



Economic and Industrial
Development Commission

2017 Business Survey Report

October 16, 2017

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PROCEDURE

In late April 2017, the Town of Middlebury Economic and Industrial Development Commission (EIDC) conducted a survey to gather attitudes and opinions from businesses throughout the town. The survey was a mailing to 300 businesses out of a list of 635 businesses provided by Town Assessor Chris Kelsey. A self-addressed return envelope was included in the mailing. The survey was not sent to out of town leasing companies, “bedroom LLC’s”, and other businesses not directly serving local customers.

The three-page survey was promoted in mid-April with notices in all three local papers. Business owners who didn’t receive a survey were told they could get one from the town web site or by calling the Selectmen’s office. A reminder was published in mid-May. All restaurants who didn’t respond were personally visited in mid-June, along with a dozen Middlebury Road businesses who did not initially respond.

Business owners were asked on the first page to rate the importance of two dozen factors in doing business in Middlebury, ranging from the rural nature and appearance of the town to tax rates, safety, utilities and services, and the school system. The second and third pages were open ended questions, asking owners to tell the commission what should be done to promote a better business climate, and about difficulties in starting the business and keeping it profitable. A cover letter promised that responses would be read in full by members of the commission and names would be kept confidential.

The survey drew 54 responses from a cross section of businesses, for an overall response yield of about 18%.

RESPONDENTS BY INDUSTRY

Attorney	8
Bed and Breakfast	1
Contractors and Builders	5
Counseling	2
Education Service	3
Financial Service	3
Insurance Agency	1
Liquor Store	3
Shipping	1
Manufacturer	0
Medical	5
Personal Care and Fitness	4
Professional Services	3
Real Estate Brokers	4
Restaurant	6
Retail Store	5

KEY FINDINGS

STRENGTHS

Safety was the top factor for choosing Middlebury as a place to do business when rated against all other reasons, and it was mentioned frequently in written comments as a plus, either directly or by implication. The town was said to have a “safe feel” for women-oriented businesses.

Location was cited most often in the written comments as the biggest plus of doing business in Middlebury. Located just off I-84, it was said to be easy to get to for traveling customers and those from surrounding communities. Many business owners have their home in Middlebury and enjoyed working where they live.

Demographics of the town were a top factor for choosing Middlebury as a place to do business. Written comments called Middlebury a small, well run, beautiful town, with friendly people, good values, and character. Owners cited the ability to get to know people and develop loyal customers. Town employees were said to be friendly and helpful.

WEAKNESSES

Middlebury is not a destination for shopping, even for residents who love living here, according to many comments. The town must get more small businesses (such as a pharmacy, hardware, or card store) that residents need and want. Middlebury Center does not look inviting. There is no town center for people to shop, walk, and congregate.

Many complained about restrictive zoning and restrictive signage regulations, especially for stores set back from the road. During verbal interviews, some raised concerns about treatment when seeking approvals and enforcement of regulations, particularly sign regulations. This seems to rise from locations that are clustered in single locations with limited signage.

The business community needs a focal point to focus efforts together with the town in promoting business in Middlebury.

Some critical utilities are missing, such as cellular service and natural gas along Route 64.

Traffic congestion on Route 64 and Route 63, and frequent I-84 incidents jam up local traffic.

Restaurant grease trap regulations were said to be much more difficult than other towns suggesting a comparison of recognized nearby utilized methods.

Commercial sewer fees were said to be much too high, when factored for the amount of water consumed.

State taxes, fees, and the general costs of doing business were frequently mentioned.

THREATS

Many worried about losing the small town character and attractiveness of Middlebury:

- Middlebury Center makes a bad first impression. It looks rundown and is not inviting. There are too many vacant lots in commercial areas.
- Middlebury needs no more gas stations, pizza shops, fast food stores or convenience stores.
- Middlebury must keep out chain stores, franchises, and strip shopping areas.

Neighboring towns, particularly Southbury and Oxford, have attractive shopping areas and reasons for customers to shop there. Southbury will soon have a movie complex.

Middlebury doesn't have a broad tax base of larger commercial and industrial businesses, and hasn't increased that base to offset residential taxes. Consequently, Middlebury doesn't have many corporate employees to shop here and live here.

OPPORTUNITIES

Most of the recommendations were common sense:

- Improve sign regulations to more effectively provide for line of sight advertising consistent with the small town feel to promote traffic and value to restaurants and retailers.
- Use media of all types to promote local businesses and encourage the formation of a business chamber so businesses can help each other and focus business needs with the town.
- Market commercial and office real estate more aggressively. Reexamine for improvements and promote the tax incentive programs.

A few business owners had a broader view:

- Middlebury must "think outside the box" to make the town a desirable destination worth the travel time to get here. When people currently think of Middlebury they think of:
 - Middlebury Consignment
 - Quassy Amusement Park
 - The greenway

We need to give them more reasons to think about Middlebury.

- Promote an upscale "vibe" that leverages the local businesses and the safe small town feel Middlebury is known for.
- Examine regulations and efforts with zoning and business in order to create a positive atmosphere for those seeking to do or grow business in Middlebury.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

As unanimously approved at the October 16, 2017 EIDC Special Meeting, the following actions are recommended for answering the concerns of our existing businesses.

REGULATIONS

Signage

Develop signage rules that will help businesses attract customers while preserving the town's character. Take into account Middlebury's seven distinct commercial areas so the signage rules can vary, depending on the area.

Develop a document that makes those requirements understandable for proactive communication to new and existing businesses.

Land Use Facilitation

Determine a way to help new or expanding businesses get through the land use process so problems are avoided.

- Promote the existing Commercial Development Guide and revise it as needed to help business newcomers.
- Follow the advice of the Connecticut Economic Resource Center and streamline land use processes. Review the practices of "best of breed" towns.
- Find a way to link business owners with someone who "knows the ropes" about building or expanding here.

Create a new "Economic Development Coordinator" position or increase the duties and hours of an existing town position, such as the Zoning Enforcement Officer, to have the time available to be proactive and helpful. (The First Selectman was mentioned by several respondents as being a good facilitator in helping business owners find out what to do and get things done.)

INFRASTRUCTURE

Many business owners complained about the appearance and shopper-friendliness of Middlebury's commercial areas. Many areas, especially Middlebury Center, are not pedestrian friendly. The adopted 2015 Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) makes numerous recommendations regarding future community design.

Aesthetics

Create "Architecture and Design Guidelines" to be used in conjunction with the town Zoning Regulations when and where appropriate to help obtain the best possible and feasible building and site design, taking into account Middlebury's seven distinct commercial areas. An RFP for creation of "Design Guidelines" went out for bids in January, 2016 and seven responses were received by March of that year with estimated costs of \$35,000. The EIDC members recommend funding and going forward with these guidelines.

Create a "Streetscape Plan" now for Middlebury Center and later for the other commercial areas. The plan should coordinate with Zoning regulations and the "Architecture and Design Guidelines" above. An RFP for creation of a "Streetscape Plan" went out for bids in January, 2016 and seven responses were received by March of that year with estimated costs of \$35,000. The EIDC members recommend funding and going forward with this streetscape plan.

Obtain the services of a "Grant Writer" to find and apply for matching grants to help with the design and implementation of infrastructure improvements.

Utilities

- Sewers – compare cost and requirements with surrounding towns and examine new technical standards that may be more cost effective for Middlebury and businesses while achieving environmental compliance. The Water Pollution Control Authority (WPCA) should review.
- Grease Traps - The WPCA should review.
- Cell Service – was said to be poor in several areas of town, hindering business. The town should communicate the need to providers regarding improvements.
- Natural Gas availability - Board of Selectmen should communicate the need to Eversource and continue current planning for expansions.

Traffic Congestion

The Board of Selectmen and Town Engineer should arrange a meeting with the Connecticut DOT to find ways of dealing with traffic congestion and tie-ups along Route 64 and Route 63 to provide local updates.

The "Streetscape Plan" should specifically address traffic control and pedestrian friendliness.

Road improvements were said to be desperately needed, however the recent aggressive road paving by Public Works has addressed much of this need.

ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT

Business Association

Follow-up with survey respondents and other likely business owners to see if there is enough critical mass to form a Middlebury Business Association. The EIDC must find motivated business owners and bring them together.

Waterbury has a very large Chamber of Commerce and surrounding towns have had various business organizations, such as the Tribury Chamber of Commerce, which have come and gone. Middlebury needs a focused, low-cost business group.

Business Promotion

Assist the business community in creating “buy local” and “meet the business” programs using social media and possibly create a “passport” brochure of Middlebury businesses.

Launch a “Taste of Middlebury” event for all restaurants, and consider a Middlebury Center “street fair” to introduce businesses to the public.

Begin a program to feature weekly articles of Middlebury businesses in the free Voices and Bee-Intelligencer newspapers sent to all residents. Explore the idea of video on local television.

Improve the “vibe” to make Middlebury a destination.

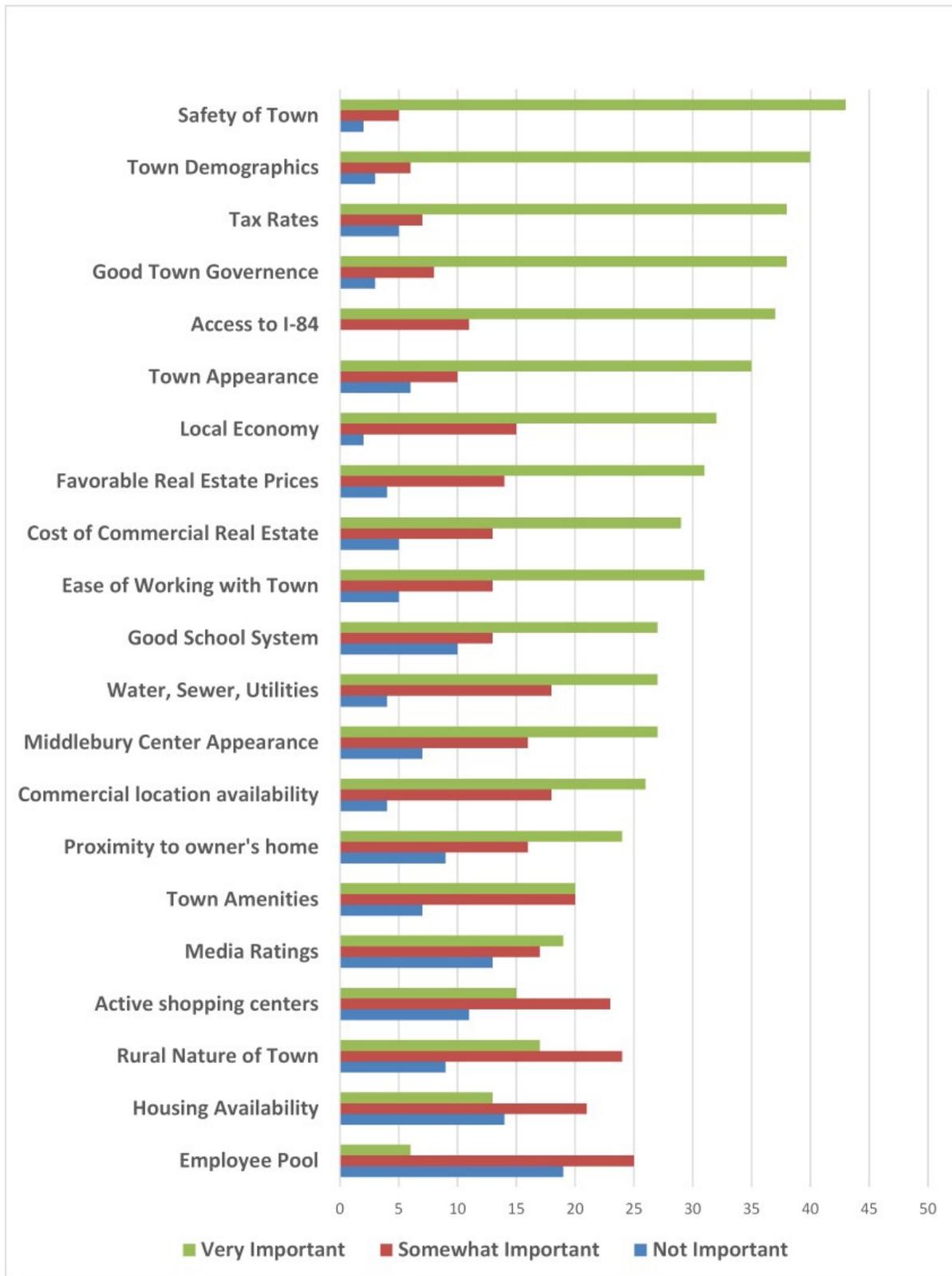
Creative ideas often come out of nowhere and do not fit nicely into conventional thinking, but once implemented, are seen with a different eye. Good examples include the Greenway and Middlebury Consignment which were initially met with resistance and now embraced as our “gems”.

Create reasons for people to visit Middlebury. Encourage and listen to “outside the box” creative proposals

Business Contact Database

Create an E-Mail database to be used by EIDC to inform businesses of opportunities and issues.

APPENDIX A – IMPORTANCE OF FACTORS IN DOING BUSINESS IN MIDDLEBURY



APPENDIX B – WRITTEN COMMENTS

These are the actual free-form comments from the returned surveys.

WHAT CAN THE TOWN OF MIDDLEBURY DO TO PROMOTE A BETTER BUSINESS CLIMATE?

Town officials at all levels need to be open to new ideas for economic development in Middlebury. They need to ask how they can help and “think out of the box.” The balance between economic development and the residential community needs to take into account the fact that if the tax base can’t be increased, fewer people will choose to live in Middlebury because they can live in surrounding communities for less money. It’s a real dilemma for us all.

Be more progressive in advertising the tax incentive plan. Modify it and be more aggressive. Waterbury is offering an 80% real property as well as a real estate abatement for a full 5 years.

Organize a business group, such as a chamber of commerce.

More presence in local media. Invite people to visit Middlebury businesses.

Balance taxes and spending so businesses want to be here.

Two acre zoning for Industrial land with minimum setbacks in that two-acre zone

Greater consistency between the regulations and the governing bodies of the town. There seem to be different requirements for people and businesses.

The tax rates and sewer charges for businesses are ridiculous. The charges should be the same for businesses and residential.

Lower taxes on business. The rates are too high compared to residential. Include sewer and water.

The Middlebury Center business section should be more inviting. It should be more of a destination instead of a “drive through” to Woodbury.

There should be a natural gas line in Middlebury Center.

We need to make Route 64 (Middlebury Center) look better because it is the first impression when people enter from out of town.

Have local businesses promote one another.

People want to live in Middlebury but don’t shop here. The town needs more small businesses that residents need and want to shop there. Take a look at other towns to see what works.

A directory of Middlebury businesses, by category, with blurb. Free to all households and available free at local businesses.

Targeted advertising outreach to match Middlebury land, buildings, and locations to the needs of businesses. Sell Middlebury harder.

Do not change the character of the town by allowing strip malls, etc.

I'm a Middlebury business owner, but not a resident. I'd like to have access to the MRA.

Zoning needs to be relaxed. Let us put some signs out so we could do more business and continue paying taxes.

Put town projects out to bid to local businesses where possible. For example, bid out mowing of the greenway and parks to local landscapers.

Reduce fees and make taxes more affordable for business. Bring in large employers that have employees that live here.

Provide online property tax bill search (like all other surrounding towns)

Better tax assessor office and ability to work with businesses.

We need to take a more friendly approach to attract and keep more business and keep our tax base in line.

More availability of business promotion opportunities. Reduce property taxes.

A book or program for just Middlebury people so everyone will try to shop local and support local businesses. I compete with national companies and online.

An annual or semi-annual town directory of local businesses.

Less rules for opening new businesses. More friendly to business.

Fill vacant spaces and lots in the center of Middlebury.

Allow more retail / commercial space to be built in Middlebury Center. Our downtown is nothing but a few gas stations and a rundown flower and farm stand.

We need retail space with apartments upstairs for younger families who can't afford a house but will be able to in the future.

Zoning regulations, compared to other towns, are very strict.

Allow signage. Town employees and officials should shop local.

Encourage use of local businesses

Encourage town employees to shop locally

Free town promotion of local business.

Free local video showcasing town businesses.

Promote/publicize "grand openings" and major business renovations

WHAT, IF ANYTHING, HAVE YOU FOUND DIFFICULT ABOUT ESTABLISHING AND KEEPING YOUR MIDDLEBURY BUSINESS?

Initially, I found my plans were viewed with skepticism and not with enthusiasm, leading to increased costs and delays. We need to streamline the development process so costs can be kept down for new development.

As a first time startup I needed to “learn” what I needed as I went along. Perhaps someone could have spoken to me before starting to help lay out expectations and outline required policies in the beginning. Even if there isn’t a list of information to convey, such a person would feel like an advocate or advisor in the early planning phase of business startup. Many things were unexpected and caused stress.

Building permits for remodeling (a few years ago) was too difficult.

I was hassled by the Zoning Enforcement Officer (a few years ago)

When I started my non-profit business (a few years ago) I filed late with the tax office and needed to pay \$1,000 in property taxes. This was an undue burden and strikes me as nickel and diming.

I found the basement location of the building department to be off-putting and unnerving (the stairs, windowless concrete corridors and turns).

Taxes. I understand fiscal issues divide the town.

Taxes.

Taxes

Taxes and local franchises.

Cost of doing business is way too high starting with taxes.

The cost of doing business here and the perpetual shifting demographic.

Cost of both commercial and residential real estate keep me from buying – so I must rent.

Slow real estate market.

I had no difficulty.

The visibility of my particular office (small office in big complex)

I had no problem because I took over a successful business.

Middlebury is perceived as a small population bedroom community with no businesses.

Visibility is difficult at a town which is not a shopping destination.

Difficult to have window signs and roadside signs.

Difficult to have a visible sign (a few years ago)

Middlebury Center / Village Square traffic at times is very difficult.

A little too much government.

Middlebury is a small community, so I must market in other areas as well as Middlebury.

There is no commercial garage space in Middlebury for my equipment (landscaping)

I didn't have difficulty. Everyone I dealt with was very professional and helpful. Smooth transition for my new business.

Middlebury has an aging population. Largest deterrent to my business.

Lack of public transportation.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST “PLUS” OF DOING BUSINESS IN MIDDLEBURY?

Great location and character of the town.

Location.

Tax rate better, as compared to Waterbury.

Small town, demographics, security and safety.

Nice community with great people.

Getting to know people.

Getting to know all our local customers.

A friendly and supportive community.

Long-time customers.

Small town “vibe”

Theme park (Quassy) attracts new customers

Close to home

It’s been my home for 30 years

Demographics and access

Quassy (in summer) attracts people passing through.

My business (women oriented) benefits from the small town “safe feel” of Middlebury.

Safe. Located just off Route 84. Easy access from surrounding towns.

Close to home, beautiful town, safe.

Travelers from I-84. Appearance of the town.

Location

Location

Location off I-84.

Location, Access to I-84 and Route 8, Tax Rate.

Safe and close to I-84

Location

Close to I-84.

Closer to the highway than Woodbury.

Close to Waterbury, a population center. Middlebury Road is an active road.

Good location for automobile-driven customers

Living here

Proximity to home.

Attractive and well-maintained town. Friendly residents, easy access, and great amenities.

Friendly and helpful boards and commissions for commercial projects.

Helpful town employees.

Friendly, loyal, long term customers. Nice friendly people.

It's not Waterbury or Naugatuck.

The hours of the town dump are great. Please don't lower.

I feel the town is very safe which is very reassuring.

The people and the location.

The attitude of the town isn't always fighting but instead looking ahead and improving. Who would have thought the greenway would be so well used? I appreciate the health benefits of our parks.

The town cleans snow before the state does. Something I brag about.

Small town, near highway.

Small town values that people like.

Good community

Centrally located.

I live in Middlebury and it is nice being local.

Ease of working with town departments, specifically Fire Marshall, Health Dept, Region 15.

Lower taxes and access to I-84.

The business climate has been good for my business (attorney)

It's a well-run town.

It isn't the town I relocated my business from (Waterbury).

Most of my customers are Middlebury residents. Having great community-minded people is the biggest plus.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST "MINUS" OF DOING BUSINESS IN MIDDLEBURY?

High Sewer use fees

Relatively high taxes

Sewer commission is completely out of line.

Small town – missing infrastructure – lack of cell service in key areas

No growth in the area.

Residents go out of town to do business. We don't have essentials like a hardware store, pharmacy, etc.

Business is not good (small shop in big complex)

Local people don't come into my business.

Availability of stores for supplies and/or services

Empty stores in my shopping center

Route 64 is extremely volatile to I-84 tieups.

We are not trying as hard (to get business) as Oxford.

Lack of commerce.

Franchises.

Excessive cost for restaurant grease traps and no flexibility in offering solutions. Other towns far cheaper and easier. Difficult to establish a new restaurant.

Rush hour traffic

Unfriendly business environment.

Zoning and sign.

A lot of cheap competition in my business area – lawn care.

Middlebury taxes, fees, and continual requests for information requiring third party professionals is excessive, driving up my costs and making my business unaffordable by customers.

Costs.

High taxes.

Tax rate.

Small number of potential clients in town. I need a way to reach them.

Taxes.

Traffic on Route 63 and I-84 cause people to avoid Middlebury Center.

Not having more retail draw to bring in customers from other towns. Quassy helps in the summer, but even that is limited.

I-84 traffic is a huge hassle and deterrent to business. Folks will not travel to Exit 17 or 16 unless they must.

State and Local taxes.

Rural aspect means lack of public transportation (a statewide problem)

WE DESPERATELY NEED:

More economic development

A town center to shop at and congregate at.

A sidewalk (Middlebury Center)

A “vibe” like West Hartford Center or Blueberry Square

To strengthen our office and industrial marketing.

More promotion of the town. Promote to local media.

Attract bigger corporations with many employees

Better communication between town and business owners

Market-rent apartments

Cluster housing to save sprawl

Hardware store and drug store (but not chain stores) owned by independent owners.

Multi-family housing at all levels. I prefer to live in Middlebury and would buy a condo or rent an apartment if I could.

To diversify the town more.

Better cellular service

A natural gas line along Route 64.

More commercial development and occupancy.

Pharmacy, hardware store.

Better sign regulations (for set-back businesses). Improve the business climate to attract out of town customers, as Middlebury Consignment has done.

Business friendly culture.

Bigger signs and less hassles on zoning.

Road improvements.

Reduce taxes by bringing in more business.

To help promote the business in town.

More units at Woodside Heights for senior citizens.

Lower taxes

Less restrictive zoning.

Lower taxes to promote growth.

Broader tax base of commercial businesses.

Nothing.

Younger families to be able to move in (and have jobs here) not just for the schools.

The ability to have bigger signs.

Town video support to local businesses – free of charge.

WE DON'T NEED:

More gas stations, although the rebuilt Shell is very nice and the rebuilt Ford's is definitely an improvement.

More pizza places and gas stations

Chain stores

More gas stations

Any more gas stations.

Overpriced commercial and rental property nobody can afford.

More gas stations

To increase taxes any higher.

Another gas station

More gas stations, pizza shops, liquor stores.

Decreasing taxes at the cost education and services. Compassion.

More gas stations or car dealerships

Expanded infrastructure.

Fast food, three gas stations, higher taxes.

Any more gas stations or convenience stores on Middlebury Road.

More strip malls and gas stations

Gas stations

More regulation or taxes.

APPENDIX C – COMMISSION MEMBERS

Name	Term
Terrence McAuliffe, Chairman	3/6/2015 – 3/6/2020
David Cappelletti	4/16/2016 – 4/16/2021
Ted Mannello	12/3/2011 – 12/3/2021
Anthony Minchella	8/7/2017 – 12/21/2020
Frank Mirovsky	5/21/2012 – 5/21/2022
Armando Paolino	1/8/2013 – 1/8/2018
Mark Petrucci	4/16/2016 – 4/16/2021