

By Lauren Burns, Planner

Daniel Burnham, renowned American urban planner, notably once said, “Make no little plans, they have no magic to stir men’s blood and themselves will not be realized.” Make no little plans seems to be the underlying precept for the City of Middletown as they bring their Downtown Revitalization vision to life. Governor Cuomo’s Downtown Revitalization Initiative, an annual program that invests \$100 million into 10 downtown neighborhoods throughout New York, launched in spring 2016. Middletown was the first community in the Mid-Hudson region to receive the \$10 million award.

The Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) was designed to transform communities into lively downtown neighborhoods for future generations of New Yorkers. Interested communities submit applications, and a short list of promising applications present to a large panel of 30-40 people in what Mayor DeStefano referred to as a “Shark Tank” like environment. Not only are communities scored on their presentation, but also on how they defend questions posed by the panel. Each REDC then nominates the one downtown in their region that they believe is best positioned to take advantage of the DRI. This includes communities that demonstrate past investment, future potential, recent or impending job growth, support for the local vision, and readiness.

Two years after Middletown was identified by the Governor’s Regional Economic Development Councils (REDCs), Mayor Joseph DeStefano and Maria Bruni, Director of Community Development for the City, spoke with the Planning Department about the process of applying for the DRI grant, the development of the City’s goals, and what Middletown envisions for its future.

#### What made Middletown’s application so successful?

*Past Investment, Future Potential* - The City has invested more than \$60 million over the last 10 years to maintain and upgrade its infrastructure, as well as upcoming transportation improvement projects,

## Make No Little Plans: Middletown Downtown Revitalization Initiative

including upgrading 25 signalized intersections, and improving bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure by making intersections ADA compliant. The City is looking to implement Complete Streets projects to create connections between educational institutions and the downtown, taking advantage of existing bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure in those areas. One major connection the City is looking to leverage is the Heritage Trail, which is planned to run through the City and connect to the Village of Harriman, creating over 20 miles of protected pathway in Orange County.

The City recently completed the redevelopment of a vacant lot and partial brownfield into a skateboard park adjacent to the Thrall Library, and successfully attracted two new breweries into the Business Improvement District area, both reusing vacant industrial buildings along the proposed spurs of the Heritage Trail. Perhaps most notably, the vacant Woolworth Building on North Street is being transformed into the Rail Trail Commons. Middletown is launching a competitive program, known as the *Race 4 Space*, to attract four businesses to locate in the revitalized building once complete.



Flyer marketing the Race 4 Space Competition to fill the Rail Trail Commons. For more information visit: <http://middletown-ny.com/en/departments/economic-development.html>



**Job Growth** - The Mayor attributes one aspect of their application's success to the City's potential for regional development. Middletown is well connected to two major highways (I-84 and State Route 17 – future I-86) and has good local and regional intra- and intercity bus routes and access to the Metro-North Port Jervis line in the Town of Wallkill. This has made the greater Middletown area a prime location for commuter housing. The Office of Community Development is looking to bring employment opportunities into the City. A proposed update to the zoning code will look to bring mixed-use buildings into the downtown BID, attracting commercial development along the street fronts and offices or workforce housing above. By providing affordable housing, Middletown is looking to attract young professionals, Millennials and new Americans into the downtown, supported by the economic development throughout the region.

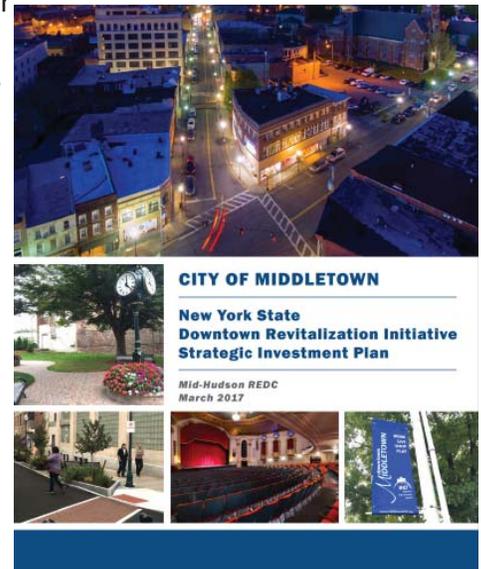
**Local Vision** - The City worked closely with Pattern for Progress throughout the years to develop downtown revitalization plans. Building on an existing vision rather than starting a new community vision from scratch was valuable in the application process. Middletown knew where it wanted to go, and leveraged the DRI as one resource to get there. Of the \$10 million award, \$300,000 is used to hire a planning firm to confirm the vision, help identify goals and strategies, facilitate public outreach meetings with local stakeholders and citizens, identify projects and produce a final plan.

A Local Planning Committee (LPC) comprised of a group of 15 residents, business owners and civic leaders was convened to oversee the development of a strategic plan for revitalization of their downtown. Educational institutions continue to play a large role in the reinvestment plan, with the City boasting three campuses including Orange County Community College, Touro College, and Fei Tian College/Academy of the Arts. Not only do educational institutions bring a student population into the area, lowering the overall median age, but they are also a major employer and economic driver in a community. Including a typically transient population into the

community vision brings both unique issues and great potential for growth.

The public outreach process, led by the consulting firm BFJ Planning out of Brooklyn, included multiple sessions of scoring different project ideas and providing thoughts on the City of Middletown. Originally apprehensive about a firm not familiar with Middletown assessing the vision and goals, Mayor DeStefano said the exercise was a very valuable tool because it helped the City to understand “how we looked at ourselves.” One such instance included a picture of a worn “Business Improvement District” sign in the public outreach presentation. The consultants said this was the first thing they saw when they drove into the area, and yet City officials drove by the sign every day and never noticed. This resonated with the Mayor, who used the anecdote as an insight to the beneficial elements of the process. By the end of the first year, the projects were evaluated by the State and selected for funding.

The final Plan “City of Middletown: New York State Downtown Revitalization Initiative Strategic Investment Plan” was published in March 2017. The plan includes a vision for the downtown; goals and strategies to accomplish the vision, an action plan, and a strategic investment plan that identifies specific catalytic projects that align with the unique vision of their downtown area. The REDC and Governor's office announced in May of 2017 the final allocations of the \$9.7 million,



A copy of the Final City of Middletown DRI Plan can be found online at:  
[https://www.ny.gov/sites/ny.gov/files/atoms/files/Middletown\\_DRI.pdf](https://www.ny.gov/sites/ny.gov/files/atoms/files/Middletown_DRI.pdf)



however not all projects that were presented in the final vision were awarded funding. Six projects received awards in the Middletown area: \$2,500,000 for the redevelopment of the Woolworth building into the Rail Trail Commons; \$1,000,000 to fund an initiative program for façade and storefront improvement; \$2,285,000 towards streetscape improvements to promote pedestrian activity; \$1,640,000 towards design and the development of Erie Way Park; \$275,000 for branding and wayfinding signage program; and \$2,000,000 for parking and greenscape improvements.



*In 2016, King Street was converted into a pedestrian walkway, connecting municipal parking lots to North Street businesses. Bicycle parking was provided by an OC Health Department grant. Photo by Lauren Burns.*

### Creating a Place to Work, Live, Shop, and Play

The geographical concept of place is derived from the human experience, meaning people and their defined experiences make a place. Two weaknesses the City identified in their community visioning sessions were overcoming the negative image of downtown and a lack of distinct identity. In the last 18 months of their DRI timeline, Middletown is looking to revitalize their image by developing a brand for the BID. While Maria Bruni and her team are continuing to search for potential branding opportunities, there are two things unique about Middletown worth mentioning – the existing built environment and the diverse people who live in it.

*The City* - Middletown developed in the 1800s in response to the proximity to the Erie Railway, industrializing the downtown area adjacent to the Erie station. What remains in the City today is the industrial “bones” of vacant, brick buildings and brownfield sites. The vacant sites and buildings are recognized as a weakness in the community vision, but also as a strength for potential urban renewal. What deters some people from coming downtown is also what attracts new businesses looking to locate in the area. Middletown is investing \$1 million of the DRI award to incentivize the restoration of facades and signage, improving the condition of the buildings while maintaining what makes Middletown unique.

*The People* - The City of Middletown is slightly younger than the rest of the County, with a median age of 35 compared to the County’s median age of 37 years old. This in large part is attributed to the educational institutions, but also partly due to national trends of dense communities attracting younger populations. Recent trends have shown most Millennials want to live in urban environments with greater opportunities for cultural arts and restaurants. Middletown is also one of the most culturally diverse communities in Orange County, which is evident in both the people who live there and the local businesses. Orange County is comprised of a 75 percent white population, while less than half the population of Middletown is white.



Middletown has a 38 percent Latino population, with approximately 21 percent Black or African American, and 4 percent Asian population, specifically Asian-Indian and Chinese. You can see the influence of the Latino and Asian communities on the built environment, including various ethnic restaurants, educational institutions and local businesses. The City is looking to incorporate these groups into the branding efforts, specifically the influence on arts and entertainment. They hope to do this through marketing and making events available in multiple languages that cater to all groups.

Now going into its third year of the DRI, Middletown is bringing these large plans to realization through the dedication of local leaders, staff, private and public investments from local partners, and buy-in from the community. While many of the projects are still years from completion, the impact of the investments that have been completed can already be seen. All one needs to do is to visit downtown on a Thursday night in the summer, where people of all ages gather to listen to live music in a small park off North Street. Like a gravitational pull of energy to the BID's center, you can feel the magic in the air.



Locals gather at Run 4 Downtown Park off of North Street for a summer evening concert. Photo by Lauren Burns.

