



**"CITY PLANNING IN MIDDLETOWN:
DESIGNING THE FUTURE BASED ON A STRONG RECOGNITION OF THE PAST
SIX DECADES OF CITY PLANNING IN MIDDLETOWN, CT."**

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Middletown has had a formal city planning agency since 1931. The tangible evidence of its rational decisions made through the six decades of this century are readily apparent to citizens of this thriving city.

This folder about the past, is presented to stimulate the use of the planning process in the early 1990's and to continue assuring a desirable future for Middletown as the next century approaches.

The information contained in this pamphlet is from the records in the City Planning Office including the names of some prominent persons who served on the Planning Commission. Several of Middletown's present community facilities are named for former commissioners. Four commissioners became Middletown mayors. They were Herbert C.F. Bell, John Roth, Bertrand E. Spencer and Sebastian Garafalo.

The Thirties

The Planning Commission advised the Federal Civil Works Administration about needed community facilities in Middletown. The Commission studied various types of subdivision and land use controls. It adopted a street map as the official General Plan for Middletown. A dominant planning issue during the decade was traffic, because of the increased use of the automobile.

Some commission members during the decade were: John Coughlin, Charles Davis, T.M. Russell, Harvey Thompson, Colonel Charles Wadsworth and William Wilcox. Russell served as Chairman from 1935 to 1952.

The Forties

The Planning Commission provided a forum for community discussion of federal housing. It conducted a hearing on housing later built at Long Lane. The capacity of the Mount Higby Reservoir and Middletown's water supply was examined. The commission made an extensive study of capital improvement needs for the post war period. Discussed were ideas for a river-front park, Westfield industry and a new municipal building. Also debated was the possibility of an airport in Middletown. Subdivision regulations were adopted in 1941.

Some commission members during the decade were: Walter Blau, James Hennessy, Henry Hippler, Theodore Lifset, James Murphy, John Roth, T.H. Russell Jr., Seb Passanesi, Bertrand E. Spencer, and Helene B. Warner.

The Fifties

Professional staff for city planning was first hired in 1954. A series of short term planners began to produce comprehensive community studies leading to Middletown's first General Plan of Development. There were studies on population, education, the economy, local government, finance and redevelopment. The period was characterized by a confusion about the the functions and purposes of city planning and redevelopment.

The General Plan noted that the city's vast geographic size is deceptive and future building will be limited by topography and the potential of flooding. The planners of the fifties envisioned a low traffic volume on Washington Street, an institutional area around Middlesex Memorial Hospital, and recreational facilities at Pameacha Pond. The Portland Bridge area would be developed into a lovely neighborhood with businesses and apartments. The Plan strongly recommended preservation of agricultural land. Middletown's first suburban shopping center opened in 1956.

The Planning Commission was important in the preparation of the schematic plans for the first redevelopment projects, the Center Street Project and the Court Place Project. The Commission discussed a possible inn location in the Central Business District.

Some commission members during the decade were: Arthur Dillon, John J. Higgins, Joseph V. Misenti, Joe Webb Peoples, T.M. Russell, I Robert Traverse, Seb Passanesi, and William Warschauer.

The Sixties

Planning activity for this decade is recorded in eight volumes, while from 1931 to 1960 there were only two volumes. Groups such as the Westfield Planning Association and the Sand Hill Tyron Street Property owners Associations testified on proposals impacting their neighborhoods. It was a decade of housing development, and the Planning and Zoning Commission considered 131 subdivision applications. Middletown's first high rise apartment buildings were constructed. Planned Residential Development regulations were adopted and the Wesleyan Hills PRD was approved in 1968. This surge in residential development meant that the City had to provide basic services to residents. The Sixties saw extensive construction of schools, roads, and utilities.

The 1965 Plan of Development was prepared by a private consultant; Planning Commission input was limited to progress reports and a public hearing. The Plan's objectives were a strong central business district, residential areas of various types, industry, commerce, and sufficient open space. It recommended a ring road in the downtown. A possible airport and motel continued to be key planning issues. Shopping centers were proposed and approved on roads leading to the newly built Middletown suburbs. Public hearings on these developments often lasted past midnight. The Planning commission made deliberate decisions limiting the mix of shopping center businesses and their locations so that they would complement the stores in Middletown's CBD rather than compete with them.

The Planning Commission and staff made important contributions in devising plans for Middletown, such as downtown redevelopment. There continued to be significant turnover in planning staff and the confusion between planning and redevelopment persisted. The early planners left Middletown, so plans were implemented by others. This indicates the significance of a written plan: it assures continuity in planning.

Some Commission members during this decade were: George G. Achenbach, Edward F. Button, Robert Chamberlain, Paul Hoover, Carmelo J. Mazzotta, Joseph Oftifinosk, James T. Rolle, I Robert Traverse, Seb Passanesi, Nathan Shapiro, William Spear, and Joeseeph Masselli.

The Seventies

The seventies was characterized by the environmental movement and the emphasis was on the visible environment and preserving the city's natural resources. Flood plain, Inland Wetland and Streambelt regulations were enacted, as well as a drainage policy. The Commission adopted historic preservation regulations which encouraged adaptive reuse of Middletown's notable historic buildings. Several controversial projects were discussed but never materialized. There were proposals for an airport, a downtown motel, a marina, a heliport, a racetrack and the relocation of Route 66. Housing in PRDs and in apartments, in both private and public ownership, provided citizens with a variety of residential choices. There was a growing input by the Federal government, into special interest housing programs.

A Charter change included Common Council members on the Commission and a stronger relationship between the Commission and administration began. The Planning Commission staff of the seventies was a stable professional staff academically trained in the contemporary practice of city and regional planning. It provided the Commission and the community with fundamental information as guidelines for the aggressive pursuit of a high quality of life for Middletown residents. The Plan of Development, adopted in 1976, was prepared by the professional staff. It was intended to link the programs of the many city departments so that Middletown government will operate as a coordinated organizational unit.

Some Commission members during this decade were: Cos Giuffrida, Ed Kalita, Dr. Eric Lowry, Betty Matteo, Dr. Christie McLeod, David Mylchreest, Paul Parisi, Seb Passanesi, Ralph Shaw, Vincent Loffredo, and Seb Garafalo.

The Eighties

All in all the eighties were a time of economic prosperity for the City of Middletown. Unfortunately true long range planning became virtually non existent in the eighties due to the combined effect of many different phenomena.

The eighties began slowly and then accelerated into a period of unprecedented growth. There were 289 residential subdivisions approved with several in excess of 50 lots. The Westlake Planned Residential Development, which, for the most part, sat approved but dormant in the seventies, was completed in the eighties. The 3581 units at Westlake contributed greatly to an anti-condominium sentiment in the latter part of the decade. This widespread sentiment lead to the elimination of the PRD regulation. Aetna Life Casualty and Middlesex Mutual Insurance companies choose Middletown for their world headquarters. A large office, hotel and conference center complex was approved and proceeded slowly and a large surgical center and elderly housing project was approved on Saybrook Road.

These and other large developments were the impetus for the formation of several neighborhood groups. These groups, while often helping to insure quality development, in most cases exemplified a Not in My Back Yard (NIMBY) syndrome which proliferated in the eighties.

Unlike those in surrounding cities, the Central Business District remained strong and viable throughout the eighties, despite intensifying social problems. This was due to careful planning and regulation in prior decades. The city welcomed the Middlesex Mutual Assurance Tower and a twelve story condominium project to the CBD. A Super Stop and Shop was approved in close proximity to the Central Business District.

The eighties was the first decade since the fifties where a Comprehensive Plan of Development was not adopted. There was an update in 1984 and then a Comprehensive rewrite in 1989 but neither were adopted in the eighties. Nevertheless in 1989, as recommended in the 1989 rewrite, the city's residents approved a five million dollar open space bond for the purchase of valuable and threatened private land. There was a major rezoning of the city which established a hierarchy of zones to promote more uniform development and Designer Environmental Subdivision regulations which allow for cluster development were approved.

Some Commission members during this decade were: Stephen Gionfriddo, John Robinson, Steve Leinwand, Steve Gadomski, Vincent Loffredo, Seb Passanesi, Ann Loffredo, Steve Shapiro, Cos Giuffrida, Rose Sbalcio and Louis Carta. Steve Gionfriddo was the Chairman for the majority of the decade and Seb Passanesi begins his sixth decade on the Planning and Zoning Commission in the nineties.

The Nineties and Beyond

The nineties have begun slowly. Housing starts and development applications are down significantly. While this resembles the beginning of the last decade, it is doubtful that the nineties will resemble the eighties. Most predict a significant and sustained slow down in the nineties.

The rapid development in the eighties caused a re-awaking of the need for long range planning in Middletown. This planning must balance economic development with environmental concerns, protect the unique resources here in the city, strive to provide housing for all income groups, tackle regional problems by working with surrounding communities and attempt to maximize the quality of life for all city residents.

In order to accomplish these objectives the first step is for the Commission to adopt a Comprehensive Plan of Development for the year 2000. Using this plan as a guide the Commission can then revise the antiquated Subdivision and Zoning Codes which regulate future development in the city. After these tasks are completed the Planning and Zoning Commission can begin the implementation of the legally adopted Plan of Development for the year 2000.

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(Chairwoman Loffredo is the first woman to
chair the Commission in its history.)