



Economic Development Commission

2022 Business Survey Report

November 28, 2022

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CONTENTS

Summary Results	5
Business Rating Chart	6
Respondents by business type	7
Key Findings	8
Strengths	8
Weaknesses	9
Opportunities	10
Threats.....	11
Recommended Actions	12
Regulations	12
Signage	12
Recognize Middlebury’s Seven Distinct Business Areas.....	12
Land Use Facilitation	12
Infrastructure	13
Aesthetics	13
Utilities.....	13
Traffic Congestion.....	13
Encourage Desirable Business Expansion.....	13
Advocacy and Support.....	14
Create an “Economic Development Coordinator”	14
Marketing Commercial Properties	14
Business Association.....	14
Existing Business Promotion.....	14
Improve the “vibe” to make Middlebury a destination.	14
Appendix A – Survey Procedure	15
Appendix B – Commission Members.....	17

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SUMMARY RESULTS

This survey is a follow up to a similar survey conducted by the Economic Development Commission [EDC] in 2017. About 50% more businesses were contacted this time to elicit more responses.

In general, the results of both surveys were almost identical, and the written comments were mostly the same, including a few criticisms involving unfairness in enforcement of signage and zoning regulations. Our recommendations are mostly the same.

Once again, 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. Less surprising, location was cited most often as the biggest plus of doing business in Middlebury, in many cases because the owner was also a resident. Located just off I-84, the town was said to be easy to get to for traveling customers and those from surrounding communities. Demographics of the town were another top factor for choosing Middlebury as a place to do business. Written comments called Middlebury a small, well run, clean, 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.

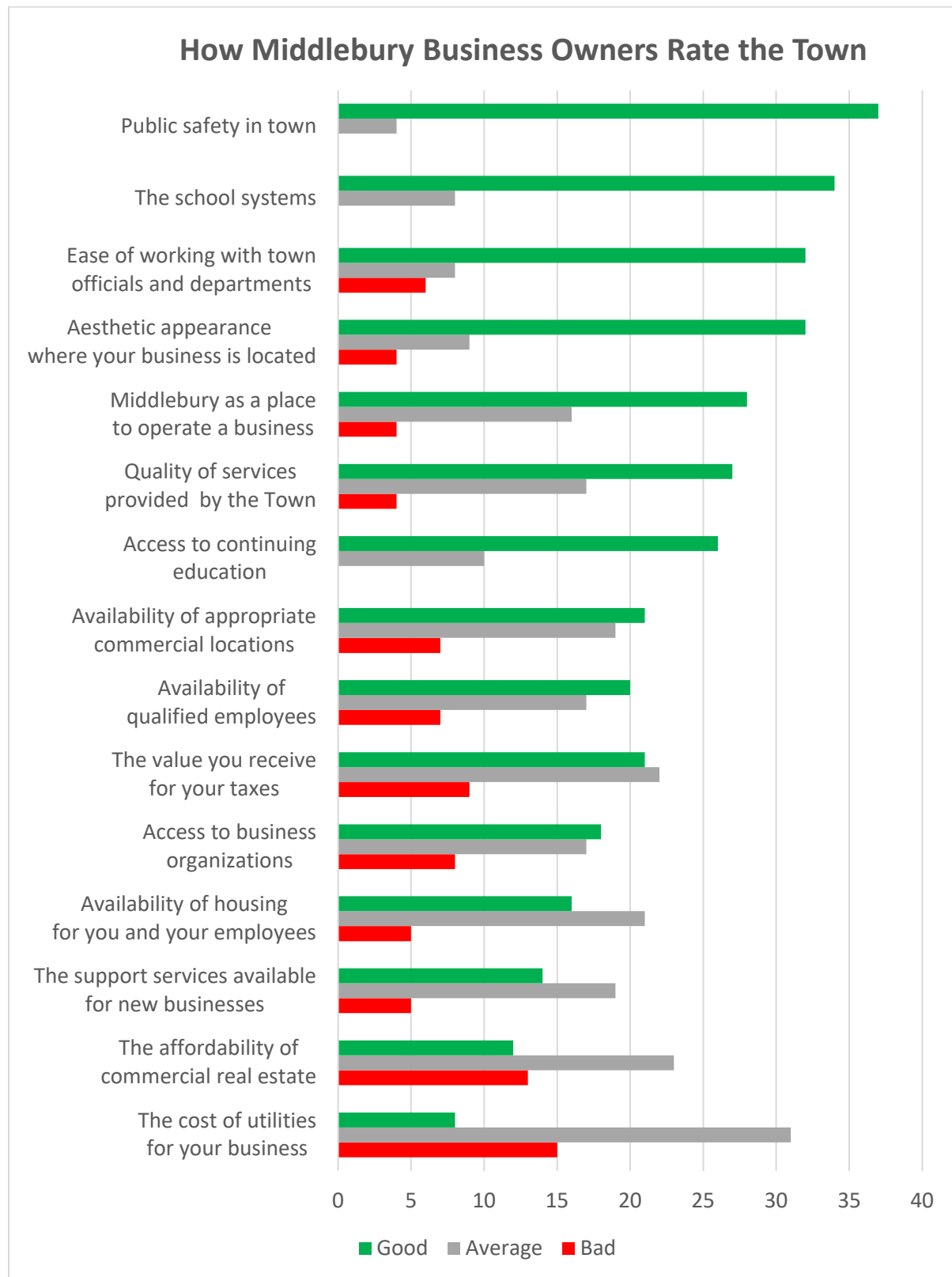
But many worried about losing the small-town “semi-rural” character and attractiveness of Middlebury and cautioned the commission about chain stores, traffic congestion and too many gas stations. Challenges included attracting customers from outside the town, promotional support from the town, local support, and business guides for consumers.

WHAT CHANGED FROM 2017 TO 2022?

There were fewer complaints and more compliments about working with town officials and town departments. Some of the new complaints involved accommodations for outside dining during the pandemic, which is no longer a concern.

There were several complaints about zoning regulation and assessment matters that had already been decided by town commissions. Similarly, some responses included complaints about state or federal regulations, which were said to be unnecessary or business hostile. EDC is not in a position to change any local regulations or rulings, beyond advocating for change if it feels the change would clearly benefit Middlebury.

BUSINESS RATING CHART



RESPONDENTS BY BUSINESS TYPE

Arts	5
Commercial Services	6
Contractors and Builders	10
Manufacturing	1
Media	1
Medical	9
Personal Services	4
Professional Services	6
Real Estate	6
Restaurant	7
Retail	4
	59 Total

RESPONSES BY SIZE

Small (1-3)	28
Medium (4-10)	27
Large (11 or more)	4
	59 Total

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 reputation, 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, and the approval process was said to be smooth and well run.

KEY FINDINGS, CONTINUED

WEAKNESSES

Several businesses complained Middlebury is not a destination for shopping, even for owners who love living here. They urge the town to get more small businesses (such as a pharmacy, hardware, or card store) that residents need and want.

Middlebury Center does not look inviting or upscale. There are too many gas stations. There is no town center for people to shop, walk, and congregate. Despite its charm, Middlebury was said to need sidewalks, beautification along Middlebury Road, and the MRA spruced up.

There were conflicting criticisms. Some asked for drive-thrus to be permitted while others wanted the town to be more walkable, leading to more foot traffic. Some wanted more strip shopping centers while others wanted the town to prohibit strip shopping centers.

Not surprisingly, state and municipal taxes, fees, and the general costs of doing business were frequently mentioned. One asked for a sliding scale of taxes based on business size, and another asked for no personal property tax on home-based business.

Two respondents complained of affordability of small office space.

Many commented about existing zoning and signage regulations and the need for more flexibility. Some raised concerns about “getting customers to notice me.” Two complained the town is tough on existing businesses.

Many complained about attracting customers from out of town. Some asked for business organizations, business guides, networking groups, and business social events to focus efforts together with the town in promoting business in Middlebury. The town is not promoting itself in Connecticut as an appealing destination for visitors.

One complained the town is not adequately promoting itself to business investment, its available commercial properties, or its tax incentive program. There is no welcoming of new businesses.

Many mentioned traffic congestion, especially on Route 64 and Route 63, and the frequent I-84 incidents jamming up local traffic. Several complained about losing business and needing to cancel or reschedule appointments due to congestion and lack of detour roads. One person quipped that a business could do well serving the people caught in traffic jams.

One said the town needs more community events and an arts commission.

Restaurant grease trap regulations were said by one developer to be much more difficult and costly than other towns.

KEY FINDINGS, CONTINUED

OPPORTUNITIES

Most of the recommendations were common sense:

- Improve sign regulations to 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 to and promotion of the tax incentive programs.

A few business owners had a broader view:

- Middlebury must make the town a desirable, upscale destination worth the travel time to get here. When people currently think of Middlebury they think of:
 - Middlebury Furniture and Home Design
 - Vyne Restaurant, Brewbury, and Pies & Pub
 - 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 to create a positive atmosphere for those seeking to do or grow business in Middlebury.

KEY FINDINGS, CONTINUED

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 does not need anymore 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.

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

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

As unanimously approved at the November 28, 2022 EDC Regular Meeting, the following actions are recommended for answering the concerns of our existing businesses.

REGULATIONS

Signage

Develop signage rules that help businesses attract customers while preserving the town's character.

Recognize Middlebury's Seven Distinct Business Areas

Take into account Middlebury's seven distinct commercial areas so the signage rules and zoning regulations can vary, depending on the nature of 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 AdvanceCT 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. See "Economic Development Coordinator" further down in the Advocacy and Support recommendation.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS, CONTINUED

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, but could be, with planning and funding.

The adopted 2015 Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) makes numerous recommendations regarding future community design.

Aesthetics

EDC and P&Z should 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 such "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 EDC members recommend funding and going forward with these guidelines.

EDC and P&Z should 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, also with an estimated costs of \$35,000. The EDC members recommend funding and going forward with this streetscape plan.

The Town should 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

Grease Traps – Since this complaint came up again as an impediment to new restaurants, EDC will meet with WPCA and review the actual costs of grease traps for new restaurants.

Cell service – This complaint, common to most small towns, said poor service and dead zones hindered business. The town should communicate the need to the Connecticut Siting Council.

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. Turning lanes onto the busier Straits Turnpike should be reviewed.

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

Encourage Desirable Business Expansion

EDC and the town should be proactive about encouraging and championing desirable development, especially in Middlebury Center. An example was a discussion July 2021 with the Board of Selectmen regarding a sale of town land to allow expansion of the Four Corners Shopping area. Such an expansion could lead toward parking, shopping, and walking between businesses.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS, CONTINUED

ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT

Create an “Economic Development Coordinator”

Middlebury’s EDC is currently an appointed commission of volunteers with an annual budget of \$2,000. Most of our neighboring towns have a paid position with a physical office and services.

We recommend creating a paid position or increasing the duties and hours of an existing town employee, to have the time available to be proactive and helpful. The person in that position must have a physical office in Town Hall with full support from administrative services. Such a coordinator should create and maintain a “Contact Database” to inform businesses of opportunities and issues.

The benefit of having a dedicated person, co-located with municipal officials, is a day-to-day awareness of opportunities and issues, something not possible with offsite unpaid volunteers.

At present, the First Selectman and Zoning Enforcement Officer often serve as facilitators in helping newer business owners find out what to do and get things done.

Marketing Commercial Properties

EDC met with several Commercial Real Estate Brokers in 2020, learning that such firms understand the market and are well motivated to offer Middlebury properties if the fit is right. Additionally, there are major websites such as Siterfinder, Loopnet, and the State of Connecticut registry available to promote and offer parcels of all sizes. EDC should continue supporting these marketing entities.

EDC should produce a video and related media to promote the town and its attributes.

Business Association

EDC should follow-up with survey respondents and other motivated business owners to see if there is enough critical mass to form a Middlebury Business Association.

Existing Business Promotion

EDC should encourage the town to bring back “Celebrate Middlebury” as a town fair for Middlebury businesses. This was discontinued in 2020 due to the pandemic and not resumed in 2021 or 2022. Such an event, along with concerts and street fairs, promote the “small town feel” we want. The town should also encourage an “Arts Commission” to organize concerts and similar gatherings.

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 (now Vyne Restaurant and Middlebury Home Design) which were initially met with resistance and now embraced as our “gems”.

EDC and the town must help create reasons for people to visit Middlebury. We must encourage and listen to “outside the box” creative proposals. Creative entrepreneurs and visionaries need to be encouraged.

APPENDIX A – SURVEY PROCEDURE

In late July 2022, EDC conducted a survey to gather attitudes and opinions from businesses throughout the town. The survey was a mailing to 467 businesses out of a list of 705 businesses provided by Town Assessor, Chris Kelsey.

FOLLOW UP SURVEY

The survey is a follow up to a similar survey conducted by EDC in 2017. The rationale for a follow up was to use 2017 as a baseline and determine whether opinions changed in five years, with the objective of reporting trends and economic conditions back to the municipality as required by Connecticut General Statutes § 7-136.

A MORE EXPANSIVE SURVEY

The 2022 survey was sent to a total of 467 businesses compared to only 300 businesses in 2017.

SURVEY TECHNIQUE

Business owners were asked initially to rate the importance of fifteen 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 remainder of the survey consisted of open-ended questions, asking owners to tell the EDC 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 EDC and names would be kept confidential.

PUBLICITY

The three-page survey was promoted in mid-July with notices in all three local papers as well as social media. A reminder was published in mid-August.

TWO METHODS OF SENDING OUT THE SURVEY, RATHER THAN ONE

The 2017 survey was a postal 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. There were 54 responses in 2017 for a yield of about 18%.

The 2022 survey employed both postal mail and E-mail, where E-mail was used when a valid address could be obtained. The source of the lists were 700 businesses provided by Town Assessor Chris Kelsey and 1061 businesses extracted from the Secretary of State Connecticut Business Registry. The lists were merged and filtered to remove inactive, nonexistent, or dormant businesses, and not send to non-profits, family trusts, leasing companies, and other entities not actually conducting business in Middlebury.

RAW STATISTICS

A total of 467 surveys were sent out, 264 by E-mail using the Survey Monkey program, and 203 by postal mail, with a self-addressed return envelope included in the mailing.

- For the Survey Monkey recipients, reminders were sent out twice for non-responders and then, in mid-August, a postal mailing was sent to the 197 businesses who had not responded by E-Mail.
- For the postal mailing, 24 non-responding businesses were visited in person by EDC commissioners to personally ask for the comments.
- Business owners who did not receive a survey were told they could get one from the town web site or by calling the Selectmen's office.

The survey drew 59 responses from a cross section of businesses, for an overall response yield of about 12%.

EFFICIENCY AND COST

The 2022 survey was less efficient, more costly, and provided only a marginal improvement in the number of responses (only 4 more) than 2017, despite a 50% increase in the number of surveys sent out.

The cost of the Survey Monkey E-Mail program was more than \$300, while the cost of the postal mailing and the postal mailing follow-up were about the same as 2017, meaning that the 2022 survey cost \$300 more to get 4 additional responses. In addition, many of the Survey Monkey responses contained mostly empty ratings and comments, while the postal responses were more completely filled out. Further, the complexity of combining the Survey Monkey data with the postal survey data required additional labor and data processing.

APPENDIX B – COMMISSION MEMBERS

Name	Term
Terrence McAuliffe, Chairman	3/6/2020 – 3/6/2025
David Cappelletti	4/16/2021 – 4/16/2026
Nicole Griffin	2/22/2022 – 2/22/2027
Jesse Langer	9/19/2022 – 12/21/2025
Frank Mirovsky	5/21/2022 – 5/21/2027
Armando Paolino	1/8/2018 – 1/8/2023
Mark Petrucci	4/16/2021 – 4/16/2026

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