

## The Listening Tour: For Town Improvements in Middletown Springs

Conducted by Shana Trombley, CPG Enterprises Inc., Fall 2018

### Note of Introduction from the Building Committee and Selectboard

Below you will find the report from CPG Enterprises sharing the results of the listening tour they conducted here this fall. You will see the process they used, and the groups of stakeholders they met with detailed in the report. Near the end of the document you will find a compilation of questions that need to be addressed as well as their final recommendation of pushing the vote until later in the Spring once more information is available and these questions can be answered.

The Selectboard and Building Committee realize that the originally anticipated town meeting vote is an unrealistic timeline. The Selectboard and Building Committee will be working diligently in the coming weeks and months to gather information and address the questions that came up during the listening tour, and others, and will share that information widely with voters in anticipation the community will be well informed and ready for a vote in late Spring.

Additionally, we would like to note here that the Building Committee is not overseeing the details of the additional projects outlined below. Those projects and ultimately the Town Office/Library project are all under the oversight of the Selectboard. The Building Committee's focus remains solely on research and recommendations for the Town Office/Library project.

### Introduction

It has been a pleasure to conduct a listening tour for the proposed \$3M bond vote to raise funds for a new Town Office and Library building, a Fire Station, a Town Garage, Salt Shed and Transfer Station. The Building Committee has been meeting and planning key infrastructure investments for many years and was eager to share its plan with members of the community to gather feedback. To facilitate this process the Building Committee reached out to diverse community groups to share their plans and seek feedback.

*The following groups were contacted:*

- Friends for Education (FFE)
- Volunteer Fire Department
- Friends of the Library (FOL)
- Book Club
- St. Anne's
- Community Church
- Tweens/Teens
- MTS Concerned Citizens Group
- Library Trustees
- Immediate Stakeholders (eg. Individuals who work in the town office, road foreman, transfer station attendant, the fire chief, the librarian)
- Bone Builders
- Historical Society
- Creative Economy Group
- Planning Commission
- Conservation Commission
- Select Board
- Farmers
- Vicki's and Sissy's

*Ultimately, we met with the following groups between October 18<sup>th</sup> and November 15<sup>th</sup> 2018:*

- Volunteer Fire Department
- Friends of the Library (FOL)
- Tweens/Teens
- Historical Society
- Creative Economy Group
- Library Trustees
- Immediate Stakeholders (eg. folks who work in the town office, road foreman, transfer station attendant, the fire chief, the librarian)
- Select Board/Building Committee
- Members of the Farming/Working Lands Community
- MTS Concerned Citizens Group
- Vicki's (general public)

Format:

We followed the same format for each group. First, we offered participants a brief factual overview of the Building Committee's plans for the combined Bond project, including a new Town Office & Library building, Fire Station, Town Garage, Salt Shed and Transfer Station. Participants also were given information about why the Select Board is proposing that the Town vote on all projects as one vote on Town Meeting Day. We also explained that more details would be shared in January so that the community has two months to review and discuss the budget and specifics of the plans in advance of Town Meeting Day. Participants were then asked five open-ended questions that we had written in cooperation with the Building Committee.

*These questions included:*

- What excites you about this project?
- Do you have concerns about this project?
- What else do you wish we were planning to build in the community?
- Why do you choose to live in Middletown Springs?
- Where do you see the town in 10 years?
- Can you offer suggestions on how we should proceed?/What else do you think people need to know before the vote?

Findings:

There is agreement among the Middletown Springs residents we met that the Town has significant infrastructure needs that must be addressed. However, there are differing opinions as to how to best address these infrastructure needs. Many of the participants in the listening tour view the town's infrastructure needs as an opportunity to reinvigorate the Four Corners/Town Green and believe that these investments can enrich the lives of current community members and possibly attract new investments and even residents. Others view the infrastructure needs as equally necessary but advocate for a more conservative approach that can meet the town's needs by constructing smaller projects with a corresponding smaller price tag. One universal theme was the desire to pursue these projects in a manner that can build trust and unify the community.

*The following is a recap of each proposed project and the reactions to them:*

**Town Office & Library Building**

Many of the groups view the proposed Town Office and Library Building as an opportunity to create a landmark building that can define the Four Corners and reestablish the town's center, which suffered a

fire approximately 100 years ago. Others view the Town Office and Library as two distinct projects and wish to address the needs separately. There is universal agreement that the Town Office, in its current state, cannot meet its obligations of keeping documents safe and cannot provide adequate work space for staff or access to residents.

The proposed building excites many people in the community who view it as “moving the Town into the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” or as an opportunity to create a “hub” for the Town; others take a more fiscally conservative approach captured best by one person who said “in theory it would be nice to have updated facilities.” Community members who find the proposed project to be overly ambitious would like to see a smaller Town Office constructed – on one floor with a large vault (located in the center of the structure), additional workspace and a community meeting room. These same community members favor an expanded library at its current location though there is debate as to whether that is feasible.

In addition to nearly universal agreement on the need for a new Town Office, there is agreement that a larger library would be beneficial for the community. The community appreciates what the library is able to achieve on its current footprint but all see the potential for expanded services. Many participants view an expanded library as a valuable resource for younger residents, where they could gather afterschool, and as a place where younger kids can do homework, read, or go on-line while waiting for parents to pick them up.

While the proposed building inspires many who see it as a landmark building on the Green, a segment of the population view it as too large and out-of-scale for the location. There was concern about aspects of the large building, including the need for a septic system that will require two pumps and a two-story building that will require an elevator, estimated to cost \$100,000, in addition to on-going maintenance expenses. The format of the listening tour did not lend itself to discussing these specifics nor did I have this level of detail; as well, it was inappropriate to debate or advocate for specific elements of the project. I am convinced the community will need factual responses to these inquiries if they are to accept the plan.

### **Fire Station**

The participating community members had a mixed response to the proposed Fire Station. A majority believes that a new building is necessary, wish to support the hardworking volunteer fire fighters, and believe that the Town would experience negative consequences should the Town not have its own fire station (e.g. increased risk to their property and increased home insurance premiums). However, the proposed plan and price tag for a \$800,000 new building was met with some skepticism. Many community members felt that they did not have sufficient information at this time to know if they can support it. As with the other projects, I explained that the Select Board and the Volunteer Fire Department were committed to sharing more information in the coming months or as it becomes available.

### **Town Garage & Salt Shed**

There is good community awareness about the need to construct a Town Garage that can adequately meet the Town’s needs and improves the working conditions for employees. Community members see the value in better housing and maintenance of expensive town equipment and recognize that these goals can’t be met with the existing facility. Some community members also expressed concern about

the run-off problem and would like to see a containment structure built at the current location or for a future facility.

Community members almost universally expressed concern about building at the West Street property given that it is in a floodplain. I shared the Town's plan to conduct engineering studies to review this location before a final decision is made, but for many people this project was too far off in the future to be considered as part of this bond vote in March. Even if the Town is able to get a different ruling, regarding construction in the floodplain, some expressed concern about the facilities' proximity to the Poultney River. There also was some concern that this location is not a good one since it is less centrally located.

### **Transfer Station**

Again, as with the Town Garage and Salt Shed, many were concerned that a bond vote on this project is premature given the unknowns. Most participants like the idea of the Town Garage, Salt Shed and Transfer Station being located together and were curious if there would be efficiencies and/or savings found by locating these critical facilities at the same location. However, some people were skeptical about being asked to vote for what would amount to \$1M of the \$3M bond (for the Town Garage, Salt Shed & Transfer Station) when the necessary engineering studies and findings haven't been conducted. There was concern that there are "too many unknowns" to know if the \$1M price tag for the three structures is accurate.

### Next Steps:

### **Critical Questions Remain:**

Inherent in all of the meetings was the need for more information. We knew this would be the case. Most groups seemed comfortable with the idea that the Building Committee, the Volunteer Fire Department and Select Board are working to finalize the budget numbers and will have a more complete picture to share in January, thereby allowing for a two-month period for community discussion. However, there is a portion of the community that rejects the plans, assumptions and estimates of the Building Committee.

Here is a sampling of some of the questions the community would like more information on: (they range in scope from overarching to very detailed.)

*For example:*

- Are current taxes higher/lower/comparable to towns of similar size to Middletown Springs?
- What will the actual tax increase be per homeowner?
- Did the Building Committee consider more than one plan for the proposed Town Office & Library?
- Is there a more affordable way to address the septic system for the building – so that two pumps aren't necessary?
- What are the additional operating expenses estimated to be? (Additional staffing, maintenance, insurance etc.)
- What are the costs of doing nothing? Specifically, legal penalties (ADA, environmental, records keeping etc.), increased insurance expenses (for individual home owners) and wear on

equipment. Can the community get a better understanding of the legal issues and penalties it is facing?

- What will happen to the existing library?
- Can the existing library be expanded (out back or next door)?
- Is there a demonstrated need for additional meeting space, or can the school and the Historical Society be used for these purposes?
- Can these infrastructure projects be prioritized and staggered? What is the biggest financial liability the town is facing?
- Is the West Street property a viable option for the Town Garage, Salt Shed and Transfer Station? What is the timeline for this project?
- Is the vault supposed to be located in the middle of the new building in order to adequately protect the records from humidity, flooding etc.?
- What if the community can't raise the additional funds necessary from private donors to build the Town Office and Library?
- Does the Fire Station need a six-bay station? How big are the fire stations of neighboring towns of comparable size and what did they cost?
- How was the architect for the proposed Fire Station selected? Was there more than one design submitted?
- Why were previous plans (specifically, the McManus plan) dismissed?

#### Recommendations for next steps:

The Building Committee has worked for many years to address the Town's need for a larger Town Office and Library. Almost everyone I spoke with expressed gratitude for the committee's work. While no community project can expect to be universally embraced, the concerns expressed by a segment of the community must be responded to. These concerns coincide with the Building Committee's accelerated timeline: residents have challenging questions and want a final and reliable budget. Without this, the Bond vote is less likely to succeed on Town Meeting Day.

*The reality is that there are two trains of thought that the Building Committee must navigate: one, which views the plan as a bold and necessary investment that will attract more opportunity, and a second, more fiscally-conservative perspective that wishes to see the Town's infrastructure needs addressed with minimum resources and on a project-by-project basis. To achieve a positive vote, some middle ground must be found, and residents need much more information in answer to their questions.*

While there is much to be said for presenting the Town's infrastructure needs as one comprehensive package for a vote on Town Meeting Day, some of the projects are further evolved than others. This reality puts the more carefully planned projects at risk of being voted down because they are tied to newer, less-evolved projects.

Furthermore, every group I met with expressed concern that a bond vote of this size could prove divisive for the community and do not want to see factions exacerbated. Most participants trust the process and were comfortable knowing that they will be given answers to their many questions in January – though many still expressed concern about the amount of work that has to be accomplished in this time period in order to meet the deadline. Unfortunately, there are also community members who are less trustful of the process. In order to satisfy these concern there will need to be more opportunities for community

engagement, through which more specific information is shared and attendees have an opportunity to ask questions. In fact, the groups had a number of good ideas about how to best disseminate information and we can apply these strategies when the time comes.

#### Moving Toward Fundraising:

We recognize that the Building Committee would like to proceed with the feasibility study before the end of the year. However, given the number of unknowns we feel that it is premature to present this plan to potential donors. A confidential interview must communicate the compelling vision and timeline, and demands solid financial data so we can ask the interviewees for reliable estimates of their potential giving. We understand the value of identifying a donor(s) who is/are willing to make a leadership gift(s) toward securing a positive vote; however, presenting a plan before we have complete information can also result in losing an opportunity for support that won't be easily reclaimed.

*Given the findings of the listening tour we recommend the following specific next steps:*

- Obtain answers to the key questions regarding the budget, the building selection process, the impact on the average taxpayer, the timeline, how other towns have addressed similar infrastructure challenges etc.
- Revisit the decision to bundle all the projects, dependent on the findings in order to present the most viable options to the community.
- Hold a community forum, which includes the following format.
  - Four to five presenters of the plan (no more than 15 – 20 minutes). These presenters should include a member of the Building Committee, the Select Board and “stake holder” (Bill, Kimberly, Joe).
  - After the plan is presented, invite the participants to break into small diverse groups of no more than eight to discuss the plan and give feedback on a few specific questions (facilitators can be assigned to each group or can rotate from group to group).
  - A spokesperson from each group can then present the feedback from each group in an organized format.

(This approach works better than having a microphone set up and allowing one person after another to speak. The ‘open mic’ format can get overly divisive and heated and silences too many participants, while a small group format can be tasked with developing solutions and a plan.)

Hopefully, from this three-step process some consensus will be identified and a plan for a vote can be finalized.

Once the financial and timeline data is gathered, and the community meeting is held, we would conduct an abbreviated series of confidential feasibility interviews. The remainder of the 25 interviews could be scheduled following the bond vote, if it passes. We do not think it is wise to attempt to solicit major gifts prior to obtaining the complete information that will be provided to the community; depending on the progress on data-finding, and research on some of the prospective donors, we might be able to recommend some early solicitations in February, to encourage a positive vote.

We believe this approach will allow the Town to create a plan that will be supported by a majority of voters and one that can attract private donations. We recognize that the Building Committee was

hoping for a more streamlined process, but we are convinced that the vote and the fundraising are dependent on full information and consensus.

Given the issues that need resolution, we feel it is most important to present a solid, full-data question to the voters. While not ruling out a Town Meeting Day vote, we believe a successful vote is better for a town than multiple votes over a period of time for the same project. A positive vote in the spring, following full information and an effort to build Town-wide consensus, could be more obtainable than one in March, and so we urge you to be open to the possibility of a spring special vote.

A positive vote will also have an uplifting impact on the fundraising. So, while the first choice would be to gather the data, hold the forum in early January, build trust and consensus in the plan, conduct the feasibility study and be ready for a vote on Town Meeting Day, we think a spring vote might be more manageable and more likely to succeed.