

Date: December 22, 2016
To: Mayor Ronald DiMura
From: Economic Development Committee
Subject: A Report on Promoting Economic Development in Middlesex Borough

Attached is a report prepared by the Economic Development Committee (EDC) containing a review of some of the issues in town affecting economic development and offering some recommendations that we think will make Middlesex more attractive for future development. We hope that you will share this information with the Council members and carefully consider the information offered in the report. If you or the Council members have any questions or wish to discuss the report in more detail, we are available to discuss the report further.

Thank you for your consideration and we look forward to continue to work towards the betterment of our community.

Economic Development Committee Report on Promoting Economic Development in Middlesex Borough

The Economic Development Committee (EDC) has been meeting regularly for the last several months discussing our role and responsibility in helping to plan and guide the future economic development of our community. During these meetings we have received valuable input from all committee members, representing the opinions and the experiences of both the residents and business owners who serve on the committee. In addition we have received and considered many comments, questions, concerns and complaints from other residents and business owners in Middlesex, as well as some constructive and interesting information from business owners outside of our community.

As our initial project the committee felt it appropriate to submit a report outlining some of the information we have acquired during this process and to also make some recommendations for the Mayor and Council to consider.

A common thought expressed throughout our process was the feeling that Middlesex is at a crossroads as to where our community is headed in the future. Like many towns across the country, Middlesex felt the impact of the Great Recession. This slowdown impacted residents and businesses alike. Job losses, mortgage defaults, business closings and other financial losses have impacted economic development substantially and perhaps worse, have resulted in a loss of optimism. Young people, single and married, are hesitant to get involved in home ownership and are opting to rent until they are confident that they have achieved both job and financial security. Business owners are reluctant to increase or expand their businesses and others are reluctant to take the chance to start a new business. This has resulted in an increased demand for residential rental properties as well as an increase in vacant houses and vacant business properties. Many feel that if Middlesex is to move forward and thrive, it must take a proactive approach to attract new residents and new businesses and to work to improve the existing conditions for current residents and businesses. The choices that are made today will affect the future development of Middlesex and the economic progress and viability of our community for many, many years to come.

The overall findings and recommendations by our committee can be summarized into three areas:

1. Identify and promote the positive aspects of Middlesex
2. Identify and implement change in those areas where improvement is needed
3. Identify ways and means to further our economic development for the benefit of our community members. [Note: The term “community members” is used to represent both residents and businesses alike since both are critical to our community development and prosperity.]

Identify and Promote the Positive Aspects of Middlesex

This is without question the easiest area to make an immediate impact. Middlesex is a great community with many fine attributes. Middlesex has long enjoyed a reputation as a family oriented community. Life-long residents are common as are many families who have lived here for generations raising children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Most people who live and work in town are aware of the many positive attributes of our community, but even many of them are not aware of all that Middlesex has to offer. In the past, communicating with the public has been problematic and expensive. It is always a challenge trying to reach as many people as possible, recognizing that it is impossible to reach everyone. Fortunately, today we have the internet and a variety of social media platforms at our disposal and the ability to reach a great number of people is far easier and much more economical.

The following are just some of the positives that we should be vigorously promoting to existing community members and potential community members.

1. Public Safety. In almost every survey or report on “Best Places to Live” public safety ranks as the respondent’s most important consideration. People do not want to buy a house or start a business in a town, or area of town, where they do not feel safe. Middlesex is very fortunate to have a very well-trained and equipped police department, fire department, Office of Emergency Management and 24/7 emergency medical services. Middlesex has an extremely low crime rate and this has often been cited by others as their reason for moving to our town.
2. Education. Equal or almost equal to public safety is the public’s desire for quality education as a reason for choosing a community. Middlesex has excellent schools and this should be highlighted. Equally important, are the tremendous opportunities in our area for education beyond K-12. We should promote our school system as

well as our proximity to Rutgers, Princeton, Seton Hall and many other colleges and universities as well as the many highly rated junior colleges nearby.

3. Recreation. In almost any survey of the qualities that residents look for in a place to live the recreational opportunities offered rank extremely high. We are fortunate in Middlesex in that we have an excellent borough recreation program, great parks with great facilities, a community swimming pool, and easy access to many professional sports, including baseball, football, basketball, hockey and soccer. Middlesex has a lot to offer, but we need to do a much better job of promoting this.
4. Location. Everyone is familiar with the real estate saying “location, location, location”. Middlesex is fortunate to have an excellent location, close to major highways, airports, rail lines and bus lines. We are close to two major cities, New York City and Philadelphia. World class cultural events, sporting events, dining and other activities are only 60-90 minutes away. Even closer are cities like Newark, New Brunswick, Morristown and Princeton where concerts, plays, art shows and other cultural events are held regularly. Well-known national and international corporations are just as close providing unlimited opportunities for a variety of careers. Again, we need to promote this area to show that our community is a desirable place to live or start a business.
5. Health. Healthcare and emergency medical services are a concern to people of all ages. Middlesex is conveniently located just minutes away from several major hospitals and urgent care centers. Some of the best hospitals in the world are located in nearby New York City and Philadelphia. In addition, there are a large number and variety of nursing homes and assisted living facilities nearby.
6. Borough Programs. Middlesex offers a wide variety of borough programs (too numerous to mention) that are available at no cost, or low cost, to all community members. Unfortunately, many are not aware of these programs. Again, communication is important, not only to let current community members know what is available, but just as importantly to show potential community members what Middlesex has to offer.
7. Business. Middlesex has a variety of excellent businesses (restaurants, retail, light manufacturing, service industry), offering a wide choice to consumers.
8. Shopping. Middlesex offers shopping opportunities both in town and at nearby malls where there are a large variety of name-brand stores and well-known department stores.

Identify and Implement Change Where Needed

Just as it was easy to identify and list all the positive attributes of Middlesex, it can be sometimes difficult to identify the negatives. Negatives are often viewed as a failure by someone or some group and therefore there must be “blame” assigned. In addition, there is an assumption that once something is identified as a problem then it is expected that the problem will be fixed. Fixing a problem is not nearly as easy as identifying one. Factors such as cost, personnel issues, practicality, existing laws, ordinances and contracts, and differing opinions on how to fix the problem all come in to play. For these reasons and others it is often easier to ignore a problem than to attempt to fix it.

During our meetings we discussed both what we as committee members thought were problems and what members of the public thought were problems. During these discussions one word that kept coming up was “perception”. The saying “perception is reality” is true and it seems that here, like in many communities, the perception does not match the reality. People feel the town could be doing more, when in reality they just don’t know how much the town is doing or trying to do. Once again, it comes down to communication.

1. Communication. As has been mentioned several times already in this report, there is a general consensus in the community that the town does not do an adequate job of communicating with the public. This applies to community programs, community events, activities such as road repairs/closings and emergencies. The borough has Nixle for messaging and it is available to everyone at no charge, yet many people we spoke to did not know anything about it. All forms of electronic communication should be considered so that the information that goes out to the public is factual, thus reducing the misinformation that is spread by others. The new Borough website that is being developed can play an important role in making information available.
2. Appearance. This is an area of major complaint by the public. Many feel that the town’s appearance is getting worse and worse and that the town is not doing anything about it (perception). As mentioned previously, the economic downturn of 2008-2010 led to some businesses closing and some homes being abandoned. As a result, many of these properties have not been maintained and have fallen into disrepair. This, combined with the aging of many of our buildings and homes along our main thoroughfares, all contributes to the gradual decline in appearance. A poor appearance contributes to a negative image of a community and often results in a reduced effort by both residents and businesses to keep their properties nice. A concerted effort needs to be made to improve the appearance along Route 28 and

along Lincoln Blvd. Most people who drive through town, both residents and non-residents, will use either of these and what they see along these roads will considerably impact their impression of our town.

3. Borough services. Although it seems that most people are satisfied with the services offered by the borough, there are many who are not satisfied with the manner in which some of these services are handled. We have heard many complaints about rude, insensitive or just plain unfriendly attitude by some borough employees and some boards. In general, people rarely compliment or commend good service they receive. More often they complain about the poor service or treatment they receive. Now, more than ever, they complain using social media and their complaint not only spreads quickly, but it is often reinforced right away by someone else who also received poor service. It doesn't take long before what might have been an isolated event or two is seen by the public as "the norm". This is why it is more important than ever that employees and board members realize that every contact with the public is much more than a single contact – it is a community contact.
4. Anti-business Bias. There is a strong feeling both within and outside our community that Middlesex is anti-business. The committee members have heard numerous stories about difficulties and obstacles that have been thrown in the path of existing businesses that are trying to make improvements and new businesses trying to move into town. This reputation for being anti-business exists beyond our borders and we have been told that many realtors tell clients looking to open a business to avoid Middlesex. Obviously, there are two sides to every story and as is often the case, the truth may lie somewhere in between. What is important is the perception that Middlesex is anti-business. This feeling has an effect on our existing businesses and is extremely harmful to future business development in our community.

Means To Further Our Economic Development

The committee has carefully considered the information and feedback that we have received from a variety of sources and we offer the following suggestions, some general and some specific, as a means to help make Middlesex more attractive to current and future residents and businesses.

Business Development.

A vibrant business community is essential to the economic development of any community. Businesses provide important services to the residents and through their taxes contribute to the revenue that is needed to provide and maintain borough services.

- Promote Middlesex as a great place for businesses to locate.
 - Take proactive steps to change the perception that Middlesex is anti-business. This will require outreach by the borough to the business community to identify and address their concerns.
 - Identify particular types of businesses that are lacking that would provide some new and different services to our town and work to attract these businesses.
 - Create a more “business friendly” atmosphere by streamlining the process for new businesses seeking to move into Middlesex and reducing steps that are costly to a prospective business owner.
 - Highlight new businesses opening in town through both print and electronic media (this is done now on a limited basis).
 - Review the Redevelopment Plan and other zoning ordinances. Consider changes, especially along Lincoln Blvd., that more accurately reflect the need for more residential and small business properties and move away from industrial development.
 - Consider hiring a professional research/consulting firm that specializes in assisting with the economic development of communities.

- Promote and assist existing businesses.
 - Streamline the process for existing businesses to make improvements to their properties; for example, having some type of board a business could meet with to discuss the feasibility of his/her plan and get a better idea of what the costs and requirements might be.
 - Encourage businesses through voluntary compliance to reinvest and upgrade their business. Consider some type of rewards program or work with local banks to offer low-cost loans.
 - Identify vacant business properties that are currently empty. Look for ways to improve occupancy. Establish a working list of vacant commercial properties and post the information on the borough website for realtors and prospective new businesses.
 - Explore programs (such as the Property Tax Rewards Program) that would encourage residents to shop in town or highlight a “Business of the Month” as a means of informing residents about some of the businesses in town.

Residential Development

Middlesex has much to offer to both existing residents and to those looking for a community to settle in and raise a family. We need to continually promote Middlesex as a great place to live.

- Make greater use of electronic communication as a means of reaching the public. Use the borough website, the electronic message board and social media such as Facebook, Twitter and others; consider an electronic newsletter or an electronic newspaper; consider a Community Calendar that would be open to

other than just borough sponsored events; consider allowing business advertising to supplement the cost of some of these ideas. (More specific ideas for the website will be offered in future reports)

- Use all means available to communicate the positive attributes of Middlesex such as: a low crime rate; great schools; excellent services; access to major highways, trains, buses and airports; proximity to hospitals, major colleges and universities, and easy access to major cities, cultural events and professional sports. (Many of these are useful in attracting new businesses)
- Promote borough events and activities for residents of all ages and backgrounds to encourage community participation and explore other programs/events that will appeal to an increasing younger and diverse population.
- Continue the residential development by considering actively encouraging mixed use construction which has proved very successful in surrounding communities.
- Consider limiting, to the extent possible, the continued construction of duplex type dwellings in areas where there are primarily single family homes. This is extremely unpopular with current residents and a source of many complaints.
- Encourage the enforcement of “quality of life issues” by both the police department and code enforcement.
- Promote good customer services practices by all employees, especially those who have regular one-to-one contact with the public.
- Continue the current efforts being made to improve the appearance of the borough.
 - The borough should continue to clean up and improve borough owned buildings, parks and monuments; continue its road maintenance/repaving program; replace worn signs, maintain crosswalks, etc.
 - Encourage businesses and residents to clean up their property to project a positive image throughout the borough. Encourage voluntary compliance and use code enforcement when voluntary compliance fails. (Programs like our existing Home/Business Beautification Awards are popular and work well)
 - Identify vacant businesses and homes and use all legal means to make the property owners maintain their properties.

This concludes the report by the Economic Development Committee. The ideas, opinions and recommendations expressed in the report are the result of input received from many individuals representing various segment of our community. They are offered to the governing body as guidelines to encourage further economic development so we will be able to keep Middlesex “a great place to live”.