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MIDDLETOWN TODAY

Newport, Middletown Looking At Working Together To Improve Schools

If Approved, Each Community Could Save 80 Percent On New School Construction While Keeping Own Buildings

The City of Newport and Town of Middletown are considering restarting talks about regionalizing their school systems — with a twist.

During recent meetings with state Department of Education officials, both communities learned they could keep their individual schools while governing the two districts together through a new joint school committee and unified school administration.

According to RIDE preliminary numbers, both communities would receive up to 80 percent reimbursements from the state to build new schools in each district.

It could also free up money in each community’s budget to pay for exciting new programs to help put Newport and Middletown students at the forefront of 21st century education.

As part of the evolving process, the Newport City Council and Middletown Town Council authorized the Solicitor’s offices in each community to conduct a preliminary investigation into the concept together. The solicitors jointly hired experts to assist with the process, with funding for that review paid for completely by RIDE. If the results of that “fast” report are beneficial, the Newport and Middletown councils could approve motions to restart the regionalization talks.



That could be done through a yet to be formed Regional School District Planning Board made up of representatives from both communities to see if a fair agreement could be struck to govern the united school district.

Should such an arrangement be brokered, it would need to go back to the councils in Newport and Middletown for approval. From there, it would likely be placed on the

Election Day ballots on Nov. 8 for ratification by voters in each community.

“We have a great partnership with the City of Newport in so many areas,” Town Administrator Shawn J. Brown said. “When this opportunity was broached, the Town Council agreed made sense to look at and see if there was an opportunity for us to work together again in a way that could not only benefit both communities, but more importantly the students in each of our school systems. This is still in the very preliminary phases, but we’re very excited about working with Newport to see where this could lead.”

For decades, the idea of school regionalization has been a topic of off and on again discussions.

Most recently, voters in Newport voted in 2014 to pursue a consolidated high school with Middletown. However, the concept didn’t get out of the starting blocks when Middletown voters shot down the proposal by a 54 to 46 percent mark.

But this go around is far different than prior versions for several reasons, which seem to benefit both communities.

For one, the up to 80 percent reimbursement rate for regionalizing was far better than prior amounts.

Also, instead of focusing only on combining high schools, this rendition would include every grade level, kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Importantly, Newport and Middletown would maintain a certain level of autonomy over the schools in each municipality and be free to have their own sports teams, bands and other offerings.

Talks with RIDE indicated Newport and Middletown could save at least \$2.5 million together annually in redundant administrative services.

In Middletown, there’s been consideration about placing a question before voters in November to ask whether the Town should approve a bond to build a new super elementary school to replace Aquidneck and Forest Avenue elementary schools.

A third Election Day ballot question is also being considered, asking local voters should regionalization be approved by Newport and Middletown, whether to fund construction of new middle and high schools in Town too. Because the process is evolving,

the specifics and amounts of both bonds has not been set.

In addition to offering better, augmented classes in each district, the main reason both communities are back at the table is longterm financial viability.

In Middletown, the community is facing \$190 million in total upgrades recommended to its four

schools and limited funding to pay for any work.

Early numbers show the Town could build all new schools for the same net price of health and safety repairs, which were estimated at about \$90 million by the School Building Committee.

By working together, RIDE has said the high schools in both communities could coordinate more closely on curriculum. That would allow both schools to eliminate unnecessary duplication and expand classes and opportunities to provide a more well-rounded education to students in each municipality.



“Middletown Center” Clears Initial Hurdle

Chamber Of Commerce,
Aquidneck Land Trust Support



The “Middletown Center” got its first public airing recently. As expected, traffic and a proposed 144-room hotel were flashpoints for the proposed mixed use development at 600-740 West Main Road during a well attended Planning Board concept review session.

After close to three hours of testimony, the Planning Board voted the plans were “generally consistent” with the Town’s Comprehensive Community Plan, the first step in a long review process by the Town. The volunteer board planned on hold a special meeting to outline items they’d like the Town Council to consider during the next phase of the multi-step process.

“We’re a long way from saying this is a green light to go,” Planning Board member Arthur S. Weber said.

The meeting drew more than 60 people including residents, business people and Town Administrator Shawn J. Brown, Town Council President Paul M. Rodrigues, Vice President Thomas Welsh III and Councilman Dennis Turano.

A number of residents took issue with the hotel, saying it wasn’t what they had in mind for a new town center. There were also concerns about traffic, stormwater runoff, lack of amenities for children other issues.

Many said something positive needed to happen with the site and it was good to see the wheels finally moving forward. Representatives from the Greater Newport County Chamber of Commerce and Aquidneck Land Trust threw their support behind the conceptual plan.

Karen Biastre, a member of the Town’s Affordable Housing Committee, said she and her son drove around the community, checking on the number of hotels in the area.

“From the Portsmouth-Middletown border near Prescott Farm to the Middletown-Newport border at One-Mile Corner is a distance of 3.7 miles,” Biastre said. “Within those 3.7 miles, there are 13 existing hotels and inns along the West Main Road corridor. That’s 13 in 3.7 miles. Do we really need a 14th?”

Former State Representative Linda Finn said the project didn’t come close to hitting the meaning of a “town center.”

“My biggest concern with the project is if the premise for the property use is to raise taxes (revenues), then this is a great plan,” Finn said. “But if the premise for the use of the property, which is town owned property, is to serve the citizens of the Town and to provide a town center, I don’t see why we’d need a hotel on that property.”

Development attorney Girard Galvin said he and his clients were listening intently to suggestions and would try to work as many as reasonably possible into the plan. At the same time, he said suggestions to remove the hotel, residential and retail components were not workable and made “Middletown Center” financially unfeasible.

Ultimately, the Planning Board agreed with the developers and their expert witness Paige Bronk, Newport’s former city planner. Bronk said the comprehensive plan designated the site for future development by name and also encouraged mixed use and residential growth there.

According to the comprehensive plan, the “West Main/Coddington Development Center” was one of a handful of true development opportunities available.

In the housing component, the comprehensive plan calls for Middletown to do more to promote “workforce housing,” create affordable housing opportunities and work to reduce housing costs while promoting sustainable development, among other recommendations.

The comprehensive plan touted the “Middletown Center” space for development as a way to help upgrade the entire location into an “vibrant, attractive, mixed use area, capitalizing on its relatively dense development pattern, available land under public ownership, good transportation access and available utilities.”

One of the big selling points was the \$1 million plus in new annual revenues to the Town pledged from the developers.

“Most towns do not have the opportunity to do what can be done with this property,” one of the project developers Christopher Bicho said. “Very few towns have this opportunity.”

The future of the 15 acres has been an open question back to March 2008. That’s when the Navy announced during a closed-door meeting in Newport City Hall that a number of their sites across Aquidneck Island were going to be “excessed” and released.

One of those sites was the now vacant former Navy Lodge property at the corner of Coddington Highway and West Main Road. At

the time, the Town showed immediate interest in purchasing the three-acre parcel for \$1.3 million, a deal that was finalized with the Navy in January 2018.

From Day 1, Town officials have talked about placing a high-end mixed residential-

commercial project on the property. The proposed development site also includes the West Main Recreational Complex, the Middletown Public Library and the former Kennedy School.

In addition to creating a new “town center,” local officials have said a suitable development there could generate needed tax revenue. None of the property in the heart of Middletown’s commercial corridor has generated a nickel in taxes for the Town in decades, likely dating back to the World War II era — and potentially earlier.

After a national search for a suitable developer, the Town selected the team of Bicho, James Karam and Rocky Kempenaar to partner with to redo the site. Bicho owns The Landings neighborhood next door as well as other properties across the island and Karam and Kempenaar have a long track record of successfully building hotels in Town.

When the partnership was announced, Town leaders talked about the trio’s deep roots in the community as one of the major selling points. Another was the concept they



promoted, which included affordable housing, mixed retail-commercial growth and other amenities.

A short time later, the “Middletown Center” proposal was unveiled. On the former lodge property at the south end, a 144-room hotel would be built. Half the hotel would be for upper mid tier rooms under the Hilton or Marriott corporate flag. The reminder would feature upper mid tier extended stay rooms with kitchens and other amenities for those staying in the area for awhile.

Moving north, several mixed residential-commercial buildings would front West Main Road, with several apartment buildings behind. All told, there would be 150 new apartments, 95 of those two-bedroom units. A 6,000-square-foot community center and pool for residents of “Middletown Center” was also featured.

Then, a large common green space with outdoor stage and 10,000-square-foot Middletown Public Library would be installed at the northern end of the site.

Interestingly, if the Middletown Center project gets the necessary approvals, it will be the first municipal project part of the March 2008 announcement from the Navy to move forward.

Since the project first was proposed, the Town has taken an active role in trying to make sure everyone is informed about the development. The Town created a section in its “Middletown Shares” website at <https://mdl.town/MiddletownCenter> as a clearinghouse for updates related to the project.

The “Middletown Center” has also been featured in the “Middletown Today” monthly newsletter and weekly postings at MiddletownRI.com as well as the Town’s social media channels.

The project has also been the subject of a survey, the results which were forwarded this

week to the Planning Board for review. A new banner advertising the plan was also placed at the proposed development site on one of the fences by the Pottsy softball field.

Middletown’s Finest Featured In Ad

Lt. Joanne Alboum In Bristol Community College Spot



If you see one of Middletown's finest in a commercial for Bristol Community College, your eyes aren't deceiving you. Middletown Police Lt. Joanne Alboum took part in filming a commercial for the Fall River school.

“I loved the school. It was a great college and I got a lot out of it,” said Alboum, who graduated from BCC 20 years ago before earning her bachelor's degree from Roger Williams University and her master's at Salve Regina University. To watch the ad, visit <https://mdl.town/BristolCC> online.

Unified Basketball Makes Memories

Students Come Together For The Love Of The Game

There's about 7:30 left on the clock in the fourth quarter.

Playing on their home court, the Gaudet Middle School Islanders team trails Lawn Middle School in Jamestown by more than a couple of buckets during a recent unified basketball game.

That was until Rahsaan Marshall nailed back-to-back bank shots in the lane to tighten the score, to the applause of everyone in attendance — even the fans rooting for the opposing team.

Eventually, Lawn pulled away, taking the game 26-22, but those on hand agreed that wasn't necessarily the point of the matchup. Rather, it was to get students who might not otherwise play in a basketball game with a referee, crowd and scoreboard the thrill and action of the real thing.

"It's fun and amazing!" said Cameron Costa, a sixth grader on the Gaudet team who wore No. 3. "I love these games!"

"I had a friend who joined in and talked about how great it was," fellow sixth grader Aibhlinn McGrath said, wearing No. 2. "I'm so glad I did it. I'm trying out as many clubs as I can and this one is definitely the most rewarding."

According to Special Olympics, unified sports became an internationally sanctioned program in 1989.

The goal of the inclusive sports program is to give an equal number of special education athletes with intellectual

disabilities and partners without intellectual disabilities an opportunity to train and compete against other similar squads.

Chyleene O'Connor, a retired Middletown teacher who coaches the Gaudet Unified Islanders with her husband Jack, said Middletown High created a unified basketball team a dozen years ago. The program was so successful a team was formed at Gaudet.

"It's a great experience for all," O'Connor said. "Unified Basketball is a chance to be part of a school team which is such a huge

part of middle school. It's a chance learn how to play basketball, learn to work as a team and to appreciate everyone with their differing abilities."

In the first few weeks of practice, O'Connor said things can be a little rusty. But like any team, the more everyone gets comfortable, the better things go.

"Seeing kids build relationships is so much fun," O'Connor said. "At the beginning of the season, some of the kids are a little hesitant to jump in when someone needs help, but after a few weeks in, the teammates just do it naturally. The kids love to see each other improve in the game. The game is run by other students in the school. We have students who keep score, run the clock, plan cheers and sing the National Anthem."

Gaudet sixth grader Chase Gaudet (No. 23) said he gets satisfaction playing, particularly when he and his buddy Nico Campopiano (No. 13) share the court.





“It makes me so happy to hang out with everyone and help wherever I can,” Gaudet said. “I really can’t explain it. You just feel good about yourself, knowing you’re helping here or during school or hanging out in the hallway.”

Ceili McCarthy, a special education teacher assistant who works with Cameron, said she knows when it’s game day.

“Cameron always comes in, wearing his jersey,” McCarthy said. “He’s so proud and it’s all he was talking about today. That just puts a smile on my face. Everyone part of this does and they’re so lucky to have Chyleene and Jack coaching the team. They’re the ones who make this all happen.”

After time expired, the teams lined up in a traditional handshake line and bumped elbows, exchanging congratulations as the crowd of about 100 people applauded.

“I retired this year, but came back to coach Unified because it is such a rewarding experience,” O’Connor said. “When I first started teaching there weren’t any unified teams and it’s now a big part of our school

community. The kids are so proud to wear their jerseys to school the day of the game and so happy to see the gym fill up with teachers, family and friends.”

Canvassing Brings Voting To MHS

Help Get Out The Vote

When he woke up one recent morning, Caleb Williams admitted he wasn’t thinking about registering to vote.

But during lunch period at Middletown High later in the day, the senior said the process by the local Board of Canvassers was so easy, it didn’t make sense not to.

Part of a voter drive across Rhode Island before the Nov. 8 elections, Williams said he was excited about having his voice heard.

“It feels good,” Williams said, smiling after completing the necessary paperwork. “I’ve always wanted to vote and now I’m registered.”

Asked what issues he was most concerned with, Williams said there was one item that worried him most right now.

“Gas prices, definitely,” said Williams, who’s considering a career in HVAC work. “I know that’s just one thing, but it’s something a lot of us are talking about.”

As far back as they could remember, Board of Canvassers members Lucie-Anne Dionne-Thomas and Adeline C. Rose said they’ve taken part in voting drives at the Valley Road school.



The canvassing crew was one of several groups with tables along an exterior wall of the cafeteria, including the Boys & Girls Clubs of Newport County and the Middletown Prevention Coalition.

Shortly after an announcement from Dean of Students Ray Clancey about the voting drive, senior Jacoby Smith approached, interested to hear more.

"I don't have any (issues) right now that I'm going to vote on, but I know it's the right thing to do," Smith said, who's eyeing college and playing football at the next level.

Fellow senior Margaret MacKechnie said almost from the moment she heard about the voter initiative during the morning announcements, she knew she was going to register to vote.

"I think it's one of the most important ways we can be heard," said MacKechnie, who's looking at colleges and potentially a career in engineering or technology afterward. "For me, that's climate change, student loan debt, racial equality."

As students completed the form, Dionne-Thomas and Rose answered questions and helped them respond to items that might be unclear.



"Of all the things we do, this is one of my favorites," Dionne-Thomas said. "To see students so excited about voting and making a difference."

Both said they were impressed with the response and behavior of the students, which they said was top notch.

"We try to make it really easy for them," Rose said. "There's so much going on for them right now and they shouldn't have to think much about registering to vote."

"We're here to help them," Dionne-Thomas said. "Voting is one of the most important things we can do as citizens and it's a big difference between how we are here and why Middletown is such a great place to live."