

# Middletown needs a better eye to its future

By CHESTER SMOLSKI

In the last 25 years this town in the middle of Aquidneck Island has undergone the most dramatic swings of population of any community in the state. Subject to decisions made in Washington, D.C., as to the concentration of Navy personnel, Middletown has had more than its share of ups and downs. Having its own Navy facilities and housing as well as housing personnel based in Newport, Middletown has seen its 1960 population of 12,675 explode to 29,900 in 1970 and then experience the greatest population loss in the 1970s of any of the nine Rhode Island communities that lost population, to 17,216, a loss of 41.2 percent as a result of the Navy pullout from Newport.

In the five-year period from 1980 to 1985 the town's population grew at a 2.8 percent rate, faster than the state average of 2.2 percent. According to Rhode Island Statewide Planning, Middletown's population in 1985 stood at 17,700.

If one were to add the 322 building permits issued in 1985 and 1986 and multiply that number by the average of 2.84, the average household size recorded in 1980, then

another more than 900 persons could be added to get an estimated 18,600 for a current figure of the town's population.

But it looks like the town is about to undergo another burst of population growth. "With more than 1400 dwelling units under construction or in the planning stages," according to recent news accounts, this could mean another more than 4000 added to the town's population.

Why the sudden interest in Middletown? Certainly the spillover from Newport is a major factor with more Navy personnel returning to the town with increased Navy activity, retired Navy personnel finding this a nice place in which to live and, finally, others also finding Aquidneck a lovely spot in which to have a home.

With all of these gyrations of population growth and decline, and now a burgeoning growth, one would imagine that the community would want to have some idea of what options might be available in terms of this future growth and where this development should take place within the town. And who better to provide this type of information than a full-time person whose training and expertise is geared to looking to the future—a town planner.

This is exactly what the town administrator had in mind when he requested \$33,000 for a planner this past spring, only to be turned down by the Town Council. Even now a request for a part-time planner at \$10,000 appears to be going nowhere. And the \$60/hour being paid to a planning consultant brings complaints that the service cannot be used too much.

In this day and age it seems incomprehensible that a community undergoing an explosive growth that promises to bring a more than 25 percent increase over the next few years to the 6483 housing units recorded in 1980 does not have full-time planner on board.

Is the town too poor to hire such a professional? It hardly seems so, when one considers the fact that Middletown, prior to this growth that started in 1985, was ranked 34th of 39 cities and towns in the state in effective tax rate. But even without raising taxes, the added revenue from all of the new construction will be more than adequate to bring in professionals on a full-time basis to provide some sense of direction for the future, and to help an overloaded and overworked planning board.

This penny-wise and dollar-foolish

policy presently being followed will only lead to greater problems in the future. One need only look at Bristol County to the north to see that such an approach will give Barrington, Warren and Bristol the dubious distinction of having the most expensive water in New England in the next few years. And the reason for this was to save a few dollars back over a decade ago when they did not hook up to the Providence reservoir system as East Providence did at the time. So this summer East Providence made money by selling its water to a dry Bristol.

The children of Bristol County residents will be paying for the penny-pinching of their parents for a long time, and it would be most unfortunate if the leaders of Middletown followed the same path by not providing the funds for someone who can provide direction and order to the forthcoming growth in the town. A full-time planner is a step in the right direction, but constant vigilance over the next few years is also necessary so that this lovely town on our biggest island can continue to be just that—a lovely town that has a sense of direction regarding its future.

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