

Middletown's Community Considered

Soc311-Section 2
Professor Gary Comstock
11/16/00
Lauren Abrahams
Josh Buswell-Charkow
Mallika Nair
Rebecca Rasch
Rebecca Weisgrau



Executive Summary

I. Introduction

The triage topic of our group is the environment. The quality of life depends on the standards of the environment in which we live. A poor environment can lead to problems of health, unhappiness, and discontent. It is therefore very important to do all that is possible to facilitate a positive living environment and to implement change when needed to solve the problems that inevitably arise. For the purposes of this proposal, the environment can be defined as the residential areas of Middletown. We worked closely with Munro Johnson, a coordinator at the department of Planning, Conservation and Development and together decided to concentrate our attentions on the low- to moderate-income tracts in Middletown. Through careful observation of these neighborhoods, research and constant conversation with Mr. Johnson, we were able to identify problems in the city as well as possible solutions.

II. Main Findings

- The conditions of the housing in the low to moderate-income tracts of Middletown vary greatly from street to street and neighborhood to neighborhood. Some houses were in desperate need of repair with paint peeling of the doors and windowpanes for example. Other houses were very well maintained with gardens and beautiful lawn.
- Some streets appeared to have a strong sense of community, observed through children playing together and neighbors conversing on their porches. Other areas appeared to lack community entirely.

- The City of Middletown would like to improve the quality of life for its residents and has been allocated ample funding for this purpose by the federal government. The department of Planning, Conservation and Development currently has three programs to improve neighborhood conditions. These programs are:
 - *Down Payment/Closing Cost Assistance Program*-provides financial assistance to resident home owners for closing costs and for down payments on new homes
 - *Neighborhood Rebuilder's Fund*- designed to improve neighborhood value by providing funding to organizations for the removal of blighted structures.
 - *Residential Rehabilitation Loan Program*-provides funding for individual home rehabilitation such as paint jobs
- There is a serious lack of communication between the local government and the residents of Middletown, which has led to a severe under-utilization of these programs. The lack of community we observed between residents of Middletown has also manifested itself in the flawed relationship between the government and the residents of Middletown.

III. Recommendations and Conclusions

- In order to improve government/resident communication, we propose a flyer mailing which details the specifics of the three main programs the department of Planning, Conservation and Development has to offer the resident of Middletown
- A dialogue between the government and the residents should be established so that they can work together to improve the community. Suggestions and concerns of the government and the residents should be discussed. Town meetings are a great forum for this type of discourse and can be easily arranged.

- Representatives of the neighborhoods in Middletown should meet with government officials on a monthly basis to keep the conversation between government and community flowing on a constant basis.
- These town meetings, in addition to allowing for the exchange of information between government and residents, will also increase the community spirit in the city. Residents working together to improve their neighborhoods help to create a greater sense of community in the area. By working together to improve the quality of life in Middletown, residents will bond with each other and government officials, creating a more positive relationship with all parties involved.

Through our reading and research, we conclude that in order to improve the quality of life in Middletown, a greater sense of community must be established. Using flyers, town meetings, and neighborhood representatives as the catalysts, a stronger community in Middletown will blossom and flourish. The Middletown environment has the potential to be a city with a healthy community where powerful bonds exist between residents, government and the city as a whole. With the establishment of a strong community, the quality of life in Middletown will reach new heights of greatness and excellence.

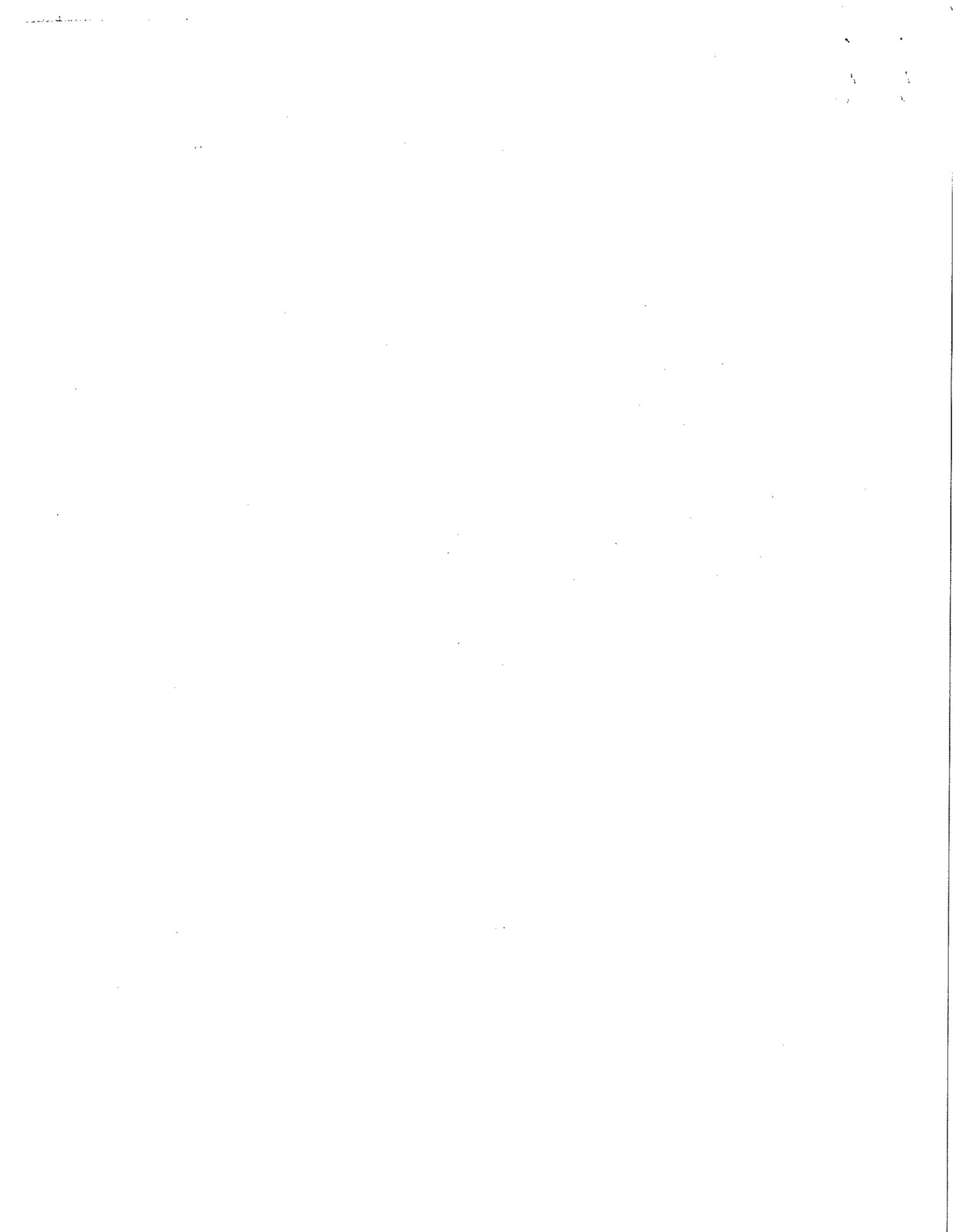
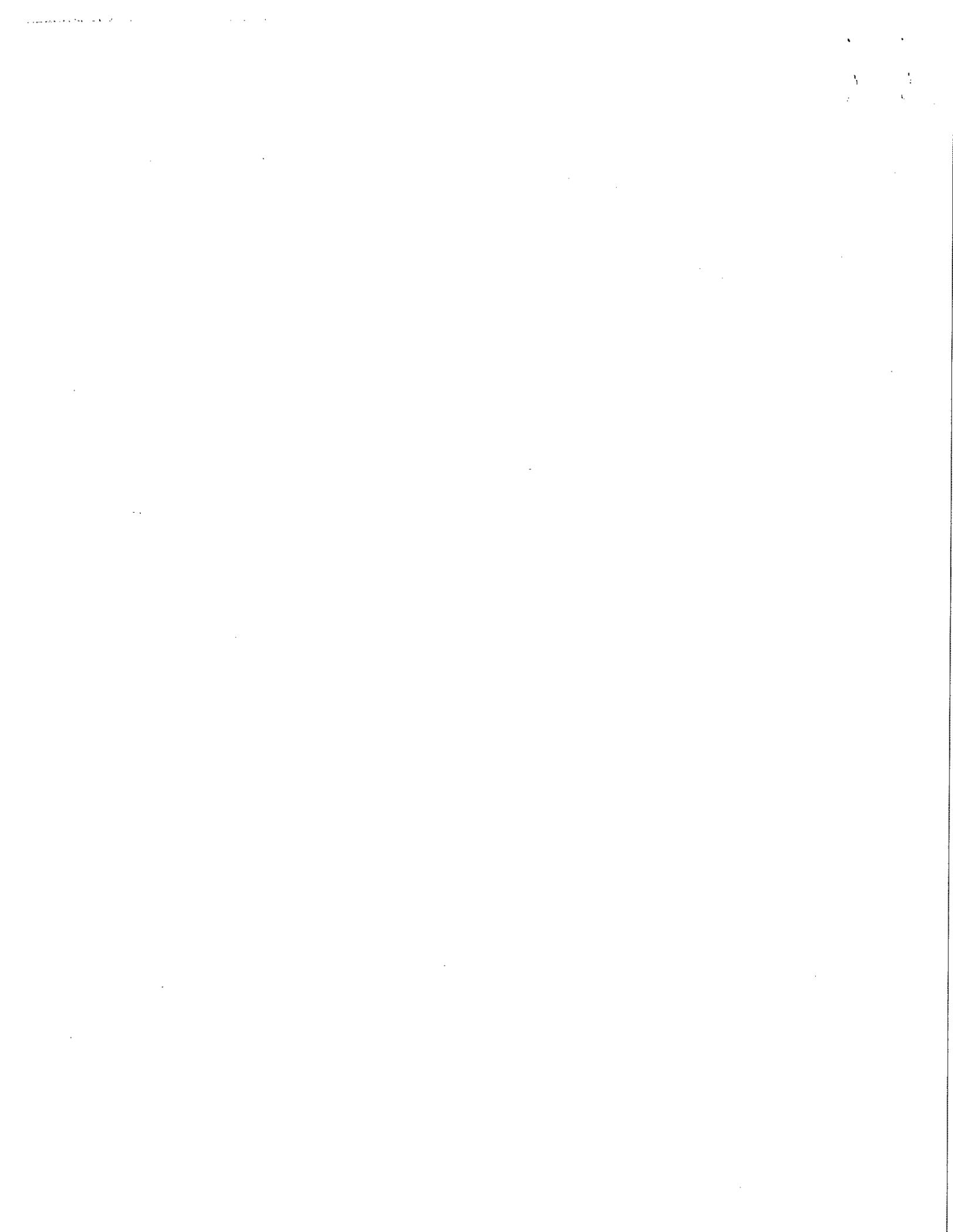


Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	3
II.	What Is.....	7
III.	What Ought To Be.....	18
IV.	What Is To Be Done.....	27
V.	Appendix	
	A. Income Tract data.....	35
	B. <u>Middletown Press</u> article.....	36



Introduction

We first learned of this group project from handouts we collected from the Sociology Office before the first meeting of class. Our professors, Gary Comstock and Charles Lemert, wanted us to have some idea of what we should expect of Sociology 311: Ethics, Policy and the Triage Society. The project involved our class splitting up into groups, where each group would do community service with a specific agency. While performing our service, we were to examine the agency and then suggest how to solve any problems we found, in an attempt to make the agency more efficient and effective. While doing this project we were supposed to keep in mind the main idea of this class: triage. Triage was defined for us as a situation where the demand for services and materials exceeds the supply of the resources available. It is a problem where one has "to find acceptable ways of weighing opposing goods (under a variety of circumstances and with due regard for the interests of our posterity) so that we—and our descendants—can lead healthy and balanced lives."¹

Throughout the course we examined different situations in society where a triage problem existed, such as AIDS, children, housing, and environmental issues. Each of these issues has a clearly defined situation of triage, where the resources for solving or alleviating each problem has to be sorted out and distributed to those suffering. These four problems that we studied, which have the dilemma of triage, became the areas of study for the various group projects. We, Josh Buswell-Charkow, Lauren Abrahams, Mallika Nair, Rebecca Rasch, and Rebecca Weisgrau, were one of the environmental groups of Sociology 311. At the first class meeting we introduced ourselves and chatted

for a few minutes, speculating on what our project might be. Our group had vague expectations of what concern or problem we might be asked to focus on. We assumed that we would explore a problem in the natural environment, but after meeting with our agency, we learned that would not be the case.

Soon after our first class we organized a meeting with Munro Johnson, the coordinator for our agency. Mr. Johnson works for the Planning, Conservation and Development division of the City of Middletown. This agency deals with a wide range of issues concerning the neighborhoods of Middletown. Anything and everything from building new playgrounds, to home improvement loans, to environmental clean up fall under their jurisdiction.

Our initial meeting Mr. Johnson provided us with an overall understanding of the workings of the agency. He was open to hearing our ideas and opinions of how we could help the agency and what kind of project we wanted to work on. Mr. Johnson is a relatively new employee of the City of Middletown. He does not have extensive knowledge of the department so he consulted with his supervisor to formulate a project idea for our group. Mr. Johnson and his supervisor proposed that we research low- to moderate- income neighborhoods of Middletown and consider how to improve the quality of its community. They presented this idea as an option, and not as a compulsory project, which showed us that they valued our opinions. We accepted this proposal, and began to adapt our initial expectations of working with what we first considered to be "environment" to this new project concerned with housing and community.

With this main objective now in mind, dozens of questions quickly popped up in our minds. What exactly constitutes a low- to moderate- income tract? What does a low-

¹ Hardin, Garrett. "Triage", p. 24.

to moderate- income tract neighborhood look like? Are the houses all dilapidated? Are the doors falling off their hinges? Would the paint be peeling off the siding and window shutters of the houses? Our careful observations of each neighborhood helped us find answers. We found that our stereotypes of low- to moderate- income tracts were similar to the portrayals of poverty in readings such as There Are No Children Here and "Saving Sheba." We expected to encounter neighborhoods resembling a description such as:

The neighborhood had become a black hole. [One] could more easily recite what wasn't there than what was... there were no public libraries, movie theaters, skating rinks, or bowling alleys to entertain the neighborhood's children. For the infirm there were two-neighborhood clinic... Yet the death rate of newborn babies exceeded the infant mortality rates in a number of Third World countries.²

Preconceived notions that followed a description like the one just mentioned did not apply to Middletown, and we soon realized that poverty did not always take the forms of what we have come to normally associate with disadvantaged neighborhoods.

After beginning our research we realized that in order to improve a neighborhood, we must begin to understand the residents' relationship to the local government officials. Is there a strong, direct line of communication? Or does the government do what it thinks is best without getting opinions and feedback from the residents of the neighborhoods?

Once we had a good idea of the neighborhoods, we needed to know how to implement change. What types of programs could help improve a neighborhood? Mr. Johnson provided us with guidance on how to identify problems and solutions and informed us of the programs that were already available to aid these types of situations. These included painting houses, helping people with home improvement loans, and renovating blighted structures.

A whole new set of questions arose from Mr. Johnson's suggestions. Were the residents being heard? How could we facilitate listening to the people's voice about their community? We did not want the government imposing its own values on the community. We wanted the residents of the city to be empowered and choose how to improve their neighborhoods themselves. Professor Comstock once said, "Choice is at the heart of social ethics." We did not want to force any programs on an area that its residents did not want and strongly felt that the community should have a choice in how to improve itself.

The abundance of questions swarming around in our minds compelled us to delve quickly into our research. Exploring neighborhoods, checking census data, and interviews with Munro Johnson were our jumping blocks. As our research continued we were able to focus in and prioritize certain issues. We narrowed down our concerns based on the information available, and the usefulness and relevance of each question in actually improving a neighborhood.

We decided to focus on defining the general characteristics of low- to moderate-income areas and to examine the main programs in the City of Middletown. We also took serious interest in how to spread awareness of these programs to the neighborhoods that we felt could benefit from them.

² Kotlowitz, Alex. There Are No Children Here. New York: Anchor Books, 1991. p12.

What Is

*"It works against good family life when you live in poor, dilapidated quarters. If you don't have good housing, you're not going to have good health."*³

Our project with the municipal office of Planning, Conservation, and Development (PCD) of Middletown, involved research of and outreach to the low- to moderate-income households in the city. According to the 1990 census (the most recent data collected), Middletown's population is 42,762, and the city contains 16,832 households.⁴ In 1990, 45.3% of these households were considered low- to moderate-income.⁵ A low to moderate yearly income, as defined by our agency, "for a household of one is \$31,700; of two, \$36,250; of three, \$40,750; of four, \$45,300; of five, \$48,900; and of six, \$52,550."⁶

The City of Middletown's PCD provides assistance to both first time homebuyers and homeowners living in blighted houses. PCD has no precise criteria for classifying a "blighted" structure, although the term is frequently used in the department. Based on Mr. Johnson's explanation and our initial observations, we considered blighted houses to have one or more of the following characteristics: paint/roofing/siding falling off, windows broken, junk (various trash articles, glass, etc.) on property, or homes in a state of disrepair. A neighborhood's value is affected by the presence of blight. Well-maintained houses can be devalued if there are blighted structures in its immediate vicinity. Therefore, an entire neighborhood will benefit from the renovation of a single blighted house.

³ Bishop Fiorenza in Religion Leaders Call Housing a Sacred Right. New York Times: 10 September 1999, p. A1.

⁴ 1990 Census of Population and Housing, Middletown CT PMSA issued 4/93 by the Department of Commerce.

The federal Community Development Block Grant Program (herein referred to as CDBG), provides money for neighborhood revitalization efforts, and helps low- to moderate-income individuals afford and maintain housing. Middletown is provided with \$500,000 yearly in federal funds for the CDBG program.⁷ The Federal Agency of Housing and Urban Development (herein referred to as HUD), according to Munro Johnson, distributes CDBG funding. The funds are available to all cities, some as "entitlement areas" (the city gets the money directly), and some as "non-entitlement areas" (the city gets the money via the state).⁸ HUD classifies an entitlement area as a city having a population over 50,000 or a county with a population of at least 200,000. They receive HUD funding directly from the Federal Government. Non-entitlement areas are cities with fewer than 50,000 people and counties with fewer than 200,000 people, and they receive their money via state-administered grants from the federal government.⁹ Although Middletown technically classifies as a non-entitlement area, the presence of the Connecticut Valley Hospital (CVH) and other special need situations give it entitlement status.

Specifically, in Middletown, CDBG money is allocated through three different programs. The *Down Payment/Closing Cost Assistance Program* provides eligible applicants with aid to buy a home as well as money for closing costs (money for legal work). The *Down Payment Loan* provides up to \$10,000, while the *Closing Cost Program* provides \$3000. The *Down Payment Loan* is in addition to an acquired bank

⁵ <http://www.hud.gov/cpes/ct/middlect/htm>

⁶ <http://www.munic.state.ct.us/MIDDLETOWN/middletown~comm.dev.div.htm>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Munro Johnson, City of Middletown Planning, Conservation and Development 10/27/00

⁹ wysiwyg://48/http://www.hud.gov/progdesc/cdbgent.html

loan, which “does not usually lend 100% of the purchase price; they demand that the borrower put substantial money ‘down’ on the purchase.”¹⁰

The *CDBG Neighborhood Rebuilders Fund* increases a neighborhood’s value by providing money to non-profit or public organizations to demolish severely blighted structures. When a new home is erected on the space, at least 50% of the residents must be classified in the low- to moderate-income bracket. This ensures that affordable housing is maintained while the neighborhood is rehabilitated.¹¹

The *CDBG Residential Rehabilitation Program* helps cure blight by providing low-interest loans to rehabilitate individual houses and thus improves community value. This program puts up a dollar for every dollar spent by the individual during the renovation process. An application for this program qualifies only if 50% or more of the individuals in a particular home are in the low- to moderate-income bracket.¹²

Our Research Methods

Our task was essentially twofold: first to report to Mr. Johnson the condition of Middletown’s low- to moderate- income tracts, and secondly to develop awareness in the community about the existence of these programs. The first step was to assign each group member a specific low- to moderate-income area. Josh, Lauren and Mallika’s respective areas were low- to moderate-income tracts. Rebecca R. and Rebecca W. looked at isolated low-income areas within higher income level tracts. Identifying these areas is called spotting.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

We identified these areas through census data. A census tract is defined over a geographical area in a county. Thus, people (usually 2500-8000 residents) of similar economic backgrounds living in the same areas are grouped together in order to compare quality of neighborhood based upon primarily income levels. Each of us spent many hours walking along every street in our areas. We paid attention to signs of blight, neighborhood appearance, and sense of community.

In judging the overall quality of a neighborhood, we considered the amount and degree of blight and the signs of structural instability. We not only concerned ourselves with individual homes, but also the quality of sidewalks, landscaping, and streets; in other words, communal areas. Gordon Geballe, of the Yale school of Forestry, emphasized how these factors contribute to the essence of community.¹³ However, these factors were not our only basis for judging community. Other indicators included seeing people talking on the streets, assembling on front porches, and kids playing together.

Before conducting our fieldwork, many of us believed the presence of severely blighted structures would dominate throughout the low- to moderate-income areas. We found that this was not the case. While Mallika did witness some homes in need of remodeling, there were for the most part no homes she considered "blighted." Rebecca R. and Rebecca W. had similar findings. Lauren noticed that there was a higher concentration of blight in neighborhoods close to the Connecticut River, but the majority of houses in her tract were in good repair. Josh noticed homes with severe blight; however it was not spread throughout the tract. Any blighted homes were concentrated

¹³ Gordon Geballe, lecture September 26, 2000: "The Natural Environment and Ethical Practice." Sociology 311.

in only a few areas. Overall, we generally found that there were blighted houses, but few neighborhoods characterized as such.

Our research also showed large income disparities throughout our areas. For example, in Mallika's tract, 5416, of which Wesleyan University is a part, there was a huge level of inequality. In spite of the fact that Wesleyan generates such a large amount of money, 5416, still qualifies as a low-income tract. This was readily apparent in Mallika's findings. She saw a wide spectrum of quality in the houses of her area, and as she moved North, the houses seemed to get worse. In Josh's tract, 5411, he observed streets where most of the houses were almost touching and without front or back yards, while other streets were well landscaped and had huge lawns, driveways, and very large homes.

While looking at the overall appearance of our areas, one interesting finding was the presence of a striking number of gardens. We found this particularly interesting, as one does not generally associate gardens with low- to moderate-income residential areas. On one hand, we found these gardens comforting and thought they enhanced the overall character of the neighborhoods. However, Rebecca W. noticed that some homes had gardens, but the actual structures were in need of repair. It is questionable why a damaged home would have such a thriving garden. We believe however, that due to the high cost of home repair, many of these homeowners simply do not have adequate funding. Maintaining a garden is a more or less inexpensive pursuit, whereas the upkeep is dependent mainly upon one's time commitment. However, home repair requires time and financial backing. Were these homeowners to know about the assistance PCD could

offer, we are confident the homes would be better maintained as there is already an interest on the resident's part in their property.

In Alex Kotlowitz's There Are No Children Here, he describes the lack of community at the Henry Horner Housing Project when he says "Residents... felt disconnected from one another; there was little sense of community at Horner, and there was even less trust [...] . . . Some neighbors wouldn't allow their children to go outside to play. One mother moved aside her living room furniture to make an open and safe place where her children could frolic."¹⁴ Thus, we believe that the presence of children is a good indicator for overall sense of community. We discovered that the presence of children outside varied from area to area. Mallika did not notice any children in her tract, which was particularly unusual as most of her observations occurred during the afternoon. However, Josh and Rebecca R. saw children on several occasions in their areas. It is possible that Mallika's tract did not have many children.¹⁵ We realize that we cannot make definitive conclusions from this evidence, as we were not able to monitor our tracts all the time. While interacting children in a neighborhood suggests the existence of a community, a lack of children does not necessarily mean that community does not exist.

When we started our research, Mr. Johnson stated that the gathering of people on their porches was a good sign for a healthy community. They provide the eyes and ears for the neighborhood, creating a degree of safety. Once again, we found that such a presence varied from area to area. Mallika saw very little open interactions on porches or

¹⁴ Kotlowitz, p. 13.

¹⁵ The only data that discusses this is from 1990, where the child population in tract 5416 (Mallika's) mirrors that of tract 5411 (Josh's), where there were many. As this data is so old, we are not going to make any firm conclusions from this discrepancy.

Having
porches
have 4
decs?

what
about
elderly?

on the streets. Lauren saw people standing together in driveways and outside of homes. Josh occasionally saw people gathering on their porches, but it was by no means a common occurrence. While these findings could be attributed to weather and the time of our data collecting, most of our work was done on relatively nice days and on the weekends.

We feel that one can judge the overarching sense of community by looking at the quality of the communal spaces. Homes may appear to be in pristine condition, but if the streets are covered with trash and the lawns are overgrown, it is likely that there is a lack of concern for the common good. Rebecca W. noticed for example that in one cul de sac, the houses were very well maintained. However, the communal space for the mailboxes was in need of work, with some barely still standing.

Walking through each of our neighborhoods, we all felt a sense of discomfort analyzing and judging these communities. Likewise, many of the residents looked at us with suspicion as we walked through their streets with notebooks and appeared to analyze their homes. We relate this to Rob Rosenthal, when he describes in the appendix of Homeless in Paradise that he wants to “minimize the presence of a narrator (himself) who assumes a higher objectivity than the characters in the story.”¹⁶ There is a difference between our roles and that of Rosenthal in that he was casting himself as an interactive narrator, while we were simply doing observational work. Yet we seem to agree upon a level of uncomfortably and concern about exuding an attitude of condescension towards the people we were interested in. While walking through her track, Mallika was asked on several occasions whether she was lost. Also, Rebecca R. and Rebecca W. were approached by residents and asked if they were looking for something. Even though

technically residents of Middletown, we could not help but feel as if we were outsiders in our areas.

Even though census tracts are “. . . designed to be homogenous with respect to population characteristics, economic status and living conditions”¹⁷, we observed, in contrast, inequalities in individual tracts from street to street. Therefore, it seems that the definition of tract is misleading, and one cannot make sweeping conclusions of all tract residents based upon tract-wide data. Because of the disparities between streets, we believed a sense of community did not necessarily extend through all of Middletown.

The second part of our task was to see how the aforementioned programs could improve the quality of homes and community in low- to moderate-income tracts. As previously stated, Middletown receives approximately \$500,000 yearly from HUD to fund CDBG programs. The name CDBG “*Community Development* Block Grant Program” emphasizes that community is valued by the government. However, during Mr. Johnson’s tenure, no application had yet been filed for any of these programs. Thus, we inferred that there existed a communication problem between the Department of Planning, Conservation & Development with homeowners in Middletown. The only information that Middletown offers the public is available on the Internet (a source of information that low- to moderate-income individuals are unlikely to have easy access to). Until we became involved with the Department, no outreach to inform eligible applicants existed.

One example of an ideal relationship between city government and its community is in Curitiba, Brazil. “We [the government] have to have communication with the

¹⁶ Rosenthal, Rob. Homeless in Paradise. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994, p. 174.

people... If we give them attention they don't feel abandoned. They feel like citizens," says Mayor Jaime Lerner of Curitiba. He proves that this is a value that actually promotes action when the city hires impoverished women to clean up slums within Curitiba. In addition to monetary compensation, the city provides them with social workers for counseling services.¹⁸ The government also has a program for orphans where they are provided with accommodations at "support houses" and with jobs. Mr. Lerner explains how he is on a first name basis with many of the children who are supported by the government.¹⁹ Where there is clearly a sense of community and government interest in Curitiba, PCD and residents of Middletown lack this kind of relationship.

An often-overlooked point is that Wesleyan University students are residents of Middletown as well. Therefore, there is also a need to improve relations between the two. Wesleyan University does play somewhat of an active role in the city, but we cannot help but feel that there is something lacking in the relationship. Wesleyan students do not always consider Middletown as "their town." All five of us have been active doing community service in Middletown, but we could not help but feel a sense of being "outsiders" while collecting our data. Further, we have heard from some Middletown residents that they do not truly consider Wesleyan University part of their community, but rather as a somewhat removed entity.

Due to the rare nature of our situation--a surplus of money available to the people we are targeting in this project--we had to create our own vocabulary to describe our problem: "reverse triage". Whereas triage is defined as low supply in a high demand

¹⁷ 1990 Census of Population and Housing, Middletown CT PMSA issued 4/93 by the Department of Commerce, p. A5.

¹⁸ McKibben, p. 85.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 86.

situation, this circumstance is characterized by no demand for a great supply of beneficial resources. Because of the large amount of low- to moderate- income households in Middletown, we can safely assume that if these people knew that such a large amount of funding could benefit them, that there would exist sizable demand, even to the extent that a classic triage dilemma would exist.

A few weeks after our initial meeting with Mr. Johnson, the PCD office issued a Press Release in the Middletown Press describing our project, including information about the CDBG programs. The Middletown Press wrote an article describing our project and these programs on October 18.²⁰ Since this time, Mr. Johnson has received at least twenty inquiries from community members about these programs.

To get our statistical data about our respective tracts and Middletown's federal funding, we referred to several sources. For finding information regarding the different programs available to Middletown residents, we referred to the city's web site, <http://www.munic.state.ct.us/MIDDLETOWN/middletown.htm>. We researched the web site of the Federal Housing and Urban Development Agency, <http://www.HUD.gov>, for information about federal funding allocation. To obtain our statistical data, we looked at the "1990 Census of Population and Housing Characteristics for Census Tracts and Block Number Areas of Hartford, New Britain and Middletown" issued by the U.S. Department of Commerce (the newest information available).

Many of the other students in our class voiced discontent about the willingness of the agencies to guide them with their projects and provide information. However, our situation proved a stark contrast to this norm. Mr. Johnson was extremely enthusiastic about our involvement with his agency and provided us with extensive invaluable

information. He was always willing to meet with us and responded to all our inquiries with remarkable speed and thoroughness. Furthermore, he presented us with a great idea for our project, which would benefit both the agency and the community as a whole. We honestly felt as if our research was a valued asset to him and his department. Whereas other groups were engaged in projects for no other reason than to write a paper, Mr. Johnson genuinely cared about our data and will use it to further improve relations between the city and its citizens.

²⁰ Refer to Appendix to view article.

What Ought To Be

Picture a world where children play outside, neighbors gather on a spring evening and enjoy each other's company. A place where people work together to protect each other and to improve the lives of the individuals and the group. And to better the group, everyone maintains the quality of his or her own property. Seems like an idyllic neighborhood, doesn't it? But it is a reachable goal for all communities.

"I'm a firm believer that we need community for survival,"²¹ McKibben writes. Like McKibben, we believe that the existence of community is important to foster a sense of growth and well being within a neighborhood or city. In communities, people are more motivated to aim for improvement. More can be accomplished than in a disjointed neighborhood because people work together. After observing parts of Middletown, we realized that improving the community is essential to improving the city. There definitely are neighborhoods within the city that contain some aspects of community. However, community in its entirety, as we define it, is for the most part lacking. As we described previously, we observed neighborhoods that seemed to us to have a sense of belonging. This tends to manifest itself in a suspiciousness of outsiders. We, admittedly, are outsiders to the neighborhoods we visited; therefore, we do not know everything about them. But we did not perceive any more than this vague sense of fellowship, and this is not enough to form a feeling of community.

Ideally, Middletown should contain many different levels of community. We will focus on three: the community within a neighborhood (a small section of a city, which may or may not be a census tract), the community within Middletown as a whole (or

community between neighborhoods), and the community that includes Middletown and the city government.

The word community is thrown around a lot without a specific definition, and its definition can differ depending on the context within which it is used. We therefore will define our idea of the type of community that we feel is needed in Middletown. A community is a group of people that is interactive, cohesive, and safe. Its members are concerned not only with their own well-being, but with the well-being the whole group. Each of the three adjectives that we use to describe communities seem to be relatively simple ideas; however, each embodies a specific value that makes achieving them slightly more complicated than it may appear.

Interaction within a community is more than just people talking to each other; it also involves listening, learning, and growing. It consists of many levels of communication, including communication within families, between different members of a neighborhood, between the different neighborhoods of the city, and between the city and the government agencies that are there to help them. Each of these levels represents a community in itself; each is desirable for the purpose of bettering the lives of its members. Improving communication within neighborhoods would cause people to be more aware of and care more about what happens to their neighborhood. Likewise, communication within Middletown as a whole would cause people to be more concerned about what happens to the city. And communication between residents and the government would lead the people to be more aware of the government programs that are available to them and the agencies that are there to help them. With heightened

²¹ Ibid, p. 206.

communication, Middletown residents would expect more from their city and demand what they deserve, thereby making the government and its agencies more aware of their problems and situations.

A cohesive group is one that has a sense of togetherness, and whose members work with one another to achieve common goals. For Middletown, ideally, cohesiveness should exist both within neighborhoods as well as within the city as a whole, with the idea of improvement and maintenance of the city as their common purpose. People should be concerned not only with their individual interests, but also with the interests of the entire city, because they apply to everyone. Therefore, problems or benefits would not face single families or small groups, but would pertain to all the residents of the city. If a problem exists, such as a sidewalk in need of repair, it is in the interest of the entire city to have it repaired. Sometimes we forget that and see it as someone else's problem. By overcoming this individualism, the community could work together to get the sidewalk fixed. "Thomas Jefferson always insisted that only face-to-face participation in Municipal government enables citizens to subordinate their immediate personal interests to the public good."²² A group effort is more powerful than if the individuals tried to fix the problem on their own. Alternatively, if one neighborhood benefits from having a playground built, the members of other neighborhoods within Middletown could see it not just as an improvement to someone else's neighborhood, but as an improvement to their city, helping their children.

Safety is an important component in community. The idea that everyone is looking out not only for themselves but for one another as well forges a feeling of safety.

Communities often develop organized neighborhood watch programs. This incorporates feelings of safety into a constructed group, which further emphasizes the idea of togetherness. People within the neighborhood are not the only people who can sense a feeling of safety and interdependence; it can also be felt when an outsider comes into the neighborhood. With this sense of safety and reliance on one's neighbors, a feeling of trust and faith in the neighborhood can be formed. It is possible that this idea could create a division between those on the inside (neighborhood members) and those on the outside. Therefore, the neighborhood must make sure that it is not harboring an overly suspicious nature of outsiders; otherwise the larger community of Middletown will break down. Maintaining this larger community would cause city residents to be aware of the movements within its smaller neighborhoods, encouraging neighborhoods to be welcoming of visitors from other parts of the city.

The benefits of living in a community are endless. If neighbors have intertwined lives, they can tell when a situation that may require action arises. If they communicate, they can alert others of the situation, protecting everyone from potential problems. Thich Nhat Hanh writes of this benefit of a Sangha or community. "With a good Sangha, you are better protected... Without a good Sangha, you are vulnerable. Please do your best to set up a Sangha. A Sangha is a raft that can help you survive in turbulent moments."²³

In addition to working together to solve group problems, the presence of a community also affects how residents deal with individual problems. If one family paints its house, the rest of the community will likely place a heightened value on beauty of

²² Goldsmith, Edward. "The Last Word: Family Community, Democracy." The Case Against The Global Economy-And For A Turn Toward The Local. Eds. Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996, p. 507.

²³ Hanh, Thich Nhat. Cultivating the Mind of Love. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996, p. 76.

property. Others will then take care of problems facing their homes, not just because of how these problems affect them, but also because of how they affect the neighborhood. If the residents have close contact with the city government, they will be aware of what resources are available to help them fix problems, so action will seem feasible. Improved physical conditions lead people to be happier about their neighborhood, and therefore more likely to help solve future problems. Improvements also raise property values and discourage crime. They give children a sense of hope about their future, and lead them to take an active role in their lives.

A community is also able to share any benefits it receives. If a neighborhood works together and convinces the city to build a playground, the neighborhood will consider the playground a gain made by the whole group, not just its individual members. All members of the neighborhood could use this new resource, which would help bring the community members together even more.

In Middletown, where Wesleyan University exists in the middle of the city, and is not sectioned off, it is necessary that interaction take place between the university and the other residents of the city. This is essential in creating a sense of community within Middletown, but it is also beneficial to both the university and the city because each can act as a positive resource for the other. Middletown is rich in history and architecture, about which Wesleyan students should take the opportunity to learn. On the flip side, Wesleyan is a stable source of income and culture for the city of Middletown. Its students bring business to the local stores, restaurants, and hotels, which strengthen Middletown's economy. Middletown residents and Wesleyan students should be able to live together and learn from each other. If Wesleyan students felt like they were a part of

Middletown, they would consider the problems of the city to be problems that affect them. If Middletown residents perceived Wesleyan as part of the city, they would not feel like they were constantly working against Wesleyan. There would be more understanding on both parts, and they would work together to find solutions that would be beneficial to all.

This need for a community exists to form communication not only between the members of this city, but with the town officials and government agencies as well. Because there is a lack of interaction between these two groups, many of the programs and aid available to the residents of Middletown are relatively unknown to them.

Goldsmith writes in his essay:

If government is going to be by the people, then we must ourselves participate in the daily business of government, and it is clearly not at the national level, let alone the global level, that we can possibly do so. Our participation can only occur at the local level, among those of us who know each other, see each other regularly, and share the same interests and worldview.²⁴

*What's
develop
here*

Neighborhood communities should develop a system of forums within the small neighborhoods where people can speak about their concerns. Representatives from these meetings should then relay messages about the needs of the neighborhood to the city government through regular meetings. This improved communication among the citizens of this city would allow all concerns to reach officials, who have the knowledge and power to help the people out. The necessity for regular rather than occasional meetings is vital, so that there is constant communication about the situation, progress and problems in the city. This interaction should take place not only when problems arise, but continuously; this allows intervention for potential problems to occur while they are still

²⁴ Goldsmith, p. 507.

manageable. This kind of networking would allow the city government to be aware of concerns, whether they are big or small, of all people. It would create an environment where the government can get feedback of the progress that has been made and how programs are working.

Rather than being a separate entity, the government and its agencies should be part of the community of Middletown. The government needs to inform city residents of what programs are available to them in order to help improve their neighborhoods. At the same time, the government should be willing to learn from the people, and change these programs according to the needs of the residents. The key to this kind of relationship is the willingness and ability to listen. Understanding in this situation can only occur if both sides of this equation are willing to hear what the other says, are open to suggestions and are able to let go of their mistrust and counter arguments. If the government and the people were able to follow the advice of Thich Nhat Hanh, healthy interactions and learning could take place. Hanh prescribes that when listening, "don't think too much; don't argue or compare. Playing with words and ideas is like trying to catch rain in a bucket. Just allow your consciousness to receive rain, and the seeds buried deep within will have a chance to be watered."²⁵ This type of interaction should lead to a healthy relationship between the city's residents and the agencies that are there to help them, where both will recognize that they are working together and not against each other to improve Middletown.

The understanding that the people and the government are working together will allow each to understand the need for the individual roles of each in the movement to better the city and its people. The residents will see themselves as having power over

their situations and their lives. The government should likewise see its duty not as to place limitations on the residents of the city, but as to be an available resource present to help fill their needs, and to guide them. If the government works with the people to help fulfill their goals, its need to limit and control them will decrease. Bill McKibben describes how in Curitiba, the government creates a new public bus system in response to the needs of the people. The design of the system is centered within the government's trust of the residents. "It would be a simple matter to walk in and out without paying...having lived in Manhattan, I of course asked about fare beaters. 'When you respect the people, they respect you,' said Oswaldo Alves, the planner. 'The people saw that the municipality was doing a lot for them, and began to take some responsibility.'"²⁶

If the government and its agencies worked with the town as we have described, the people would know about the programs available to help them. The *Down Payment/Closing Cost Assistance Program* would allow people to buy rather than rent their homes, which would cause them to feel more a part of the neighborhood in which they lived and take a greater interest in its well-being. "A house is an urgent need. Not just shelter—a house they own, on a lot they own... When they have the land, it begins to give them... validity."²⁷

15-16-00
demand
- few more
could do it.

The *Neighborhood Rebuilder's Fund* would help eliminate structures that were unsafe or create a sense of discomfort. The *Residential Rehabilitation Program* would assist people in improving the conditions of their houses. These two programs would cause people to take more pride in their streets and neighborhoods, and therefore in the city.

²⁵ Hanh, p. 3.

²⁶ McKibben, p. 111.

If both the residents of Middletown and the government were to follow the guidelines we have described to improve the Middletown community, there would be many benefits. The government will have more success in doing its job and the standard of living in the city will rise dramatically. The city of Middletown will be a nicer place for all involved.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 90.

What Is To Be Done?

We started out our project looking at low- to moderate-income neighborhoods in Middletown and considering how our agency could help them. We found disordered houses, but also houses that were well kept. One house had an abandoned car in their front yard and trash littered on the ground, while next door was a beautifully maintained house. In other words, there were vast variations in the upkeep and maintenance of homes within the same small neighborhoods. We do not necessarily know the reasons behind these inconsistencies, but we can be sure that this situation can be changed.

PCD has shown a strong desire to improve the living conditions of Middletown residents.²⁸ Likewise, there is an interest in the Middletown community to gain a better understanding of the opportunities available to them.²⁹ Both sides want to improve the current situation within the city. This can be done through increased communication among residents and the municipal government. In order to accomplish this in the most effective yet timely manner, we believe that both a short-term and long-term plan are in order.

The short-term plan must be initiated by the government, for the government has the power to do so. Jaime Lerner, the mayor of Curitiba, says about the role of the government, "It's a job of balancing needs and potentials. If you only work on the big issues, you're far from the people. If you only work on the daily needs, you don't do anything fundamental. *You have to understand you are responsible for the hope of people, their hope for change.* If your city isn't changing, you're frustrating their

²⁸ We know this from their encouragement of our work with low- to moderate-income houses.

²⁹ Evidenced by the numerous calls to PDC following Middletown Press article on October 18.

hope.³⁰ To effectively remedy the situation, the government's solution must be pragmatic and reasonable. Thus, in the short term, we propose two practical solutions: the distribution of flyers, and an organized meeting between PCD and Middletown residents.

We believe a mail out flyer is perhaps the best and most efficient first step in addressing a lack of communication. This flyer will explain the three programs available to Middletown residents (the *Down Payment/Closing Cost Assistance Program*, the *Neighborhood Rebuilders Fund*, and the *Residential Rehabilitation Loan Program*), who is eligible, how to apply, the web site address and who to contact. The flyers will be mailed to all residents in the low- to moderate-income tracts as well as the neighborhoods pinpointed as needing improvement (i.e. Rebecca W. and Rebecca R.'s spotting).

A list of the addresses can be easily obtained through the government services of Middletown. Money for these mailings can be derived from the funding allocated for administrative expenses for PCD, which is sufficient to cover these costs. There are approximately 3600 homes in these low- to moderate-income areas.³¹ A flyer sent to each one would be a minor expense for PCD and could easily be accomplished through minimal efforts in the department.

Currently, the only access that Middletown residents have to the information about these programs is through the State of Connecticut web site. Every member of our group has a background in using the Internet, yet we each found accessing this information to be slightly difficult. Further, the likelihood that a resident in a low- to moderate-income area has a computer, let alone access to the Internet, is low. To expect

³⁰ McKibben, p. 84.

low- to moderate- income families to know of these programs through this often-inaccessible medium is impractical. Not only does it expect understanding of computers and how to use the Internet, but also an already present knowledge of the existence of these programs. Our research and communication with Mr. Johnson have shown that this is not the case. This knowledge is in the hands of very few people, most of who work for PCD and are not the ones in need of the programs. A flyer is the most direct way of informing the public.

Recently, our project was discussed in The Middletown Press. It is questionable how many Middletown residents even read this article, yet there was still a positive response. We feel confident that the flyer, which will be in the mailbox of every resident in need, will attract even greater attention.

Another option for a method of spreading information, perhaps an even more effective one, is to go door to door. Obviously, this would be much more time-consuming. However, it would be a compelling way to prove to Middletown that PCD does care about the state of its neighborhoods. This personal touch on the side of PCD would be noticeable; especially since this agency and its programs are currently relatively unknown to Middletown residents. While at first this might seem to be a daunting task, it would not require an enormous amount of effort. It would take less than a day for three or four people to reach every household. This would not only save on the cost of postage, but it would also begin to forge a relationship between PCD and the city's residents. These benefits would outweigh the costs.

Knack on
to
leave
flyer?

³¹ "1990 Census of Population of Housing Characteristics for Census Tracts and Block Numbering Areas Hartford-New Britain-Middletown, CT," page 17.

END

The next stage in improving relations between the government and the community will be to organize a town meeting. Although the flyer will provide all the information necessary to apply for these specific programs, it is likely that the residents will have questions and concerns. We also believe that this would be the best forum for government officials to open a line of communication with the members of the city.

Residents will be made aware of the meeting through mailings and advertisements in the local newspaper. These methods of publicizing are cost-efficient and effective. Advertising through local churches and other neighborhood locations would also be a helpful way of notifying as many residents as possible. Munro Johnson, our program coordinator, has assured us that a town meeting is a realistic and feasible option.

Administrative officials in the Department of Planning, Conservation and Development would lead the meeting. They could reiterate the specifics of the programs and even have assistants available to help residents complete applications for these programs. The meeting could be located in one of a number of public areas, including the Middletown Police Station community room or a local church.

The meeting will also provide a forum for residents to voice their suggestions, concerns and complaints. In Bill McKibben's Hope, Human and Wild, he describes a situation where a landfill was proposed near his quaint community in the Adirondacks. There was deep resentment amongst the people, and they scheduled a meeting where both sides could discuss the proposal. In the end, the proposal was quashed through the voiced discontent of the community. McKibben says, "The victory made me realize anew the power of aroused people working together [.]"³² By having a dialogue between residents and government officials, more effective change is inevitable. With the

government playing a more active role in the lives of residents, feelings of a unified community will begin to develop between government and residents.

As these feelings of alliance grow, it will become easier to try and institute a more permanent line of communication between these two bodies. Therefore while this initial phase of interaction is an end in itself, providing countless benefits, it is also a stepping-stone in setting up the groundwork for a more integrated governing body that we envision for Middletown.

In the long term, we believe that for PCD to effectively communicate with the Middletown communities and receive updates from them, the neighborhoods need representation by the people. To accomplish this, we believe that representatives from each tract or area need to meet with PCD and voice the feelings of the residents. Tracts are large, and there are without a doubt many views and interests represented within each tract. For this reason, and also to decrease the scope of the job, there should be two or three representatives for each tract. This would ensure that all residents would have someone in their local area who is in direct contact with PCD, and that everyone's voice can be heard.

We understand that it is not realistic to expect this type of organization to develop right away. We are not suggesting that its formation be demanded by PCD. Rather, we feel that after an initial meeting and distribution of flyers, it would be a natural second step, especially if PCD offered some guidance. PCD could use the initial meeting to determine who are the active members from the various areas and to explain the vision of this structured network of communication with the residents.

³² McKibben, p. 177.

We are confident that each tract will have several eager volunteers for the position of representative. During our first meeting with Mr. Johnson, he described how virtually every neighborhood has someone who is the eyes and ears of the community. These are the people who would not only be willing to listen, but would most effectively voice the sentiments and concerns of their neighborhood.

The structure of such an organization would be shaped like a pyramid. The base of the pyramid would be the various residents of the low- to middle-income tracts. Correspondence would occur with their local representatives, who would be in charge of setting up meetings within their areas and be responsible for spreading the relevant information to the community. In turn, the representatives from the various tracts would have monthly meetings with PCD, where individual and city concerns could be voiced. Thus, the information would reach not only PCD, but also the various tracts via their representatives. This would create a greater awareness within the Middletown community.

It is very difficult for us, as outsiders, to gauge the sense of community residents feel toward each other. However, while observing the neighborhoods, we felt that in certain areas a strong community atmosphere was not apparent. In addition to the benefits listed above, the meeting would also cause a change in overall community atmosphere. Coming together in an effort to improve their immediate surroundings and working together towards a common vision will help harbor a sense of togetherness.

This increased sense of community will lead people to have more interest in improving their neighborhoods. Community members would feel that problems with their homes would affect not only them, but the entire community as well. Since they

will also be aware of the government programs, residents will be more likely to improve their houses. As Mr. Johnson told us, when one house gets painted, it causes other homeowners to fix up their homes as well. The residents are also likely to try to improve common spaces, which will be achievable due to the new communication with the government.

The relationship between Middletown and Wesleyan is an important area in which improvements must be made in order to create an overall sense of community within the city. The three levels of community that we have discussed are community within a neighborhood, between neighborhoods, and between residents and the government. Improving Middletown-Wesleyan relations falls under the second level. Middletown cannot be a complete community without including Wesleyan. We realize that this problem has many angles, and is too broad for us to solve here. However, as we feel it is an important concern, we will include in our plan a major step to improving Middletown-Wesleyan relations.

Just as other neighborhoods are to have representatives who will meet with PCD, Wesleyan should have one as well. This representative will bring to the government some concerns of Wesleyan students, and discuss issues in Middletown that relate to the university. This will accomplish many of the same things for Wesleyan that it does for the rest of the city; in addition, other benefits will result. Meetings with PCD would facilitate discussion between these three entities, especially between Wesleyan and Middletown residents. Each would have a chance to voice frustrations and problems concerning their relationship, with the possibility that these problems may be overcome. Awareness about each other's situations would be raised, which would lead to more

understanding on both parts. While this does not solve the entire problem involving Middletown and Wesleyan's relationship, it is an initial step that must be taken in order to ease the tensions that exist now. As Gary Snyder said, "A consequence of our human interdependence should be a social ethic of mutual respect and a commitment to solving conflict as peacefully as possible."³³ This is what has to be realized in order for Middletown-Wesleyan relations to improve.

The importance of a strong community exists for all parts of the globe. A successful community can affect a wide range of places. For example, while Curitiba is at the most basic level just another city in Brazil, its reputation is widespread. Ticket books used in one of Curitiba's hunger programs reads, "You are an example to Brazil and even to the rest of the world."³⁴ While it would certainly take time and effort for Middletown to reach this level of recognition, the possibility nonetheless exists and should be recognized. By demonstrating community mobilization from the ground up, Middletown can prove that even small efforts have a large impact. The activity of giving out flyers is specific to this particular program, but the idea of bridging the communication gap between government and community residents can be universally applied.

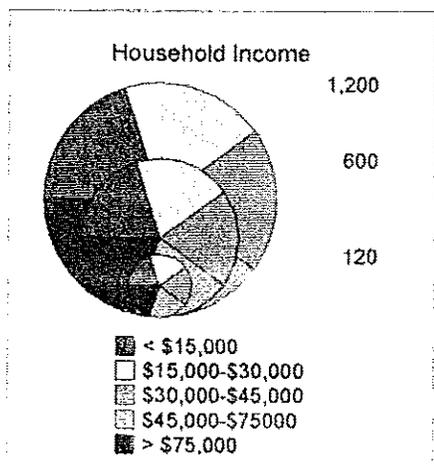
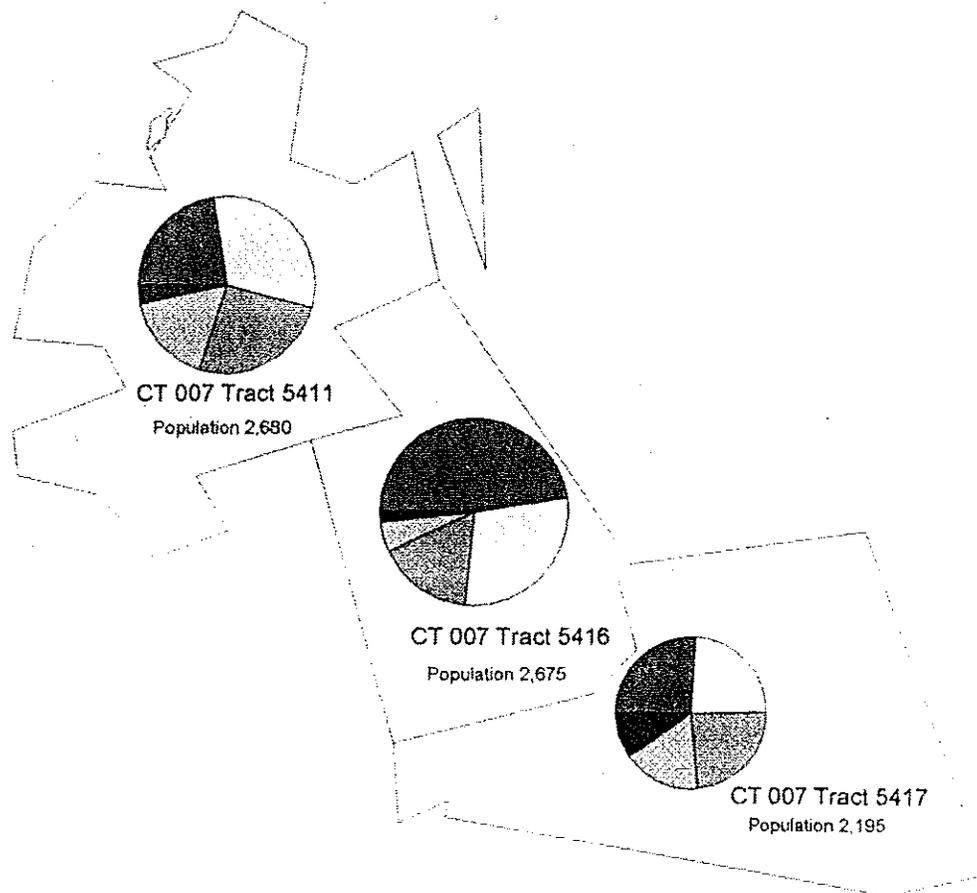
On a local level, our proposal will have tremendous importance and benefits for Middletown. Flyers and town meetings will greatly improve the physical conditions of the houses of Middletown. Property values in Middletown will rise, benefiting all residents in the city. But the ultimate end result of these measures will be the newfound sense of community across Middletown.

³³ Snyder, Gary. A Place in Space. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995. p. 77.

³⁴ McKibben, p. 90.

Appendix

Household Income 1990 Census Middletown, CT



10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100

Middletown Press Article

City offering loans for redevelopment

By JOHN CHRISTIE, Middletown Press Staff

October 18, 2000

MIDDLETOWN -- The city announced a new \$250,000 initiative aimed at helping homeowners within Middletown's suburban neighborhoods fix up their houses.

Mayor Dominique S. Thornton said the new project will extend recent efforts to improve the appearance of downtown to the surrounding neighborhoods.

"The administration has worked diligently to eliminate blighted buildings and now we must turn our attention to also keeping our neighborhoods vital and attractive," Thornton said.

"The city is committed to ensuring viable neighborhoods. This program allows us to give general assistance to individuals who want to increase the values of the property and neighborhood."

The city's Planning, Conservation and Development Department -- aided by five Wesleyan sociology students fulfilling their community service requirements -- will conduct an inventory of homes in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods. Once completed, the city will offer rehabilitation grants and loans to homeowners.

The city will use funding from its relatively unknown Residential Rehabilitation Loan Program to offer low-interest loans and use existing federal Community Block Grant funding to award rehabilitation grants. The loans and grants will cover 50 percent of a rehabilitation project's cost.

A committee comprised of members from the city's Community Action Committee, which handles doling out Block Grant funding, will review any applications received.

The committee will be able to offer flexible grants or loans based upon income levels and owner-occupied status.

Planning, Conservation and Development Director William Warner noted the work done on the homes not only improves the house, but also the neighborhood as a whole.

"A few coats of paint, new roofs and new gutters can go a long way towards reversing the blighted influences that reduce property values and discourage others from maintaining their property, and still others from investing in the neighborhood," Warner said.

Residents and property owners interested in obtaining more information on the program can contact city Community Development Specialist Munro Johnson at (860) 344-3425.

©The Middletown Press 2000