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Andrew Frasier

Adapt CNY

Winn W. Wasson

Syracuse University

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Dawn's First Light: A New Flag Rises Over Syracuse, New York

By Andrew Frasier and Winn W. Wasson

Introduction

The story of the City of Syracuse's new flag begins as many others have: the 215 podcast on city flag design by *99% Invisible* host Roman Mars.¹ In his traditional style, Mars illustrates what constitutes good and bad flag designs of local municipalities all over the United States. While not called out specifically by name, the Syracuse flag fell under the category of "SOBs"—seals on bedsheets—and the video accompanying the lecture shows the city's flag in the background.

The city of Syracuse, the fifth-largest in New York State, serves as the economic, cultural, and population center of the Central New York region. The city is home to Syracuse University,

a major research institution with popular NCAA Division I sports programs. Many

symbols of the university—colors, logos,

and phrases—have been co-opted over time by residents looking to showcase hometown pride. However, there is much more to Syracuse than the university, and non-university related symbols are harder to come by and stand behind.

The city's seal graces the former flag—itsself a testament to the history of Syracuse and the industries which spurred its rise. The seal features salt sheds—an important early industry and the source of the city's current moniker of "Salt City"—the Erie Canal, and smokestack-billowing factories. The seal does a fantastic job at being a seal—a symbol of government, best viewed up close and on official documentation. This project did not aim to alter the seal.

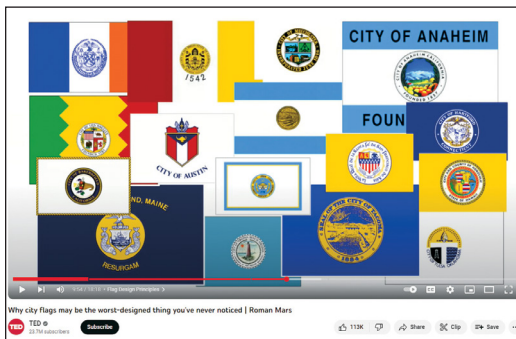


Figure 1. Screenshot of Roman Mars' 2015 TED Talk. The now-former flag of Syracuse, New York (upper center), is featured as an example of poor flag design. Roman Mars, "Why City Flags May Be the Worst-Designed Thing You've Never Noticed", 2015, Source: <[youtube.com/watch?v=pnv5iKB2h14](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnv5iKB2h14)>



Figures 2a & b. (Above) New Syracuse Flag flies over Clinton Square in Syracuse on February 21, 2024. Photo: Andrew Frasier.

(Right) Eric Hart, "Flag of Syracuse, New York" (2023). Based on the design at <syracuseflag.com/firstlight/>. Source: <commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Syracuse,_New_York.svg> Public Domain.



What the seal does not do well is serve as a symbol of the city's people—one that can be displayed proudly, and easily recognized and understood from afar.

Between the TED Talk and seeing other communities change their flags, Syracusans began to connect the dots. A new city flag could give people a way to showcase love for their community separate from the local university. Conversations about initiating a change began in 2019 among civically engaged individuals associated with the local non-profit Adapt CNY (for "Central New York").



Figure 3. Flag of Syracuse, New York (1986–2023). Formal design: <[commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Syracuse,_New_York_\(1986%E2%80%932023\).gif](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Syracuse,_New_York_(1986%E2%80%932023).gif)>



Figure 4. Flying flag of Syracuse (1986–2023). Syracuse originally held a flag design contest in 1915 under Mayor Louis Will (1914–1915). Source: <ourcity.syr.gov.net/2022/02/city-of-syracuse-and-adapt-cny-announce-city-flag-redesign-process>

The Existing Flag

A 1915 article from the *Syracuse Herald* reads,

The plan of a Syracuse flag was suggested to Mayor Will by the fact that many cities in the West had a special flag and that the idea was being received with favor by municipalities everywhere. A municipal-flag has been recently adopted by New York City. The Mayor believed that Syracuse should be in the forefront in this, as in all other respects. Accordingly a competition was instituted in which a price of \$50 was offered for the best and most suitable design for a flag for Syracuse... Between forty and fifty designs were submitted, many of which were beautiful and very original, but the committee of award, after careful deliberation, settled upon that of Miss Marion Markham as the best for the purpose, recommending a few minor changes.²

Markham's design featured a plain blue field with the city seal in color in the center. The minor changes were inspired by a late submission from a boy named Bradley Walker Tomlin. A 1927 article on Tomlin from the *Syracuse Herald* reads,

Syracuse has a constant reminder of this young artist who has achieved fame in wider fields. In the city flag which was adapted from a design executed by Mr. Tomlin when he was a 16-year-old student in Central High School. Syracuse wanted a municipal flag. New York had just adopted an official standard and Syracuse did not propose to lag behind. So there was a prize contest. None of the designs submitted pleased the judges, and the contestants were instructed to try again, with the provision that only those who had submitted designs in the first trial were eligible for the prize.



Figure 5. The *Syracuse Herald* announces "The New City Flag", December 12, 1915.

Mr. Tomlin made a design, and although he hadn't entered the first contest and therefore was ineligible for the award, he sent it along. The first prize was awarded to Marion Markham, but when the flag was made it was decided that Mr. Tomlin's design be used, leaving the city emblem in the center just as he had made it, and adding the band of blue that was included in Miss Markham's design.³

Project Initiation

Adapt CNY is a local non-profit organization with a goal of improving Syracuse as a place to live, work and play through engaging with, creating with, and connecting with residents.⁴ Traditionally, the group has consisted of a series of individual task forces, each with a different focus. The Transit Task Force, for example, worked closely with the city of Syracuse to bring in the city's first-ever bike share system. The Public Arts Task Force is responsible for several art installations all over the city, and the Civic Engagement Task Force has coordinated Earth Day cleanups, and a "Civics on Tap" lecture series.

It was within the Civic Engagement Task Force that the first ideas of a flag redesign began to first take shape. One of the task force's co-chairs had lived in Tulsa during that city's flag redesign, and Adapt CNY members believed that a similar, citizen-led process could work here. Adapt CNY leadership and city of Syracuse staff presented the groundwork for a flag design initiative to the Syracuse Common Council, and the idea received support. A few meetings were held to plan out how to proceed.

However, March 2020 arrived, and with it, the upending of everyday life by the COVID-19 pandemic. Adapt CNY tried to keep the conversations going through virtual meetings, but the medium did not share the same strengths as in-person gatherings. The Adapt CNY board decided to table the flag redesign initiative until the immediate pandemic crisis passed.

Flags From Half-Staff to Full Mast—Project Relaunch

As the world inched closer towards normal in 2021, Adapt CNY reconvened its board for regular meetings and reviewed initiatives that the group had put on hold during the pandemic. The flag redesign was identified as an opportunity to reengage the community. After meeting with representatives from the Syracuse Common Council and the Mayor's Office, the initiative was back on the agenda in December 2021.

The initial goal was a 12-month project which would see a new city flag raised by the end of 2022. Taking its cues from the process used in Tulsa, Adapt CNY saw this as a project with three phases: Input, Design, and Selection. Adapt CNY planned on creating an approximately 12-member Syracuse Flag Committee consisting of interested community members who would develop the design criteria and eventually judge the submissions.⁵ Adapt CNY

leadership would serve in the role of conveners—taking notes, facilitating meetings, hosting a website, engaging on social media, and providing administrative support. The flag redesign process itself would be developed by the committee members.

To help spread the word and find interested people for the committee, Adapt CNY sent out email communications to its extensive mailing list of 1,300 people, launched a website with information about the process, and issued a joint press release with the City of Syracuse.

Committee Selection

Adapt CNY leadership knew that we would likely have more interested people than we realistically had space for on the committee. With a goal of around 12 members, the committee could be large enough to offer representation of Syracuse's diverse neighborhoods and populations, but small enough to maintain orderly meetings and build consensus. Adapt CNY did not want to restrict membership to Syracuse residents, as there might be some non-residents affiliated with the city and its history who would be able to offer different perspectives. Adapt CNY members interviewed about three dozen people by phone for the committee to gauge their level of commitment and interest. Questions included:

- Are you interested in eventually submitting a design?⁶
- Would you be able to commit to four meetings over the next couple months as we create the Design Prospectus? We are planning on having these meetings in-person at this time. What time of day works best for you?
- In the fall, we will be vetting design submissions. Additionally, we will be engaging in a thorough public input campaign. Will you be available to assist as a part of that? This will include promoting the meetings, staffing any public forums that we may have, and answering questions about the Design Prospectus and submitted designs.
- What are some things that you are involved with in the community? What makes you excited about Syracuse?
- Is there a flag's design that you absolutely love that you want to tell me about?

Adapt CNY ended up with a committee of 14 members from all ages, backgrounds, and neighborhoods. Twelve committee members were selected by Adapt CNY through the interview process noted above. Two additional members were nominated by City of Syracuse staff and appointed to the committee: one with ties to the Onondaga Nation (the "central fire" of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy on whose ancestral homelands the city of Syracuse now rests) and an advocate for Syracuse's large New American population (our term for recent immigrants).

Prospectus Creation

During the search for committee members and for interested individuals, Adapt CNY posed four questions:

- What are some words or phrases that you think of when you think of the City of Syracuse?
- What event(s) do you feel had the most profound and lasting impact on the Syracuse community?
- What do you believe is the most important aspect of a community's municipal flag?
- What are some important places within the City of Syracuse?

It was initially the goal to take the responses to these questions, synthesize them, and include them in the "Design Prospectus"—a document to inspire submissions and outline the rules of the initiative.⁷ The first few committee meetings were dedicated to the creation of the prospectus.

Early conversations about the prospectus included discussions on the answers to the questions. Flag committee members added their own thoughts and perspectives to the list, and it grew. As the first meeting continued, committee members raised other practical questions, such as the type of submissions accepted, the size and dimensions of submissions accepted, and whether or not to have the prospectus seek to inspire designs.

As conversations evolved over the course of the first few committee meetings, the overarching desire was to reduce the number of limitations placed on the public when it came time for design submissions. The committee sought to accept both electronic and paper submissions, allow for a multitude of flag dimensions, and to provide a series of general statements about Syracuse instead of issuing design guidelines, including suggestions or requirements that users include elements related to the committee's answers to the four above-mentioned questions. Essentially, the committee decided that the Five Basic Principles of Flag Design from "*Good*" Flag, "*Bad*" Flag should be highlighted, and allow artists to work on producing designs however they saw fit.⁸

The prospectus really started to come together when a committee member produced a rough draft of what the document could look like. The draft prospectus doubled as the paper submission form, and included a space to design a flag, requests for personal information, and a place for the designer to tell the story behind the submission, as well as general background on the Syracuse Flag Initiative. This draft prospectus evolved into the final document that was used heavily throughout the design phase. Several hundred copies were distributed to libraries, community centers, and businesses around the city, and were also available electronically on the initiative's website. The committee also developed a "Fact Sheet" which sought to answer the most commonly asked questions about the project. These fact sheets were also widely distributed and included online.⁹

The prospectus creation phase took longer than Adapt CNY staff had initially expected, but it was an important part of the process. In the project planning phases, Adapt CNY leadership envisioned the prospectus as a set of stronger



Figures 6a & b. The online and printed versions of the design prospects/submission form.

design guidelines, fed with community feedback collected as a part of the project announcement and social media comments. As the committee worked on the idea, the new plan of fewer guidelines and more space for creativity emerged as the preferred option. These early discussions, although less structured in regard to advancing the initiative, allowed the committee members to get to know one another and begin to feel comfortable with voicing their opinions in a respectful manner. The committee had very few strong disagreements over the course of the project, and the free-flowing conversations that occurred during the prospectus creation are likely part of the reason.

While this was all important for building the interpersonal connections within the committee, it did delay the project from meeting the ambitious deadline initially set out. The website was again updated—as it contained language about having a new flag by the end of 2022—and a new goal was set for a new flag in the first quarter of 2023. To go along with this, the goal of opening the submission window in November was set.

Public Outreach and Design Submission

The website opened for submissions on November 18, 2022. Adapt CNY promoted the submission phase on social media, in the local newspaper, and through interviews with local public and commercial radio stations and with local television news



Figure 7. Syracuse Flag Initiative information session and design workshop at the Northeast Community Center in Syracuse, New York. Photo: Eric Ennis, 2023.

programs. The committee brainstormed a list of places and entities to target for outreach through interpersonal interactions and the placement of paper submissions

forms and fact sheets. Committee members signed up for locations where they would drop off paper forms and entities they would contact. Members of the committee also reached out to administrators and teachers in the Syracuse City School District to promote the design competition to students in art and social studies classes and encourage younger members of the Syracuse community to submit designs. The committee also engaged in outreach with local Indigenous communities.

The Syracuse Flag Initiative held several in-person outreach sessions in January and February 2023. Committee members and Adapt CNY staff tabled at Syracuse’s Vietnamese Lunar New Year celebration and held informational sessions and design workshops at Syracuse’s Southwest and Northeast Community Centers, as well as two informational sessions and design workshops at Syracuse University’s Bird Library. These events promoted awareness in the community that the flag redesign competition was up and running; conveyed the reasons for the flag redesign initiative; provided space for community members to ask questions of committee members and Adapt CNY staff; and gave attendees an opportunity to work on their designs. Adapt CNY gave a presentation about the initiative at these sessions and provided participants with paper submission forms and drawing supplies in case they wanted to create a design while they were there.



Figure 8. Syracuse Flag Initiative information and design table at the Lunar New Year celebration in Syracuse, New York. Photo: Andrew Frasier, 2023.

A flag collector on the committee brought miniature flags of U.S., Canadian, and European cities that illustrated principles of good flag design. After the information sessions concluded, the flags were displayed at Bird Library at Syracuse University for the first half of February. The collector, an employee of Syracuse University Libraries, also created a companion research guide to the display to educate members of the university community and the general public about the initiative and provide examples of good city flag design.¹⁰

The outreach efforts yielded around 300 designs by individuals from all over the world. Based on the ratio of responses to population that other cities’ efforts yielded, we would have expected 150 designs. Thus, we were pleased with the number of submissions. That said, the outreach and design submission phase had its shortcomings. The first half of this phase was during the November and December holiday season, which meant that many people were not tuned in to the news that the submission process was open. This timing also meant that our outreach to the Syracuse City School District was late in the process.

Committee Flag Vetting

After three months, the submission window closed on February 17, 2023. The next step was to provide the committee with all of the new flag designs. Because designs were accepted through a number of different media, this proved to be an arduous process. Flag designs were mostly sent electronically, either through a Google Form or emailed directly, but there were also several hand-drawn designs collected at community events or mailed to the Adapt CNY offices.

Adapt CNY staff wanted to ensure that the committee had an opportunity to review each flag, no matter how it was submitted. Staff researched a number of other communities which had held flag design contests to search for best practices on how to present numerous designs to a committee of judges. An initial idea of printing each design out and placing them all over a meeting room for the committee to review was considered. A similar process was used by both the state of Oregon and Burlington, Vermont.¹¹ However, given the occasional hybrid in-person/virtual meetings of the Syracuse committee, the idea morphed into including each flag design as a slide on a PowerPoint presentation, with the description of the design included in the “Notes” field. This is also similar to the process used by Norman, Oklahoma, which placed all files into a Google Doc.¹² Adapt CNY staff reviewed each submission and combined some submissions into a single entry if only a few minor changes (such as primary color or size of elements) occurred. Staff also stripped all personal identifying information from the submissions, so that the submission was anonymous to the committee. There were close to 300 submissions prepared for the committee to review.

This first review had the goal of screening the submissions to ensure that they followed at least the spirit of the Five Basic Principles of Flag Design.¹³ Knowing that these are just guidelines and not absolute law, the committee was very lenient on this initial pass-through. Some submitted designs could stand alone as excellent pieces of artwork but were not appropriate for a new flag. Adapt CNY staff provided “thumbs up” and “thumbs down” voting paddles for this phase, and if a design received a majority of “thumbs up” votes, then it progressed to the next round. Overall, 140 submissions advanced to the next phase.

To narrow down the 140 flags, the Adapt CNY staff utilized a process devised by a committee member who holds an annual aesthetics competition. We began by randomly sorting the 140 designs into 7 “primaries” of 20 designs each. Each flag received an identification number, and the associated

flag description was included with each design. Adapt CNY staff developed packets for each primary to distribute to the committee. The committee was very set on having the opportunity to review each flag during this phase, and not only reviewing one or two of the primaries.

The committee was instructed to rank each flag with a letter grade; each member could give out five As, five Bs, five Cs, and five Ds in each primary. After committee members submitted their votes on a Google Form, Adapt CNY staff gave designs 4 points for As, 3 points for Bs, 2 points for Cs, and 1 point for Ds, and totaled up the points each flag received. All 140 flags were then aggregated to determine the top designs.

Because the same total point value might be a high value relative to the ratings of other designs in one primary but a low or medium value in the context of the ratings of designs in another primary, Adapt CNY adopted the process used by the aforementioned committee member who holds the annual flag aesthetics competition to compare flags across primaries in that competition and standardized the total scores of each flag using the statistical method of assigning each flag a Z-score.¹⁴ A Z-score is a statistical measurement that gauges how far the value of a specific case or sample is from the average value of the total set or population. In the Syracuse Flag Initiative’s use, the average was always simply the total number of points in the entire primary (essentially 40 times the number of committee members) divided by the number of flags (20 in each primary). What would vary across primaries was the spread in point values among flags, on statistical measure for which is standard deviation. This meant that one could not compare flags in different primaries based on point totals alone; earning 40 points in one primary might be exceptionally high in one primary but be a modest total in another. Using a Z-score (which controlled for the standard deviation—the spread—of total point values in each primary) allowed the point values in each primary to be standardized and thus compare flags based on how far they were from the average value, relative to the other flags in their specific primary. Z-scores are technically to be used with statistically “normal distributions” that are symmetric relative to the mean (average) value of a population. Even though the scores of the flags in each primary did not follow a normal distribution statistically, the Syracuse Flag Initiative decided calculating the Z-scores of each flag would suffice for comparing flags across primaries. Using Z-score comparisons, Adapt CNY determined the top 35 flags in the primaries, which automatically advanced to the next round.

Applying the “Discuss List” procedure used by the U.S. Supreme Court whereby individual justices bring cases to their weekly conferences for consideration of grants of writs of *certiorari*, each committee member also selected one design in each primary as their “champion”, which meant that the design would be discussed in front of the whole



Figure 9. “Good Flag, Bad Flag” in action: paddles used by the committee in the initial rapid-fire round. Photo: Andrew Frasier, 2023.

committee regardless of its aggregated point value.¹⁵ Most “champions” advanced to the next round anyway through consistently high rankings, but the “champion” option brought 19 more designs (for a total of 54) before the full committee that would have otherwise been eliminated. At meetings in late March 2023, the committee discussed all 54 designs that advanced from the primaries and decided whether any “champions” that were not among the top vote receivers would advance to the next vote by the committee. This narrowed the number of designs to 38, from which each committee member selected and ranked their top 15.

In mid-April 2023, the committee met to discuss the 15 remaining designs and held another round of voting on Google Forms, where each committee member chose and ranked their top five designs. Adapt CNY used a system called the “Borda count” that assigned point values for each rank (5 points for a committee member’s top choice, 4 points for a second choice, etc.) and tabulated the point totals to arrive at six flags that had the most support.¹⁶

On May 8, 2023, the committee met to narrow down those six designs to 3–5 semifinalists to put up for a public vote. This proved to be the most contentious committee meeting. Adapt CNY staff’s goal was to have three designs, with the possibility of a maximum of five. After extensive debate, committee members submitted their ranked top three choices, and Adapt CNY staff used a Borda count to tabulate aggregate point values for each design. Three flags emerged from the process, with the committee largely having consensus about advancing the top two designs for a public vote. However, while the third- and fourth-place designs were close but still distinct in terms of their point values, some committee members had strong adverse feelings toward the third-place design. This led to suggestions that the fourth-place design be put up for a public vote in its stead, that the committee limit the public vote to the committee’s top two choices, that the committee be able to override the public vote, and that a public vote not be held at all and that the committee send the top choice from this meeting to the Syracuse Common Council for approval. Ultimately, after much debate, the committee reached a compromise to submit its top four designs to a public vote and recommend the winner of that vote to the Syracuse Common Council for adoption as the new flag of the City of Syracuse. The four semi-finalists were presented to the Syracuse Common Council Finance, Taxation, and Assessment Committee at a special meeting on May 16, 2023, after which voting opened to the public through June 10, 2023.



Figure 10. The Flag Design Committee reviewing the semifinalist designs. Photo: Syracuse.com.

Public Flag Vetting

From the start of the initiative, representatives from the Syracuse Common Council suggested that the final recommended flag design brought forth for their approval must be the result of a public vote of some kind. The specifics of this process had been discussed at the committee level since the beginning of the project, but now with a directive from the Council, the committee needed to settle on the mechanics of the vote. A period of approximately 3 weeks was set aside for conducting the vote.

Committee members researched a number of different options for conducting the vote. The main considerations were:

- The vote should not require an account to access.
- Voting should be limited to Syracuse city residents.
- Only one vote should be allowed per person.
- Care should be taken to prevent bots from voting.
- Voting software should be free or low-cost for Adapt CNY with its limited budget.

A local media outlet routinely runs (non-scientific) opinion polls on its news website. Committee representatives contacted the outlet but it declined to allow the use of its software. Committee members also reached out to Syracuse University, which has access to a Qualtrics account, but were also denied. In the end, the committee decided to use Google Forms, with a number of modifications to attempt to best achieve the considerations.

Because Google Forms does not give information about IP addresses that could be used to locate voters and because some city residents might be traveling when they cast their votes, the committee asked voters for their ZIP Codes in an effort to limit votes to city residents. This was self-reported, and thus relied on the honesty of the people voting. However, there were limited other options to ensure a city-only electorate. Additionally, some ZIP Codes include areas not within the city limits, but Adapt CNY had no desire to ask for addresses and then attempt to map the results. Nonetheless, this method proved effective, as many voters entered in ZIP Codes not tied to the city. Anecdotally, some individuals who lived in areas not covered by Syracuse ZIP Codes thought that the requirement for ZIP Codes entry on the initial page served as a gatekeeper and that they would not have been permitted to advance to the page where they cast their votes had the “system” not “accepted” their ZIP Codes as valid. Had such a verification system that rejected ballot access to non-Syracuse ZIP Codes been in place, it is likely that many individuals would have simply dishonestly tried again with a Syracuse ZIP Codes to gain ballot access.

To best allow for “one person, one vote”, the form asked for an email address. An application through Gmail automatically sent a response to the email listed and included a link to an additional form. Respondents were asked to verify their email address by entering the same

address on this form that they used to vote with. People entering fake email addresses on the ballot would not receive this verification email, and thus would not be able to verify and confirm their vote. A reminder email was sent before the voting concluded to those who voted but did not verify, and emails that bounced back from this reminder had their votes culled.

Committee members also visited libraries, community centers, and businesses to host “office hours” where community members could ask questions about the project and submit their votes by paper ballot. These ballots were included in the final tally. Additionally, to promote voting, Adapt CNY had all four designs made into physical flags that each had a midday flag-raising ceremony outside Syracuse City Hall, from June 5, 2023, through June 8, 2023. Unfortunately, this coincided with days of hazardous air quality in the region due to smoke from wildfires in northeastern Canada. Thus, the ceremonies were not well attended, and the hazardous air quality dominated local news coverage, which hampered the initiative’s publicity efforts.



Figures 11a, b, c, d. Semi-finalist designs flying outside Syracuse City Hall. Photo: Vincent Scipione.

The ballot asked for participants to rank the four flags from their favorite to their least favorite. The committee wanted to utilize a ranked-choice voting system. This would allow voters to engage in the same type of scoring as the committee members in earlier rounds. Additionally, the ranked-choice voting allows for a winner to come forth with a greater consensus. Since four points were awarded for each “favorite” flag, three for “second favorite,” two for “third favorite,” and one for “least favorite,” a flag which performed well among first and second place votes would compete better than a flag which garnered many first-place votes, but also many last place votes. As with the committee rounds, results were tabulated using a Borda count. For the public vote phase, an instant runoff was also used, which produced the same result as the Borda count.

When voting was closed, Adapt CNY staff calculated the scores of each flag based on the number of “points” it received. There were approximately 1,400 votes submitted, which is close to 1% of the Syracuse city population. This is slightly lower, but nearly in line with other communities who conducted public votes, who often had response rates of 1–2% of their community population, often with greater resources.¹⁷

Flag Adoption

After the results were tallied, the flag recommended to the Syracuse Common Council was the First Light Flag, designed by Eric Hart. Each flag semifinalist was notified, and a prize of \$250 was mailed to each of the final four. The final design also received an additional prize of \$250.

The flag recommendation was placed on the Syracuse Common Council agenda for their study session on Wednesday, June 14, 2023—Flag Day! At study sessions, councilors review each item on their meeting agenda, and ask questions of city officials associated with each agenda item. Adapt CNY, Flag Committee members, and city staff were available to answer questions on the day of the study session, but none were asked. Councilor Mike Greene thanked the Flag Committee and Adapt CNY for their hard work on the project.

The flag was set to be voted on at the next meeting, Tuesday, July 20, 2023. In a unanimous vote, the Syracuse Common Council adopted the First Light Flag as the new flag for the City of Syracuse. Designer Eric Hart was present and delivered several statements and interviews to the media.



Figure 12. Eric Hart raises the First Light Flag at Syracuse City Hall in Syracuse, New York. Photo: Thomas Bardenett, 2023.

Flag Acceptance

At one point during the flag redesign process, Adapt CNY staff met with the NAVA City Flag Interest Area group to give an overview of the Syracuse initiative. During that presentation, “Flag Accepted by the Common Council” was listed as the final step. Ted Kaye was in the virtual meeting, and gently suggested that the flag adoption was actually the *first* step—having the flag accepted by the public and seen in the community at large was the ultimate goal!

To that end, Adapt CNY has been busy promoting the First Light Flag in order to increase its visibility. Designer Eric Hart has also been a tremendous resource, providing all the colors and dimensions of the First Light Flag on his website and a Wikimedia Commons page, so that anyone can adapt it for his or her own use.¹⁸

On July 5, 2023, the First Light Flag was officially hoisted outside Syracuse City Hall in a ceremony with the Mayor, Deputy Mayor, Common Council President, and other dignitaries in attendance. For the time being, however, special occasions excepted, until the conclusion of the war the city is flying the flag of Ukraine, in solidarity with the people of that republic, on the flag pole outside City Hall meant for the city flag.¹⁹ However, the First Light Flag is now proudly flying in Syracuse’s historic Clinton Square and will continue to appear across the city as new flags are purchased and old ones phased out.

To continue to promote the flag, Adapt CNY announced a mural contest as its next initiative, which will select artists and pay for materials to construct murals around the city which feature the new flag.



Figure 13. First Light Flag flying at Clinton Square in Syracuse, New York. Photo: Andrew Frasier, 2024.

Conclusion

The Syracuse Flag Initiative is part of the larger nationwide movement for U.S. cities to redesign. It built on the lessons of other cities’ initiatives and offers lessons to cities that wish to pursue flag redesign in the future. One of these is to be flexible with timelines, so long as there continues to be forward momentum on the work to redesign the flag. The steps for narrowing the full pool of designs to semi-finalists presented for a public vote (an initial quick look followed by randomized primaries with grades given to each flag) are another potential model for other cities to give consideration to all of the submitted designs. The ultimate goal, however, is flag acceptance, and this is where we now look to the models of other cities. Cities that are redesigning their flags are all unique and designing new flags accordingly. However, we are also a community in and of ourselves that can look to each other for inspiration and support as we move together in our own ways to create symbols that instill civic pride in our communities.

This article was presented as a paper at NAVA 57 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in October, 2023.

Andrew Frasier is a board member of Adapt CNY, a civic-minded nonprofit organization in Syracuse, New York. Adapt CNY organized the Syracuse Flag Initiative and convened the Syracuse Flag Committee, and helped shepherd the project from an idea to reality. A Syracuse native, Andrew’s other interests include local history and promoting alternative forms of transportation.

Winn W. Wasson is the Social Science Librarian at Syracuse University and was a voting member of the Syracuse Flag Committee. He has lived in Syracuse since February 2020. He has built a collection of over 800 miniature flags over 34 years and for the past 31 years, has held an annual aesthetics competition among the flags in his collection. The process he uses in that competition to narrow down hundreds of candidate flags to a select few served as the model for the voting process used by the Syracuse Flag Initiative. He served on the flag selection committees for NAVA 54 and NAVA 56.

¹ Roman Mars, “Why City Flags May Be the Worst-Designed Thing You’ve Never Noticed”, 2015, <[youtube.com/watch?v=pnv5iKb2hI4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnv5iKb2hI4)>

² “The New City Flag”, *Syracuse Herald*, December 12, 1915, Magazine section, NewspaperArchive.com.

³ Ramona Herdman, “Syracuse Artist Calls Latin Quarter Folk Serious Strivers, Not Dwellers”, *Syracuse Herald*, July 26, 1927, NewspaperArchive.com.

⁴ “Adapt CNY”, accessed August 9, 2023, <adaptcny.org>

⁵ Gitwit, “#TulsaFlag Design Brief” (working paper, 2016).

⁶ This question was asked to clarify that one could not submit a design and also serve on the committee.

⁷ Gitwit, “#TulsaFlag Design Brief.”

⁸ Ted Kaye, compiler, “Good” Flag, “Bad” Flag: *How to Design a Great Flag* (Boston: North American Vexillological Association, 2020).

⁹ Adapt CNY, “Syracuse Flag Redesign Fact Sheet”, 2022, <syracuseflag.com/s/Flag-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

¹⁰ Winn Wasson, “Research Guides: Emblems in Cloth: The Art of City Flag Design: Home”, Syracuse University Libraries, 2023, researchguides.library.syr.edu/city_flags/overview; Winn Wasson, “Research Guides: Emblems in Cloth: The Art of City Flag Design: Flags in the Exhibit”, Syracuse University Libraries, 2023, researchguides.library.syr.edu/city_flags/display_flags.

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¹² Gabriel Bird, “Case Study: A Flag for Norman, Oklahoma, 2016–2020” <co.richland.wi.us/pdfs/2021/ethicsBoard/attachments/20211007/07%20Attachment%20B%20-%20Norman,%20OK.pdf>

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¹⁴ Scott Nevil, “How to Calculate Z-Score and Its Meaning”, *Investopedia*, March 31, 2023, <<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/z/zscore.asp>>

¹⁵ John J. Patrick, Richard M. Pious, and Donald A. Ritchie, “Discuss List”, in *The Oxford Guide to the United States Government* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ “Borda Count”, in *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁷ The competition in Norman, Oklahoma (population of around 128,000), received approximately 2,400 public votes (Bird, “Case Study: A Flag for Norman, Oklahoma, 2016–2020”). The competition in Tulsa, Oklahoma (population of around 400,000) received approximately 8,000 public votes (Gitwit, “Process”, Tulsa Flag, 2017, tulsaflag.com/process).

¹⁸ Eric Hart, *Flag of Syracuse, New York*, June 20, 2023, own work based on: <syracuseflag.com/firstlight, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Syracuse,_New_York.svg>

¹⁹ Ava Pukatch, “We Are All Ukrainians: Syracuse Announces Sister City with Irpin, Ukraine”, *WRVO Public Media*, April 15, 2023, <wvvo.org/regional-news/2023-04-15/we-are-all-ukrainians-syracuse-announces-sister-city-with-irpin-ukraine>