

MIDDLETOWN MASTER PLAN

Interviews Results

October 20, 2004

This memorandum is intended to summarize the results of key person interviews conducted in the course of work on the Middletown Master Plan. As indicated at the outset of that process, the results are a summary of the overall impressions gained from those interviews and do not reflect individual comments by individual interview subjects. The intent of the key interview process is to gain a tangible understanding of the state of the City as perceived by key community leaders and members.

16 interviews were conducted over a period of seven months. The interview subjects included industry, community and religious leaders, key property owners, and professionals. Interview subjects were recommended by Council members, Steering Committee members, City staff, and at the suggestion of other interview subjects.

Leadership Vacuum

One very clear impression is that many people in Middletown have a tendency to focus on better years in the City's past and have difficulty focusing on current circumstances, or on the future. In particular, there is a nostalgic longing for the era when Armco Steel (now AK Steel) was at its peak, and the paper companies were still in robust operation. The period extending from the mid 1960's through the late 1970's is seen by many as the City's glory years. As is often the case in cities with such a strong industrial heritage, there is a longing to go back to the good old days.

At that time, much of the City's civic leadership was drawn from the upper and middle management of those businesses. Today, there is a strong sense that the type of civic leadership typical of that era has disappeared, and the community has struggled to replace it. Today most management personnel working for AK do not live in the City and do not participate in a meaningful way in the City's civic life. Several of the paper companies have gone out of business, and the remaining ones are less vigorous than they once were.

There are two interpretations of the City's current leadership and capabilities. About half of the people interviewed indicated that elected and appointed City officials were not providing adequate leadership for the community. The other half noted that the City has changed a lot in the past 30 years, that the current leadership is a product of that change, and that many people in the community have been slow to embrace new leadership styles. Overall, the consensus was that the City leadership should be doing more to benefit the community. No interviewees, however, offered constructive examples or suggestions as to what officials should do differently.

Changing Economy

There is widespread recognition that the City's past as a community that relies on an economy based in heavy manufacturing is fading. There is a pervasive apprehension, often unspoken, about long-term future of AK Steel and its implications for the City. This apprehension has decreased in recent months with the announcements by AK of new plant investments, but concern remains. It is widely recognized that the City must increase its efforts in the area of economic development. In fact, that sentiment underlies the determination of the City to undertake this Plan. But while that recognition is pervasive, there is also a perception that the City's efforts in this area have been and may continue to be ineffective.

This is true for several reasons. First, success in attracting new employers to the City requires available development sites with good transportation access, utilities and zoning in place, and an approval process that can move quickly. Very few such sites actually exist within the City, and there is no program in place to insure that such sites are made available. Many of the people interviewed also noted that Middletown couldn't compete with its neighboring communities in Butler and Warren Counties to attract potential employees. Second, the resources being devoted to economic development in terms of staff are modest. Effectively marketing the City as a prospective business location is difficult given the resources available.

Thirdly, the community as a whole is not involved in promoting economic development; that function is today performed by the Middletown Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) and is largely perceived as an outgrowth of the Chamber of Commerce. There is a perception that City Hall and City Departments are not actively involved or oriented towards achieving success in the area of economic development. Rather, the perception is one of inertia, doing things "the way they've always been done," and lack of preparation to move quickly and effectively when opportunity arises. Some of the people interviewed noted that the Chamber of Commerce is ineffective at attracting and retaining businesses, but noted also that there seems to be new leadership in the Chamber and things might be turning around.

Community Image

Another barrier to economic development success in the minds of many is image. Middletown has an image of a blue-collar community, one that is not visually attractive, particularly as seen at the City's gateway at the interstate interchange. Signs, building appearance, building upkeep (or the lack thereof), and the public school system are all seen as indicators of an image problem. The City's image is seen as a deterrent to attracting new, high quality business and residential development to the City. But at the same time, there is another sentiment in the community that things are fine the way they are, and that stronger regulations oriented towards improving the appearance of the community will drive away businesses. There is also a sentiment that Middletown is Middletown and should not try to be like West Chester.

Lack of Coordination

There is a sense that in pursuing economic development, no overall coordinated strategy is in place, with no particular type or size of business identified that might be successfully pursued. Interviewees noted that past efforts in planning have concluded in turf wars between different members of the community rather than positive goals.

Housing/Schools/Hospital

There is awareness that Middletown is increasingly becoming the location of the largest concentration of low-income housing in Butler County, and that this trend does not bode well for the City as a whole in the long run. The City school system is seen as inferior, and a growing low-income population is not likely to ease that situation. Some people interviewed noted the change in demographics over the past ten years, and said that the State's education system and emphasis on standardized testing put Middletown at a disadvantage in terms of test scores because the system does not account for language barrier problems.

With respect to the relocation of Middletown Hospital, there is an underlying skepticism regarding the way the City's arrangements on the matter have been made. There are those in the City that believe moving the hospital to a new site near the Interstate will reduce health care opportunities for residents in the minority community. Others believe that the move will have nothing but benefits for the community as a whole including new employment opportunities.

Track Record

There is a great level of frustration in the City regarding past planning and visioning efforts designed to address the City's problems. There is a perception that previous efforts have generated a lot of meetings and discussion, with no results forthcoming. In general this is attributed to two things: (1) previous efforts have degenerated into "turf battles", with participants primarily seeking to protect their own interests rather than getting involved in making change happen; and (2) key decision makers in the City have not been involved and thus have no stake in the outcome or vested interested in seeing results. There is also a level of fatalism, a belief that nothing can change and that current trends in the City will continue indefinitely.

Isolation and Change

Generally, Middletown remains a community isolated from the larger metropolitan area around it, even from the remainder of Butler County. There is little sense that Middletown is an integral part of the Cincinnati/Dayton metropolitan area. The City's past isolation still colors much of its world view. There is an understanding among some that this needs to change for the City to move forward and take its place in the region, but there is still great resistance to change from old ways. If anything, becoming open to, and welcoming of, change is the greatest challenge facing the City of Middletown.

Summary

In summary, the following interview information will most inform this planning process:

- Offering and supporting venues and opportunities for communication and interaction between local leaders will help to engender a sense of commitment to Middletown among them, with leaders then able to become “ambassadors” for the City.
- Perseverance, consistency, and aggressive action by City officials will be necessary to overcome a perception (whether accurate or not) of economic development ineffectiveness among local leaders.
- Improvements to community image, but without considerable additional (and perceived excessive) regulation on business and industry will help the City greatly in its economic development efforts.
- The City should become involved directly in economic development efforts, rather than continuing a perceived “arm’s length” delegation of such a role to outside entities. This would help, among other things, to coordinate and focus City efforts in this area.
- The City should identify a particular type or size of business or industry to attract, so as to help focus its efforts.
- Even with additional City involvement, outside entities and local leaders should be considered as key stakeholders in the City’s future success and involved in implementation efforts.
- The manner in which the City undertakes change management will determine the level of success that it is able to achieve in its efforts.
- Cultivating a new generation of committed community leaders to implement these key goals will be a strategic component to ensuring future success and stability.