

MIDDLETOWN LEADS

WHAT IS MIDDLETOWN LEADS?

Middletown Leads is a weekly newsletter intended to connect the Middletown community by expanding understanding of how government works in Middletown.

The Middletown Town Council establishes policy and provides oversight of municipal activities, which are managed by a Town Administrator.

The Town Council meets twice monthly to discuss and act on business related to the Town. Meetings are streamed on the Town's website.

Town Council actions are the *what* of government. This newsletter will provide the *why* and *what it means*.

IT STARTED WITH A WORKSHOP.....

"Community Civics for Adults," a workshop series, was recently conducted at the Middletown Library where interested citizens met to learn how municipal government works in Middletown.

The schedule included the following topics (with summaries of the discussions):

1. Middletown - Its Citizens, Its Values, Its Government revolved around the challenges to developing a community character. There was consensus that Middletown provided a thruway between Newport and Portsmouth, and the division of the town by the East Main and West Main roads promoted separate interests on the east side and the west side of town that undermined a sense of unity. Missing was a community culture focused on Middletown as a whole rather than on separate areas of the town.
2. The Town Charter drew attention to the Code of Ethics, the state requirement for a 10-year charter review, and the inconsistency between the recommendations of Charter Commissions and what finally appeared on the ballots. There was discussion about conflict of interest and outside influence on the recommendations of all committees as they translate to governmental action. Some dissatisfaction was expressed about the difference between those recommendations (in spite of substantial research and lengthy discussion) and what was finally sent to the voters or enacted by the Town Council.
3. Government Structure and Services focused on a review of the Policy Manual and Table of Contents of the Book of Ordinances. Differences between Town Policies and Ordinances were observed, with the conclusion that policies could be relaxed as appropriate while Ordinances were effectively the laws of the town. It was noted that an inordinate amount of time passed between a recommendation based on apparent need for action and actual approval.
4. Strategic Planning and Services stimulated great interest in the Comprehensive Plan as it relates to governmental actions, including some confusion about the areas of responsibility of planning and zoning. Discussion provided clarity about state approval of the Comprehensive Plan and the need for zoning to conform with the Plan itself.

Discussion of the Planning Board, Zoning Board, and Conservation Commission drew questions about members, many of whom had been on the boards for many years. It was acknowledged that these boards often spent many meetings exploring and even researching mitigating factors, although there were questions about the extent to which the decisions of individual members might be influenced by the political preferences of others.

There was also concern about the ability of small groups of self-interested residents to influence final decisions that might not be beneficial to the town as a whole.

5. Finance brought a review of the tax structure, including rates for the previous 10 years as well as tax credits due to exemptions. There was discussion about the influence on taxes of the town's 47% rental and/or investment properties. Concerns were expressed about the fairness of rentals and investment properties compared to owner-occupied properties. There was brief discussion about taxing rentals and investment properties at the commercial rate since they generate income.

6. Making a Difference led to concerns about the dominance of a small core of residents who seem to have more influence than others due to their longstanding presence on boards and committees. A suggestion was offered to appoint a nominating committee to seek prospective candidates and make recommendations. There was agreement that term limits on all boards and committees might encourage new applicants.

Public engagement was considered particularly challenging because Middletown does not have a town publication, and newsworthy coverage is provided only by *The Newport Daily News* and *Newport This Week*, whose primary focus is Newport.

In summary, participation was exceptionally vocal. Discussion repeatedly returned to the absence of community spirit and participation in town affairs leading to a need to interest others, especially millennials, in political activism.

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Weekly essays about Middletown community and municipal affairs will appear on the Middletown Public Library website. Questions and suggested topics are welcome.

More detailed essays will appear in the following blog: MiddletownLeads@blogspot.com.