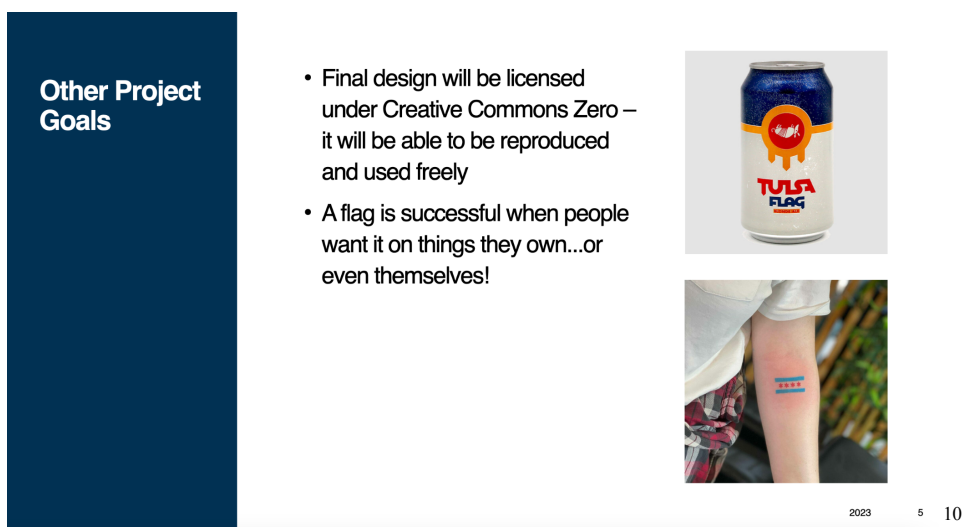
Economic growth is a less overt theme in the Syracuse flag redesign project. It is a factor considered and known by many, but my participants do not see it as a primary reason for the initiative. In this chapter, I will explain how economic growth functions within the flag redesign process and how the theme works with civic pride to stimulate contributions from the city.

Terms such as marketing and branding embody the idea that the Syracuse community members understand that this will help their city economically but do not directly state that for unclear reasons. Civic pride is also the foundation for growth agendas, so the two go hand in hand. As growth machines, cities feel competitive and want to be the best. They want to thrive in every aspect, so it makes sense that there was a wave of flag redesigns within the years after the TED Talk came out criticizing cities for their flags. Syracuse became one of those cities that embarked upon a flag redesign project.

Growth Machine Theory

The committee members are very up-front about the economic benefits of the flag redesign while not explicitly stating that economic growth is a reason for the project. On “syracuseflag.com,” when you click “Learn About the Process,” it says, “We want to see the new flag displayed not only on poles but on t-shirts, coffee mugs, murals, and more.” Just based on information about the redesign, it is clear that marketing the city is an integral part of the project. This way, the committee can get more backing from the community. Perhaps, the Syracuse community is less likely to get excited about “economic growth” without the words “civic pride” also included. Community members need to feel confident in their city before believing that economic growth is possible, especially since Syracuse has been having a population decline for

decades. Even in different articles about the Syracuse flag redesign, the term “economic growth” is never explicitly stated (Cobb 2023). Only four of my eight participants mentioned branding, marketing, or any other terms associated with economic growth as prevalent in this flag redesign initiative. This statistic might come across as puzzling. However, it makes sense in terms of growth machine theory. In line with growth machine theory, the emphasis on economic growth is less overt and follows from the sense of “us-ness” and community pride that the process creates⁹. As I mentioned earlier, cities focus on growth more than other issues. According to the growth machine theory, actors who want to develop their cities stimulate growth. Civic pride works as the groundwork for this kind of economic growth.



Other Project Goals

- Final design will be licensed under Creative Commons Zero – it will be able to be reproduced and used freely
- A flag is successful when people want it on things they own...or even themselves!

2023 5 10

In a presentation given by one of the committee members at one of the flag design workshops, on a slide titled “Other Project Goals,” there were photos of other city flags. The wording above shows civic pride and economic growth coming together to stimulate growth. The committee members want the community to see what the flag can do regarding branding.

Community members can showcase their pride in their city by using the flag as a symbol.

⁹ Molotch, Harvey. 1976. “The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place.” *American Journal of Sociology* 82(2):309–32.

¹⁰ Committee Member. 2023. “Syracuse Flag Redesign Initiative.” PowerPoint presentation presented at a Flag Design Workshop, Syracuse, NY, January 24.

Similarly, the design will be able to be used freely. Opening the flag allows local businesses and artists to use the design for free and incorporate it into their products. This idea is very much in keeping with other cities that have redesigned their flags. For instance, in Des Moines, you can buy socks with the flag; in Milwaukee, you can see the flag on beer cans.

Committee member James stated, “We’re gonna go to businesses, give them the flags to fly for themselves,” explaining how they will get the community's attention. Committee members did not always fully agree on the interpretation of the reasoning behind why people decided to get involved. For example, one committee member, Steve, explained when talking about someone else involved in the flag redesign process, “He sees it totally as a business development opportunity. He might not tell you that because he’s a politician, right?” Some understand how economic growth plays a role in this process. Adapt CNY Member Frank stated, “The revitalization and the new direction the city is moving in, I do think, goes hand in hand with this. Because a lot of the flag process that we’ve been talking about is kind of coming up with symbolism, but also what is a representative image of the city of Syracuse.” Frank acknowledges that the city's economic growth goes hand in hand with the flag redesign project. He points out the idea of branding and identity, identity being important for civic pride and branding being essential for economic development.

In a presentation given by one of the committee members at one of the flag design workshops, on a slide titled “Framing the Initiative,” one of the reasons is a “branding opportunity” for the city.¹¹ Again, this is in keeping with the role of place branding stemming from cities with a negative place reputation. Community members feel that their city is failing. They want to save the city they love. In an exchange with an older community member at a flag

¹¹ Committee Member. 2023. “Syracuse Flag Redesign Initiative.” PowerPoint presentation presented at a Flag Design Workshop, Syracuse, NY, January 24.

design workshop, she joked, “Are we going to include symbols that represent Syracuse being ranked as one of the poorest cities in New York?” Residents are choosing to get involved to feel they have a potential say in the economic direction of Syracuse. They no longer feel comfortable leaving that up to Syracuse University because they cannot trust that the University cares. Adapt CNY member Frank explained, “Part of what we’re talking about is how the city is changing compared to 50 years ago. We should really have a flag that reflects that.” Thus, branding is essential in changing the city's reputation. The committee will not say they are doing this as an economic development strategy. This concept may suggest that that motivation would not resonate with the community members. By getting community members excited by using certain words like branding, they can see the vision of where this could go.

Similarly, this goes hand in hand with the community members wanting a separate identity. They want to be able to express themselves through branding techniques. They want a Syracuse mug or t-shirt that is not just from the Syracuse University bookstore. I mentioned earlier that committee members David and James spoke to me about wanting a way to express pride in their city, precisely one that was different from the University bookstore. They talked about other cities, such as Buffalo, which had other ways to brand themselves that were not the Buffalo Bills. This idea ties together economic growth and civic pride because the two go hand in hand. The city of Syracuse is going to be able to turn the pride that the community has in the city into economic growth. This creation of a new symbol will result in identity and branding.

As I mentioned earlier, the 2015 TED talk that went viral for widely criticizing many city flags also plays a significant role in this process. Four out of my eight participants stated that they had seen the Roman Mars TED talk disparaging Syracuse’s city flag years before the idea of the flag redesign project. Committee member David explained, “I saw the infamous Roman Mars

TED Talk, in like 2015, and I saw it in my office, and I was like ‘Oh hey!’ because of the Syracuse flag. And I’m pretty positive I just annoyingly tweeted about it for 4 or 5 years.” Similarly, Committee Member Frank said, “So the process really began, And it was actually, Well, I’m sure you’ve seen the TED talk about good flag, bad flag” when I asked how the process began. Community member Drew and committee member Angela made similar statements, asking if I had heard about the TED Talk and explaining how they saw it when it came out in 2015.

People being interested in the TED Talk comes from competitiveness. The Syracuse community members did not like that their city was being talked about negatively. Even if it was true, the TED Talk caught the attention of many Syracuse community members, and not necessarily in a positive way. This example shows a less overt representation of Syracuse wanting to grow economically. Sure, Mars noted other cities during the TED Talk, which he criticized for having “ugly” flags, but there were also cities he praised. At the beginning of the video, Mars mentioned Chicago and commended the city for having a fantastic city flag that people rally around. Syracuse community members want to be able to have that reputation as well.

The flag redesign initiative is a way for rebranding. It is a way for Syracuse community members to show that their city is also great. Since the Syracuse population has grown slightly, Syracuse community members are gaining pride in their city. Because of the period of revitalization, Syracuse community members can get behind the idea of a new symbol for their city. They want to have new branding representing the new city that is to come. The revival of Syracuse did not just start from nothing. When speaking with community member Drew he explained, “There were all these promises for years of things that were going to come in and save

the city and none of them panned out... And I think in the last decade or so... There has been this, just a slight change in attitude. Population has steadied, and has finally started to grow, not in big numbers, it's not going to move the needle, but it's moving in the right direction." Drew told me about Micron, which picked a Syracuse suburb as the destination for its new manufacturing plant. As I mentioned earlier, this is supposed to create over 9,000 jobs over the next few decades and is a substantial economic opportunity for people living in Syracuse. This slight growth has stimulated pride, which the new flag will showcase. As the growth machine theory suggests, this is what the process of growth needs.

Adapt CNY and the City

Adapt CNY is the prominent growth machine actor trying to translate community pride into economic growth because they are the organization that created and is in charge of the flag redesign project. As I mentioned previously, Adapt Central New York is a non-profit organization that creates projects such as hosting events to clean up the streets, hosting networking opportunities, and starting a bike share program. When speaking with committee member Steve, he explained who volunteers at Adapt CNY and said, "A lot of the volunteers also work for the city or the county or local government in some capacity. So they're volunteers and it's definitely not on the clock kind of work for them... I think it partly is an entity that gives stability to some kind of community action program that the city employees remain connected to." This is a way for the city to stay connected with the community members and have some sort of control over the growth happening in the city. Because this organization has city government officials volunteering, the city still has influence. Committee member Angela stated, "I think that Syracuse is going through kind of a process of redefining itself and a lot of people

are interested in having a say in that process.” As committee member Angela explained, this is a way for the community members to voice their opinions and come up with suggestions for beautification ideas for neighborhoods and a new identity for the city. So while the flag redesign effort is appealing to residents based on creating a new identity and sense of place that is decoupled from the University, the goal of Adapt is to translate that sense of place ultimately into a strategy of growth. In an interview with committee member Paul, I asked them what success looks like, and they stated, “A symbol that’s now been adopted by sports teams or local businesses or it's on lawns, it’s on houses, it’s on murals across the city.” Out of all my participants, they all shared this idea, stating that they wanted the flag to be used all over the city. Committee member Matthew noted that the end goal is “People being excited about this flag and putting it on shirts and all those things which certainly I hope to see too...I would like baseline that they like it and are happy with it, and if they choose to do more, then all the better.” Steve explained what victory looks like as he laughed a little and said, “I think success looks like... honestly, to me, success looks like seeing some kinds of merchandise that bear the flag, right?”

Economic growth is a sign of success that the people involved in this process hope to see. They view this success through seeing things like merchandise or branding opportunities, not necessarily just economic growth in the literal sense. Creating the flag as a symbol will help Syracuse’s branding efforts. It is not necessarily the final success story that is wanted, as my participants noted they are not focusing on branding as the only important aspect of the initiative.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The Syracuse flag redesign initiative is one way the city can generate civic pride to stimulate a change in how Syracuse community members view their city. Syracuse city leaders want to help their city grow. They want Syracuse to become what it once was, a city with a steady population increase. Because the city has just recently seen this increase in growth, the pride has started returning. Civic pride and economic growth go hand in hand. Syracuse community members live in Syracuse for a reason; their place is their identity. The city is focusing on making sure economic growth is happening as well. Civic pride is what is fueling this revitalization period that is happening in Syracuse. Community members are excited about the city finally not only having a symbol that they believe in and can rally around but that they can see economic prosperity in the future. My findings build off previous sociological literature to show modern examples of cities growing when competition becomes even more difficult. They are finding ways to incorporate community, civic pride, economic growth, and aesthetics.

The flag redesign initiative is still ongoing, as the committee members are still finalizing their votes on the current submissions. Once the committee members decide on a final group of around four to five flags, they will be displayed publicly. After the public can view the finalists, there will be a final public vote. The committee will then present the final flag to the Syracuse city council in hopes that the council will accept it. It is unclear whether the council will accept the flag. From my understanding, the city council is working alongside the committee, but I could not get in touch with any of them to hear their comments on the process. It is also unclear whether this project will result in the growth that city leaders are hoping to achieve. There have been other cities that have had success in adopting the flag as a symbol of identity as well as

having the flag used for effective branding. An example of this would be Bellingham, Washington. My participants have noted that success would look similar to what Bellingham, Washington, achieved. As shown below, various community members have used the flag in many different ways to show pride in their place. It is unclear if this is what will happen in Syracuse.



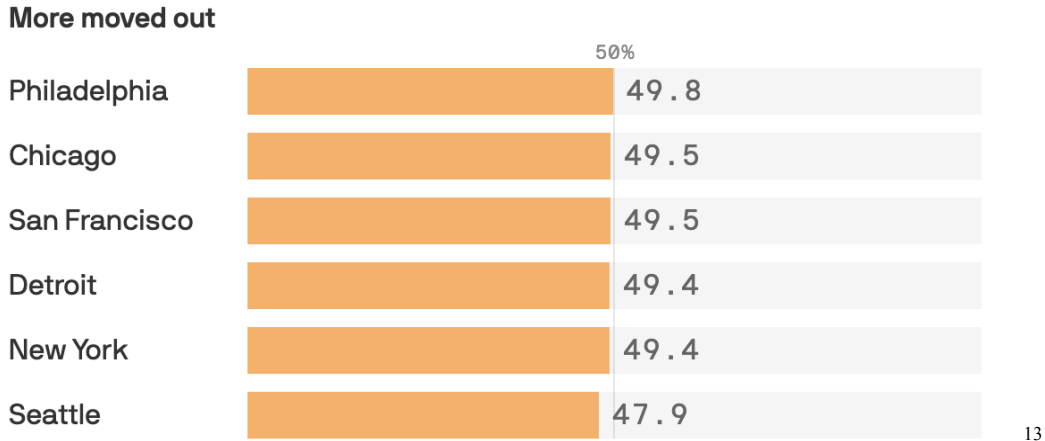
12

I plan to keep in touch with my participants and watch what happens with the new Syracuse flag. Getting in touch with more members of the Syracuse community would have helped bring a more comprehensive understanding of how the Syracuse community understands this flag redesign process. Syracuse is a unique case of a flag redesign process because of

¹² Lockhart, Bradley James. 2023. "Bellingham Flag Design." LARIAT Creative. Retrieved May 1, 2023 (<https://lariatcreative.com/Bellingham-Flag-Design>).

Syracuse University's role. Through briefly looking into other city flag redesigns, I was not able to find a city similar to Syracuse, NY, in the way that they have a university bearing their name, which has also decided to go about a flag redesign. By doing this research, I have come to an understanding that cities are competitive. Even though these cities might not have a university they are trying to stray away from to come up with their own identity, they might have another entity to compete with. An example would be a large corporation, a neighboring city, or something of that nature.

This research is essential to understanding cities and how they operate. It explains the actors involved in revitalization processes and why these flag redesigns are happening. Economic development groups are clear in their intentions for growth, but how they go about change is what is interesting. Cities are becoming increasingly competitive because people have recently moved to the suburbs. As shown below in this graph, major cities are struggling with population decline. With more cities becoming competitive and looking for ways to grow, this research helps to understand their processes better.



¹³ Sparber, Sami. 2023. "Population Drain Persists in Big Cities." Axios. Retrieved April 26, 2023 (<https://www.axios.com/2023/01/31/cities-pandemic-moving-trends>).

City flags are a foreign topic to most people in the United States. Still, more cities are becoming aware of their flags as these redesigns increase. This phenomenon is something that I do not understand to its full extent. However, the Syracuse redesign, even though it is one particular instance of this happening, can be applied to other cities due to their competitive nature. My participants have high hopes for this initiative, and I am curious to see how the process unfolds. I do not have a clear answer for what will happen and how the public will react. This thesis is just the tip of the iceberg.

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