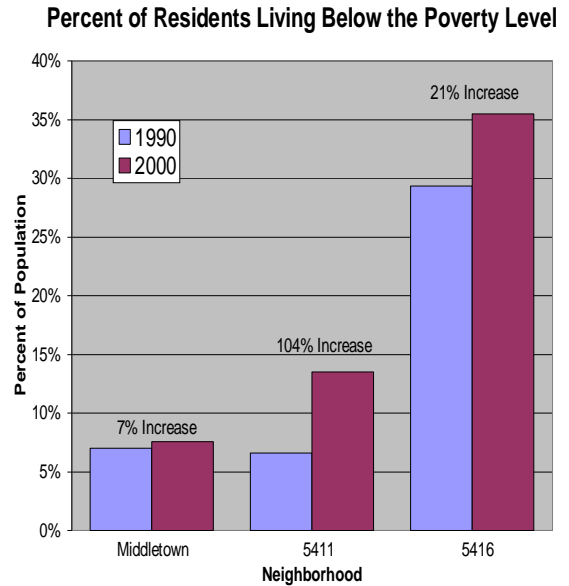
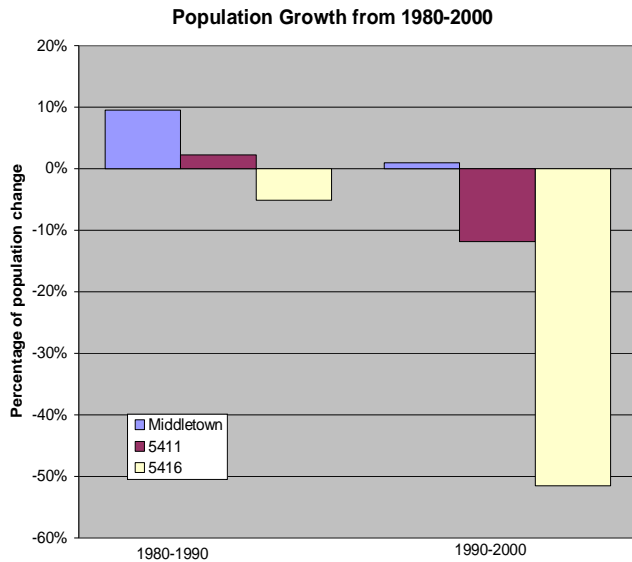


CHAPTER 8 Addressing the Urban Dilemma

Citywide median income and population have increased at a healthy pace from 1980 to 1990 to 2000. Median income and population in and around the downtown have decreased from 1980 to 1990 to 2000. The average percentage of homeownership citywide is 51%, and the homeownership rate in the downtown neighborhoods is often less than 30%. The median income for the City is \$54,000. The median income in the downtown area is as low as \$13,699. The downtown neighborhoods are now as poor as the poorest neighborhoods in the cities of Hartford, New Haven and Bridgeport.

Population Growth in Middletown and Poverty Levels



	Middletown	5411	5416
1980	39,040	2,644	2,834
1990	42,762	2,704	2,689
2000	43,167	2,383	1,304

Source: US Census Bureau

Housing in these neighborhoods is the oldest in the city. Parking is very often non-existent and housing conditions are often substandard, including zoning, housing and fire code violations and serious problems with lead paint. Quality property management and maintenance are lacking on many properties.

These are the areas that have significantly lower incomes, greater criminal activity, and more zoning, housing and fire code violations. Homeownership rates in these areas are lower than more stable neighborhoods and property values for comparable properties are lower in these areas than in more stable neighborhoods.

Table 8.1: Comparison of ownership in downtown area versus city averages.

	Total (units)	Ownership	Rental
Middletown	18,554	51%	49%
Miller and Bridge St.	26	15%	85%
Portland St.	31	16%	84%
Baer and Dunham St.	12	0%	100%
Main St. extension- E.Main St.	29	31%	69%
<u>Grand and Liberty St.</u>	<u>168</u>	<u>14%</u>	<u>86%</u>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

As long as this level of poverty and sub-standard living conditions continue to exist, the downtown and the entire city will have to deal with quality of life issues, the blight, the crime and all of the other negative consequences that are attracted to and emanate from these areas.



Ferry Street

Dramatic changes and significant investment are necessary. The city needs to reverse the negative stigma associated with these neighborhoods and where appropriate, foster a sense of pride in these neighborhoods.

The best way to turn these neighborhoods around is to allow market forces to revitalize these areas. This occurred in the Silver Street corridor and the area defined as the “Village District” between downtown and Wesleyan University. The Silver Street corridors revitalization was largely due to proximity to a major employer, Connecticut Valley Hospital, and easy access to the highway. The Village District was the result of proactive zoning that created an area limited to single and two-family homes and very strong architectural standards. Perhaps more importantly, there is a committed group of existing and new residents who have formed a neighborhood organization. These actions created stability in the area that fostered a willingness to invest.

As evidenced by the success of the Village District, there is a segment of the population that wants to live in a more urban setting. However, most will only invest in areas that have potential, have stabilized and are on the upswing.

Identifying what segment of the population will invest in various neighborhoods is the first challenge. Promoting these neighborhoods and making them attractive to that niche market would then follow. Unlike the Silver Street corridor and the Village District, more government involvement will be necessary to address the key problem areas and organizing the existing residents in these neighborhoods.

Failure to move forward with a plan to stabilize these neighborhoods will result in more and more investment from absentee landlords, a decline in the rate of homeownership and more neglect and less maintenance of the rental properties.

This plan will now discuss each neighborhood in detail and begin to define a strategy to begin to stabilize these areas. The neighborhoods that will be discussed are displayed on Figure 8.1.

Miller and Bridge Street Neighborhood

This neighborhood has been extensively studied by the Redevelopment Agency. The current Redevelopment plan for the area concludes that the neighborhood is not a safe or healthy living environment. The area’s inaccessibility combined with several other factors resulted in a determination in 1998 by the Redevelopment Agency that the only prudent course of action was to acquire all the properties, relocate the residents and demolish the structures. The agency acquired and demolished twelve (12) buildings. A lack of funding has delayed the project and the decrease in density has improved the area significantly.

State and federal funds are not available and therefore, the city needs to pursue local funding to continue implementation of the Redevelopment Plan. In the short

term, a way to greatly improve public safety would be to close the center median between Route 9 North and South bound.

Portland Street Neighborhood

This neighborhood is located at the northern end of the downtown and is almost as inaccessible as the adjacent Miller and Bridge Street neighborhood.

It is bounded on the east by the railroad tracks on the north by the railroad tracks and the Arrigoni Bridge and on the north and west by Saint John's cemetery and church property. The only access into the property is from a very busy Hartford Ave. and from North Main St. under the bridge to St John St. The housing is old and displays serious signs of decay. Crime has increased significantly in the area. Recent discussions about connecting this neighborhood to the Miller and Bridge Street neighborhood and closing Route 9 access could create emergency access concerns.

Baer Street and Dunham Street Neighborhood

This small neighborhood is bounded on the south and west by commercial development, on the north by East Main Street and on the east by Saybrook Road. Both East Main and Saybrook Road are major commercial collector roads.

The area is identified as mixed use on the future land use plan in the 1990 Plan of Conservation and Development and the property is zoned Transitional Development (TD). The entire neighborhood is made up of 8 residential buildings and 15 housing units. The entire area encompasses less than 3 acres of land.

Previous Planning and Zoning Commissions have recognized the commercialization of this entire area and have created zoning to encourage the same. Retail and commercial uses are permitted in the TD zone. The age of the housing, the surrounding commercial development, the heavy traffic volumes at the signalized intersection at Saybrook Road and East Main Street and impending commercial development on the north side of East Main Street clearly suggest that the highest and best use for this neighborhood is commercial development. Any future development will abandon Baer and Dunham Streets and incorporate the entire area into the existing Stop and Shop Plaza. In this way traffic from any future development will be directed to the signalized entrances and exits on East Main and Saybrook Road.

Due to very strong market demand and the existence of owner occupied single-family homes this plan does not recommend the involvement of the Redevelopment Agency or the use of eminent domain to speed this conversion.

Hillside Avenue - East Main Street Neighborhood

This small enclave of homes at the intersection of Hillside Avenue and East Main Street is very close but very different than the Baer Street and Dunham Street neighborhood. This area is made up of residential structures dating back to the late 1800's. The area is bounded on the north by Sumner Brook, on the west by Rubber Mill Pond, and on the east by the Stop and Shop Plaza. The eleven (11) parcels are located on very small lots ranging in size from 5000 – 10,000 sq.ft. The consolidation of these parcels would not yield a sufficient land mass for any type of commercially viable development. Due to the limited potential for commercial redevelopment, high traffic volumes, adjacent commercial uses and the lack of cohesion within this neighborhood, the City must focus its efforts on code enforcement and wherever possible residential rehabilitation. It is very unlikely that this neighborhood can be transformed into an area of homeownership and it is much more likely that the residential units will remain rental units for lower income populations.

Main Street Ext – East Main Street Neighborhood

Like the Baer and Dunham Street Neighborhood this area is designated as mixed use on the future land use plan and is zoned Transitional Development (TD). The area is made up of a mixture of commercial, industrial, office, retail and residential uses. The area is located in the South Cove Riverfront Area and has been targeted for commercial uses once the Route 9/Route 17 Intersection project is underway. The commercialization of the area should include a mandatory residential component such as new upper story residential uses along with the ground level commercial/retail development.

In the short term, the City needs to focus on the blighted structures ordinance to deal with the vacant and poorly maintained Formatron property. Law and code enforcement will also be essential to maintain stability in this area until commercial development moves forward.

Grand & Liberty Neighborhood

This neighborhood is on the west side of Main Street in the north end of the downtown area. This is the most intact neighborhood of those that have been discussed. There are examples of well-maintained properties as well as examples of poorly maintained properties. There are a number of historic properties and streetscapes, and these features add a very desirable character to the neighborhood.

Currently, only 14% of the homes in the neighborhood are owner occupied. Elderly residents, who have a long history of pride in their homes and property maintenance, are selling to investors who are converting from homeownership to

rental units with absentee landlords. It is well accepted that this conversion in ownership results in reduced property maintenance and appearance, which then makes people less likely to make an investment in homeownership.

The current zoning is Residential Pre-Zoning (RPZ). This zoning is restricted to single and two family homes, like the Village District, but there are no design controls on additions and new construction. Those interested in investing in a neighborhood such as this are interested in the historic fabric of the neighborhood. Currently there are no protections from a neighbor enclosing an entire front porch with cinder blocks or making any other change completely incompatible with the streetscape. This uncertainty in what could happen with neighboring properties has a negative impact on an individual's willingness to make an investment in homeownership.

Street crime such as drive-by drug dealing and prostitution is quite apparent in the neighborhood. This activity also has a negative impact on an individual's willingness to make an investment in homeownership.

Supportive housing, sober houses and other types of group homes are certainly necessary in today's society. Whether the fear of dangerous people living there is real or perceived, very few people would want to raise a family next door to one of these facilities. An over concentration of such uses in any particular neighborhood could tip the delicate balance from a working affordable neighborhood to one in serious decline.

Connecticut General Statutes Section 8-3e was specifically designed to strip municipalities of the right to regulate these uses. A large portion of Middletown's supportive housing is located within this neighborhood. The recent changes to state statutes have opened the door to the establishment of group homes and sober houses throughout Connecticut. State agencies have focused their resources on establishing such residences in cities such as Middletown. The establishment of these facilities in residential settings can have a chilling effect on property values and an individual's willingness to make an investment in homeownership.

As traffic congestion continues to increase in the downtown, more and more traffic is using this neighborhood to bypass the traffic lights and congestion on Washington and Main Streets. The continual flow of traffic through these high-density neighborhoods gradually degrades the roads and impacts the buildings. Significant cut-through traffic is also very unattractive to individuals looking for a home and a place to raise a family. Also, the number of very narrow dead end streets off of the main roads creates congestion and densities less conducive to homeownership.

Neighborhood recommendations:

- The Grand and Liberty neighborhood is a logical expansion of the Village District zoning. This type of zoning will not only prevent conversions to non-residential uses and higher densities, but also institute stringent design guidelines and mandatory reviews by the Design Review and Preservation Board.
- The city administers a down payment and closing cost assistance program with Community Development Block Grant funds. While this is a good program, it is available citywide which dilutes its effectiveness. In 2006, sixty nine (69) families went through the mandatory homeownership training program and purchased homes in Middletown. The most recent homeownership class has sixty eight (68) families enrolled. The city needs to restrict this program's availability to specific target neighborhoods and provide additional assistance to those buying multi-family dwellings and converting them to single-family homes or owner occupied two-family homes.
- The city also administers a residential rehabilitation program with Community Development Block Grant funds. While this is a good program, it is also available citywide which dilutes its effectiveness. The program can be extremely helpful in renovating some of the neglected properties in these neighborhoods. It is offered to homeowners and landlords. The city needs to restrict the program to homeowners and its availability to specific target neighborhoods. Additionally, more favorable terms should be offered to those homeowners willing to convert multi-family dwellings to single-family homes or owner occupied two-family homes.
- Specific and targeted code enforcement is necessary. As allowed in Connecticut General Statutes Section 8-23, this plan calls for concentrated housing, zoning, building and fire code enforcement, and law enforcement.
- The use of the Grand and Liberty street neighborhood as a bypass to avoid the lights and congestion on Route 66 / Main Street has and will continue to degrade the neighborhood. The Planning and Zoning Commission and the Police Traffic Division need to investigate methods which will make this cut-through less attractive to people simply looking to get over the Arigoni Bridge. The use of one-way streets, traffic calming, and street closures should be seriously considered.
- In all the neighborhoods the city must make it clear to absentee landlords that poor property management will not be accepted. A city ordinance needs to be established which requires annual licensing and inspection of

units that are not located in owner occupied buildings. The ordinance should also require a re-inspection and new license prior to any sale.

- Group homes –The Mayor, the Common Council and the Planning and Zoning Commission should lobby and demand that the city's legislative delegation recognize the disproportionate share of what many would consider “negative” state facilities in towns such as Middletown and provide safeguards to avoid an over concentration of such facilities in any one municipality. Legislation might include language that exempts cities and towns from CGS 8-3e and consideration for new facilities if some established benchmark is met (ie. number of state facilities, square footage of state facilities, number of state operated or sponsored group homes.)
- Currently, state sponsored and privately operated sober houses can locate in any residential zone with no separating distances. A private operator of a state sponsored sober house can purchase a two-family and run both units as sober houses. Various operators or the same sober house operator could purchase 2 or 3 homes on the same street and run 2-3 sober houses. This is wrong and will have devastating effects on neighborhoods. Section 8.3e requires a 1,000 foot separating distance for group homes, however the State Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) does not require any separating distance for the private sober houses it sponsors.
- Historically, all cities and towns have had a definition of a family in their Zoning Codes. These definitions included related family members and a defined number of unrelated individuals living together as a family. In Middletown, the definition of family includes no more than 5 unrelated persons living together in one housekeeping unit. Private landlords and DMHAS have taken advantage of that definition to establish sober houses consisting of 5 individuals in any residential area. Being fully cognizant of federal fair housing laws and the Americans with Disabilities Act, the city needs to revisit its definition of family and ensure that the city is getting what it intended.
- The above changes should be followed by specific neighborhood organizing efforts. The North End Action Team and Nehemiah Housing have proven themselves as leaders in the north end and they should be encouraged to continue their efforts. The community garden on Erin Street is an excellent start, and these efforts should be encouraged and supported by the city.
- Once a core organization has been formed for the Grand and Liberty Street neighborhood, the group needs to market itself to the people that are interested in living in this historic north end neighborhood. These

target populations could include artists, young families looking for affordable homeownership, non-traditional families and active adults/empty nesters looking for small yards, historic homes and a walkable downtown setting in close proximity to a major liberal arts university.

- Marketing efforts should highlight the specific benefits of the neighborhood, the sense of community in the neighborhood, the city's commitment to increasing homeownership and providing stability, the targeted down payment assistance program, the targeted residential rehabilitation program and the existing, but never utilized, tax deferral program that exists in Section 272-7 of the Middletown Code of Ordinances.