

PUBLIC INPUT SESSION 1

MARCH 18, 2009

Middletown Plan of Conservation & Development

The first public session to solicit input from city residents on the Plan of Conservation & Development was held March 18, 2009, from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. in the Hubbard Room of the Russell Library. 33 people were in attendance, including P&Z Commissioners Deborah Kleckowski and Catherine Johnson.

Presentation Explaining the Principles of Smart Growth

The meeting began with a presentation by Catherine Johnson sharing the framework of planning principles that the state wants to see incorporated into municipal planning policies, often referred to as "Smart Growth". The state encourages a more sustainable model of development than we have seen in the past 50 years. The phrase that is being used at the state level is "Responsible Growth." (Read Governor Rell's Task Force Report [here](#), pp. 10-12.) Smart Growth is land development that follows the traditional neighborhood pattern, linked by transit.

Here is a summary of the principles:

1. Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities.
2. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place.
3. Create walkable neighborhoods.
4. Mix land uses.
5. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices.
6. Take advantage of compact building design.
7. Preserve open space, farmland, and critical environmental areas.
8. Provide a variety of transportation choices.
9. Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost-effective.
10. Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions.

Ms. Johnson illustrated what these ideas look like on the ground, comparing them with standard land use conventions and typical zoning regulations. This presentation can be seen in its entirety on middletownplanning.com (click on Presentation 3.18.09), comparing:

- *neighborhoods* (from the earliest settlements to about the 1950's), "*Smart Growth*"
- *conventional suburban zoning* (since the 1950's). Often referred to today as "*sprawl*".

Public Input

The main aim of the meeting was to hear ideas from city residents about how Middletown should plan for future development. For the most part, discussion focused on particular areas of concern for distinct neighborhoods. Westfield and Westlake were well represented. According to one speaker (Bill Maune), the Westlake area contains about 15% of the population of Middletown, yet it is neglected by the city. Of particular concern is the fate of the open space or "park" there. All were agreed that it is a nice area and that it should be better maintained. Many Westlake residents wish to see the city take charge of the open space and maintain it, especially the paths that run through it.

The associations represented included Beacon Hill and Trolley Crossing. In any case, the residents in attendance wished to correct the impression that Westlake is full of "transients" who don't care about or have a stake in Middletown. There are high rates of owner-occupancy in the Westlake area: upwards of 85 to 90% in some of the condominium associations, according to those present. The people in the room were evidence that some Westlake residents have lived in Middletown for over 40 years. And many feel a loyalty to and love for Middletown, so much so that they regret the convenience of shopping in Cromwell and wish that there were better shopping opportunities nearby. One suggestion was that perhaps one of the auto dealerships could be converted to a grocery store. Another speaker, John Wilson, noted that Westlake boasts a diverse population, diverse in ethnicity, age, and income. The bike and walking path is heavily used. In pleasant weather you would not be surprised to see anywhere from 200 to 400 people out for a stroll. Often one will see three generations of a family walking together.

Several people spoke of the need for better transit connections, both in town and between towns. There was some concern that there are too few arterial roads in Middletown and that we need to connect some of the suburban side roads that terminate in cul-de-sacs. Others were more concerned with the need for better bus and rail service, and the old trolley routes were mentioned with great longing. Johnson brought out the 1913 CT System Streetcar map and showed the routes around Middletown and connections to other cities.

Another point raised was the need for better pedestrian connections, both in the downtown but also within and between other mini-centers such as South Farms, Washington Square, etc. Mary Abongo spoke of having to drive to the Super Foodmart on Washington St. even though it was only about 800 yards away from her home on Old Mill Road, simply because the sidewalks are so unappealing. The need for bike lanes and more bike paths was also expressed.

Another challenge that faces Middletown, noted by Vijay Pinch, is how to regain access to the river. Given that the CT DOT has de-prioritized the redesign of Route 9 at both the southern (Acheson Drive) and northern (Arrigoni Bridge) interchanges. This may be an opportune moment to begin thinking anew about reclaiming the valuable waterfront. It is, after all, the reason Middletown exists. (See plans at [Design Review Blog](http://middletownplanning.com) at middletownplanning.com).

Anne Marie Cannata wondered about the possibility of making the Main Street less expansive, to make it more user-friendly. This prompted John Wilson to remark that Heidelberg, Germany, has many similarities to Middletown (including being a historic river city), and that the entire Main Street was made into a foot-street from church to church (carless). Adele Johnson said Main Street needs to stay the way it is (re: width): “That’s Middletown!”

Vijay Pinch spoke in support of creating more mixed use areas in town (many heads nodded in agreement), and also to connect to the larger (regional) economic development opportunity of being part of the so-called “Knowledge Corridor.”

TREES

The poor state of our trees was also noted by John deBoer, son of Kerste deBoer. Kerste deBoer worked hard years ago to protect the lovely row of specimen trees on Long Lane. About ten years ago, the city or state wanted to widen the street, which would have severely damaged the roots. This is why the area is now known as the Wadsworth/deBoer Arboretum (Wadsworth, because it was originally planted by the Colonel). One person observed that "Middletown used to be called the 'Forest City'", prompting Bruce Spaman (Middletown's former Urban Forester) to pipe up and acknowledge that it is still known as the 'Forest City', though the plight of our trees is admittedly pitiful. Ellen Lukens suggested the commonsense policy that states that “Whenever a tree is taken down by the city, another must be planted to replace it.”

P&Z Commissioner Deborah Kleckowski spoke about some of her concerns, including how we are not doing enough municipal planning for an aging population. This means better sidewalks, access to medical care, etc. We need to do more to ensure that we can "age in place".

It was a productive meeting, particularly because there were so many new faces. The NEXT meeting will be on 16 April, 6:30 pm Russell Library, in the Hubbard Room. The special focus will be conservation and open space. *Notes by Vijay Pinch, Dave Fossum, Catherine Johnson.*