

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Marketing the Town of Middlebury

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If you ask Siri or “Hey Google” whether Middlebury is a good place to live, the first answer to come back often is *“with a population of 7,739, Middlebury is in New Haven County and is one of the best places to live in Connecticut. Living in Middlebury offers residents a rural feel and most residents own their homes. Many retirees live in Middlebury and residents tend to lean liberal. The public schools in Middlebury are highly rated.”*

That four-sentence answer is pulled from niche.com, a website which has 140 million ratings and reviews for schools and colleges, as well as quality of life metrics for various U.S. cities. The underlying source of their ratings is more than a dozen governmental and business databases, making the niche.com results an accurate source for license by Apple and Google.

Middlebury also scores quite well in the 2021 Town Profile published by AdvanceCT, a nonprofit quasi-public organization that works in collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development. With a land area of only eighteen square-miles, Middlebury’s 7,739 residents live in 2,749 households, for a population density of only 436 per square-mile, far less than the state average of 738. The median yearly household income is \$121,122, compared to \$78,444 for the state and \$62,843 nationally. The Moody’s rating of financial governance is Aa1, excellent.

What does this residential goodness mean for economic development? We asked the people who best knew, commercial real estate brokers and developers.

The commission spoke with several of those firms in 2020 and 2021, asking what the town should do to market itself to business. In every case, we were told that Middlebury is regarded as an “upscale” town and a prestigious address with a good nearby labor force, great access to highways, and desirable demographics. Some pointed out the town’s unique proximity to Waterbury hospitals and acute care facilities as a plus. But we were also cautioned that we could not compete on price, because most of the surrounding towns had lower costs per square-foot and offered commercial space in less prestigious Class B and Class C categories, with older construction, less impressive architecture, and fewer amenities.

We were told to let commercial real estate agencies find the premium businesses that fit Middlebury because they’re already incentivized to do that. Our land use boards are doing a good job of moving approvals along, we have an aggressive tax abatement program, and our knowledgeable First Selectman, Ed St. John, is always available to show off the town to interested parties. If there was anything the commission should do it was to encourage the town to maintain its high standards and continue to improve the appearance of the town so visitors would know they arrived at “a great place.”

The Commission is comprised of seven members appointed by the Board of Selectmen. The commissioners are town residents and business owners who possess a wide range of experience and expertise about Middlebury and its economy. The Commission operates in accordance with Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 7-136 Municipal Economic Development Commissions. Its work focuses on conducting research on economic conditions and trends in Middlebury, promoting economic development, and supporting existing and prospective businesses.