



MIDDLETOWN

COMMUNITY GUIDE 2020–2021

**A Place to Call Home
In Southwest Ohio**



**ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
EDUCATION
OUTDOOR RECREATION**

Supplement to
Cincy
magazine

DISPLAY UNTIL WINTER 2022



Middletown: Roots of Steel and MODERN INNOVATION

While our historic roots will forever be proudly made of steel, Middletown's culture and livelihood now spans across the manufacturing industry into health care, high tech, and research and development while continuing to demonstrate quality and American pride in everything we do. No city can rival the creative energy and passion of Middletown, Ohio. We are a family. Whether you currently live in Middletown, are interested in moving to Middletown or are one of our neighbors, we welcome you with open arms and are grateful for the unique aspects you bring to our community.

Now more than ever, our central location between Cincinnati and Dayton provides endless business and work options, while our downtown district, beautiful Great Miami Riverfront and active parks continue to gift our citizens with a unique hometown energy and vibrance. Our business travelers have two international airports at their fingertips, as well as our very own expansive Middletown Regional Airport.

During First Friday events, you will find physicians, car mechanics, college students, entrepreneurs, scientists, recent graduates, mill workers, pilots, artists, CEOs, professional athletes, our beloved police officers and fire fighters, and Americans from all walks of life enjoying the company of their fellow citizens and Middletown family.

With roots made of steel, our city is sure to not just weather every storm but stand as a beacon for growth. Here's to enjoying life's precious moments TOGETHER in our hometown.

Blue Skies over Middletown,

Nicole Condry
Mayor, City of Middletown, Ohio



Table of Contents

Welcome	2
Leadership	3
Events	4
History	5
Economic Development	6
Employers	8
Education	10
Housing	13
Arts	14
Outdoor Recreation	15

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Answering the Call

Women and young people are finding their place in the municipal government

In Middletown, more young people and women are answering the call of government service than ever before. In fact, the current city council is the city's first female-majority council and the average age of its members is 39.

Mayor Nicole Condrey, who previously served in the Foreign Service office with the U.S. Department of State for 15 years, says that she decided to get involved in local government because it was a "purposeful challenge." Though not originally from the area (she moved to Middletown only a couple years ago) she's found there to be much to love about the city.

"Middletown is definitely on the cusp of an economic and quality of life explosion," she says. "It has so much untapped potential and has all this underlying energy

[that's] really just asking for just enough focus and attention to light that social fire. There's a lot of energy in our citizens."

Middletown's energy and potential are encouraging other driven individuals to take up leadership positions as well.

"What I can tell you is what you find in Middletown is a real desire for change and a real desire to help this community," says Susan Cohen, acting city manager of Middletown. "Middletown has such a rich tradition and young people are seeing that tradition and seeing what potential there is in this community and really taking on the call to guide this community into that next level in our next era."

Condrey says that the openness of the community itself has also allowed for more people to get involved.

"That was a little bit surprising to me at first because I know Middletown has a strong rooted history and a lot of pride in their community," says Condrey. "They're very embracing and [Middletown] definitely feels like it's my home and my family."

Cohen adds that she's found city residents to be willing to listen to any good idea, no matter the source. "The community is up to hearing those ideas, to see what Middletown can be and where we're headed. People want to buy into anybody who can help us get there ... People still know each other and people still know what's going on in town and that really fosters an environment of everyone being able to get involved," she says. ■



Events



Ohio Challenge

Downtown Fun

Middletown stays busy with unique and exciting events all year long

It's no exaggeration to say there's always something happening in Middletown. And according to Kara Goheen, a volunteer who handles social media and marketing for the nonprofit Downtown Middletown, Inc., that's the plan.

Middletown hosts events every month of the year, including Downtown Middletown, Inc.'s three signature events: the Women, Wine & Chocolate Walk, Hops in the Hangar and the Hocus Pocus Halloween Family Fun Festival.

In its eighth year, the Women, Wine & Chocolate Walk brings up to 1,200 women to Middletown to try different wines and chocolates, as well as do some shopping. "It's kind of an official ladies' night out that women look forward to. Usually if you come to one, you're coming back every year," says Goheen. During the May event, participants are given a wine tasting glass, swag bag and tasting map, which takes them into businesses throughout downtown.

"People travel from all over the Tri-state for this event in our little city, so it's re-

ally kind of a cool signature event," adds Goheen.

Another signature event, Hops in the Hangar, mixes craft beer samples with airplanes for a craft beer festival like no other. Goheen says that the event features up to 30 breweries, skydivers, acrobatic airshows and historic airplanes. Held annually at the Middletown Regional Airport in August, the event often attracts up to 1,500 people.

"It's a very unique kind of environment to have a craft beer event," says Goheen.

October's Hocus Pocus Halloween Festival invites the whole family to have fun in Middletown. During the festival, Main Street between Central and First avenues is filled with live music, dance troupes, arts and craft vendors and more. In addition, families can enjoy a car show, take a spooky tour of the Sorg Opera House or watch a free screening of the movie, *Hocus Pocus*. Visitors may even see the Sanderson sisters themselves walking around.

But Goheen says there is even more to do outside of these unique events. Downtown Middletown, Inc.'s First Friday events, held the first Friday of each month, invite residents and non-residents alike to explore downtown. Shops, restaurants and bars stay open late for the event, encouraging people to discover new businesses.

The goal of First Fridays is to get people downtown who may not have visited before or haven't done so in a few years.

"Once we get people down here they're always like, 'I had no idea this shop was down here or this was the best coffee I've ever had. How have I never been down



Thunderfest Cruise-In



Hops in the Hangar

here? I had no idea this was booming like this,'" says Goheen.

Each month also has a different theme with previous themes including an All-American Weekend, a Hot Chocolate Walk and Tasting Away in Margaritaville. "We did a salsa competition, like eating and tasting salsa, and a margarita competition, and a Jimmy Buffet afterparty with a cheeseburger bar," says Goheen of the Margaritaville event.

Other Middletown events include the Broad Street Bash, a block party with live music held every other Wednesday during the summer; Thunderfest Cruise-In, a large car show that features hourly "thunder" from the cars; Middletown Pride, which features a parade and festival; and the Ohio Challenge, a large hot air balloon festival.

In addition to Middletown residents, Goheen says that they've been seeing more and more people come from other locations in the Tri-state.

"We're actually attracting people from outside the area," she says. "That's been a really neat thing to see and Middletown is surprising a lot of people." ■



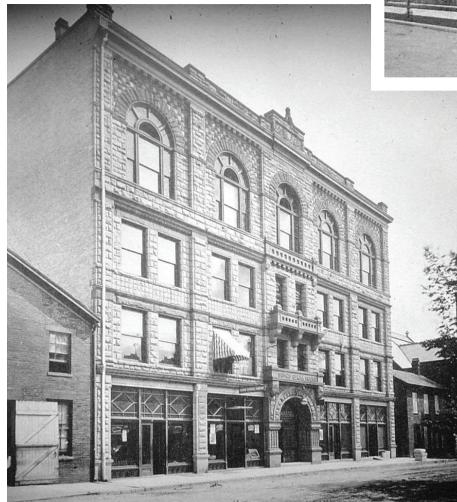
A Lasting LEGACY

Preservation of Historic Middletown buildings in progress for future enjoyment

Paul J. Sorg, a local businessman, philanthropist and member of the U.S. House of Representatives who lived from 1840 to 1902, impacted Middletown in many ways. But two of his most visible legacies, the Sorg Mansion and the Sorg Opera House, are becoming new again thanks to the work of passionate individuals.

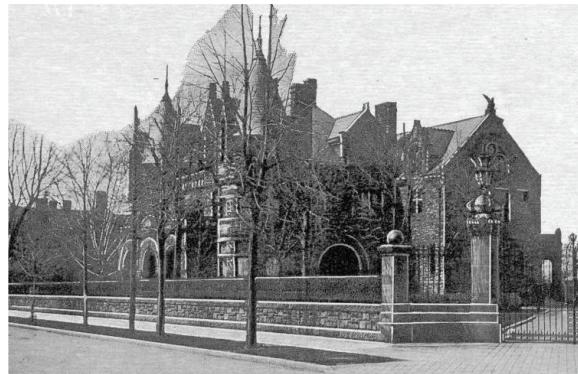
Sorg first moved to Middletown in 1869 when his tobacco company, Wilson, Sorg and Company, built a factory in the city. He would later marry his wife, Susan Jennie Gruver, in Middletown in 1876, and have two children, Paul Arthur Sorg and Ada Gruver.

In 1888, he completed a 35-room Romanesque style-mansion on South Main Street for his family. After his death, the mansion was used as a business school, dance and photo studios, a construction company and apartments, but it will soon be a single residence yet again. Mark and Traci Barnett purchased the home in



2013 and have been steadily remodeling it ever since.

In addition to his work as a businessman and a U.S. representative, Sorg was known for his contributions to both civic and charitable causes. One such contribution was the Sorg Opera House. Built by Sorg in 1891, the theater was designed by Samuel Hannaford, architect for Cincinnati's Music Hall, and, like Music Hall, features two curved balconies. In its heyday, artists like Will Rogers and Sophie Tucker performed in the theater.

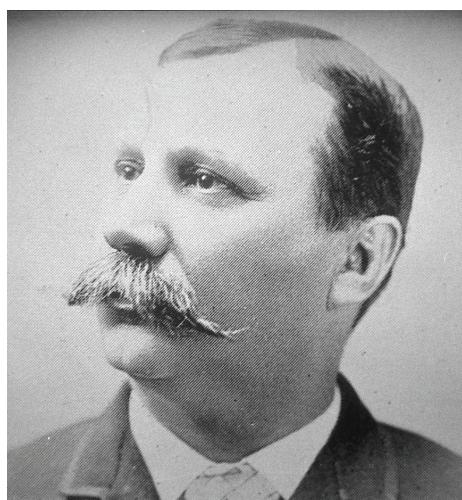


ABOVE: The Sorg Mansion in 1909

LEFT: The Sorg Opera House in 1895

BELOW: Paul J. Sorg

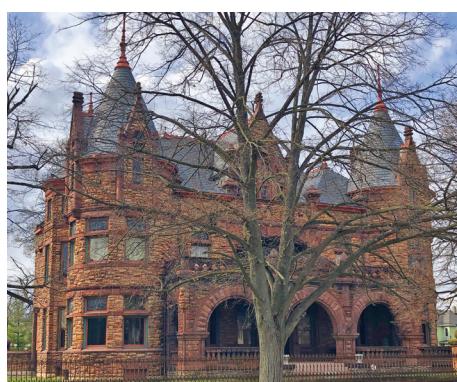
Photos Courtesy of the Crout Collection of MidPointe Library and Middletown Historical Society



Over the years, the Sorg Opera House fell into disrepair. But in 2012 the theater was bought by a group of investors and the Sorg Opera Revitalization Group was formed. Since then, the group has repaired and updated the roofing and drainage systems, hired an architecture firm to help with the renovation, replaced the seats, exposed the second balcony, repaired and restored bathrooms and installed heating and air conditioning.

With both buildings on their way to being restored, the legacy of Paul J. Sorg will continue to live on in these historic structures.

Information was provided by the Middletown Historical Society. Visit middletownhistoricalsociety.com to learn more about the society. ■



ABOVE: The Sorg Mansion today

LEFT: The Sorg mausoleum

Photos by Sam Salmon,
Middletown Historical Society



Sitting in a SWEET SPOT

Location is key to Middletown's growth



Downtown Middletown

Located near both Cincinnati and Dayton, the City of Middletown enjoys a location that is favorable to recreation and family life but still close enough to major metropolitan areas and transportation hubs to make it the perfect location for business.

"We sit right in the middle between Dayton and Cincinnati," says Chris Xeil Lyons, director of economic development for the City of Middletown. "We also enjoy a growing and diverse economy that includes companies in industry clusters like steel, chemicals, polymers and aviation."

Middletown is served by major interstate highways that offer access to 60% of the nation's population within a one day's drive. There are two international airports within an hour's commute in Cincinnati and Dayton. Middletown also offers access to three regional airports, including Middletown Regional, and Butler and Warren County airports. It's also served by the CSX and Norfolk Southern Railways.

There is an abundant water supply from the Miami Valley Aquifer and affordable energy sources, including service from one of the largest, most efficient gas turbine plants in the nation.



Cincinnati State Technical and Community College offers career and technical training to the Middletown community.

"We also have low-cost real estate and infrastructure that is already in place," Lyons notes. "Many communities don't have available sites or the urban fabric of a downtown area. Middletown has all of that."

But today, companies are looking for more than just logistics and location, Lyons concedes. They're looking for access to talent. Once again, the City of Middletown offers as much, if not more, than many communities three times its size.

More than 2.3 million people live within a 60-minute commute of the area. These are folks who bring with them a traditional Midwestern work ethic that is the envy of other regions across the nation. And that willing population has access to plenty of career, technical and collegiate training.

"We have an amazing relationship with our community partners in education," says Lyons.

Three local schools offer career and technical training, among them Butler Tech and the Warren County Career Center. Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, Sinclair Community College and Miami University Regionals offer degrees and certification programs.

One of the more recent economic development tools is an Opportunity Zone located near Middletown Regional Airport. City officials have been working to diversify future development, partnering with aviation maintenance and support companies.

"We like to stress opportunities," says Lyons. "But we're also very focused on retaining and growing the companies that are already here."

Many companies like to build on their success in Middletown. Take the former

Middletown Cycle as an example. When a large commercial space opened up near the highway, Middletown Cycle seized the opportunity to triple its floor space, purchasing the 93,000-square-foot property and immediately expanding its brands, products and service. It has since adopted the name Octane Outlet of Middletown to better describe its larger footprint.

"That's a great example of a company that expanded their operations by relocating within our community," says Lyons. "We also have at least three new retail quick serve outlets coming online as well."

This includes a new Chipotle restaurant expected this summer and a Waffle House and Dairy Queen expected in the second quarter of 2020, says Lyons.

In addition to its new retail development, an organization called Downtown Middletown Inc. has helped bring the city's downtown back to life, with local entrepreneurs turning historical buildings into homes for new businesses, many with completely new, modern twists that appeal to millennials—like Spoken Bicycles in downtown Middletown.

"Downtown Middletown Inc. has played a big role in bringing this neighborhood back and attracting people to downtown," says Otto Bohn, owner of Spoken Bicycles, a unique business that is one part bicycle

shop, one part running center and one part brew pub. "As a small business owner in Middletown, all I can say is that it's been fun. We have a real sense of community down here, and people really come out to support us. Of course, being just a few blocks from the Great Miami Riverway also helps."

The latter includes 99 miles of waterway as well as more than 300 miles of bike paths that run north to south and east to west, improving the quality of life for residents, while also adding to economic development.

"I guess the role we play in the area is really one of community development," says Dan Foley, director of the Great Miami Riverway. "A lot of the major employers in our area want their communities to be places where their workers want to live. Many cities along the river have leveraged our networks of bike paths and access to kayak and canoeing opportunities to develop more retail and dining establishments along the river."

Naturally, Middletown already has a presence. Located along the Great Miami River Trail, the River Center at Bicentennial Commons is a reprieve for bicyclists, runners and pedestrians alike. The building is over 3,000 square feet and sits on 3.2 acres of land. It is equipped with a kitchenette, conference room restrooms, two park offices and



Regional attraction BMW Motorcycles of Greater Cincinnati opened up near downtown Middletown in June 2019.

40 parking spaces. MetroParks of Butler County runs the River Center and hosts events there throughout the year.

City council has already approved a trail plan that will connect Middletown to Franklin. When completed in fall 2021, the new trail will connect the Great Miami River Trail to Dayton and beyond for nearly 80 miles of continuous trail.

A prime location between two major metro areas, logistical transportation links and economic opportunities throughout the community have made the City of Middletown a great destination for emerging businesses. It's also easy to see why so many companies call Middletown home. ■



MetroParks of Butler County operates the River Center at Bicentennial Commons. In addition to giving bicyclists and runners a place to rest, the center hosts meetings and events.



Employers



AK Steel has called Middletown home for more than 120 years. Today, it employs 2,400 locally.

Corporate Citizens

Middletown is the perfect size for many world-class companies

To several large, world-class companies, Middletown is a hidden gem to call home.

Given the logistical assets the area has to offer and its prime location between Cincinnati and Dayton, is it any wonder companies like AK Steel, now a Cleveland-Cliffs Company, choose to operate major facilities in Middletown?

AK Steel is a leading producer of flat-rolled carbon, stainless and electrical steel products, primarily for the automotive, infrastructure and manufacturing markets. AK Steel has more than 120 years of manufacturing and innovation in Middletown, with its predecessor, ARMCO, first incorporating there in 1899. Today, AK Steel's Middletown Works' facility is located on a 2,791-acre site and employs approximately 2,400 people locally, according to published reports.

But steel is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Middletown's diverse and growing list of corporate citizens.

"There are several targeted industries that we have identified that are major employers in our area," says Chris Xeil Lyons, director of economic development for the city of Middletown. "We have steel, of course, but also chemicals, polymers and aviation and aerospace because of our proximity to Wright-Patterson Air Force base."

Headquartered in Mississauga, Ontario, Magellan Aerospace is a global enterprise providing integrated products to the aerospace industry worldwide. At its Middletown location, the company manufactures high-temperature, vacuum-brazed honeycomb structures primarily for aircraft exhaust systems, in addition to assembling titanium and nickel-based alloy components. The company also makes carbon fiber, filament-wound components, among many other products for both aircraft and missiles.

"Surprisingly, we also have a number of major packaging companies that have a presence here in Middletown," adds Lyons.

Those companies include PAC National, which has more than 1,200 employees in facilities worldwide, providing custom and stock packaging solutions and

automated packaging systems around the world. Another one is Graphic Packaging International, which manufactures paperboard and paper-based packaging for some of the world's most recognized brands of food, beverage, foodservice, household, personal care and pet care products. Of course, the Middletown facility is just one of more than 70 worldwide. The International Paper plant in Middletown manufactures corrugated boxes.

While those companies are among the larger employers in the area, the invasion of the novel coronavirus has changed manufacturing and employment. However, there are some industry sectors and companies that have seen an expansion of their business or services in recent months, including health care.

"And our area is served by two major health care facilities that are also major employers," says Lyons.

With well over 1,500 employees and almost 300 volunteers, the Atrium Medical Center is a full-service hospital and Level III Emergency Trauma Center that serves Butler and Warren counties. A member of Dayton-based Premier Health, it's also a Magnet Hospital for nursing excellence.

Kettering Health Network opened its Middletown location in 2018, providing the community with comprehensive care that includes round-the-clock emergency care with MRI, CT, X-ray, ultrasound and cardiac testing. The Middletown location also offers heart and vascular care, primary care, orthopedic care, general surgery and women's health services. The Kettering Health Network includes nine hospitals throughout the region that employ more than 12,000 people.

Another company that has found success in Middletown is Pilot Chemical, which manufactures disinfectant products.

"Pilot Chemical's Middletown plant has been in operation since 1985," says Mike Bizzarro, director of Manufacturing and Middletown plant manager for Pilot Chemical Company. "Over the last 25 years we have had three significant expansions at the site. There we specialize in surfactant production for a variety of markets, including the personal and home care cleaning market."

The Middletown plant employs approximately 72 people and has seen high demand for its surfactant products, which are key ingredients used to make consumer and industrial cleaning products.

According to Bizzarro, Pilot likes Middletown because of its great location.

"We can deliver product to most of our customers within one day," he says. "With Middletown, we have easy access to solid public services, like fire and police departments, as well as reliable and accessible utilities, including an industrial wastewater facility."

"The city is very supportive of business—tax incentives enabled our last expansion of the plant."

Pilot Chemical's location in Middletown gives it great access for shipping and warehousing and close proximity to a key raw material supplier in Cincinnati, says Bizzarro.

"Additionally, we're uniquely positioned to tap skilled labor, industrial maintenance and contract engineering expertise from the Tristate area," he adds. "Having the Cincinnati Northern Kentucky International Airport nearby also enables business meetings and plant visits from our regional, national and global customers. There are a number of family-friendly communities and amenities in the general area that provide a short commute to the plant for

our employees, which is a huge benefit when we recruit."

Approximately 24% of Pilot's Middletown plant workforce lives in Middletown, while 54% live in Butler County, says Bizzarro.

Recruitment "is an ongoing struggle with all manufacturers, but we are heavily engaged with the Advanced Manufacturing Industry Partnership that is actively promoting manufacturing careers to high school students," says Bizzarro. "We participate in the annual Manufacturing Month in October to invite students to our plant to learn about what we do, and we've partnered with Cincinnati State to train our chemical operators."

In addition to recruiting from the local workforce, Pilot Chemical has also

been recognized as a solid corporate citizen. The company recently earned a prestigious regional award that not only recognizes its environmental efforts but also represents a deepening of its relationship with city officials.

In January, the Southwest Section of the Ohio Water Environment Association (OWEA) honored Pilot Chemical with the Karl G. Voelkel Industry Award for outstanding environmental achievement. Bestowed on companies that have improved the water environment in Southwest Ohio, the award recognizes contributions in waste minimization, pollution prevention, environmental compliance and environmental stewardship. ■

The Great Miami Riverway and the bike path are attracting companies and talent to Middletown.





Something **SPECIAL**

Middletown's education offerings include programs that you can't find anywhere else

There's nothing ordinary about education in Middletown. In fact, high school students and those seeking a college degree have access to programs in Middletown that can't be found anywhere else in the country.

BUTLER TECH

Butler Tech, a career technical school in Butler County, serves both adults and high school students with a variety of programs. Adults can earn industry-recognized certifications in areas like health care and public safety and high school students from 11 area schools—including Middletown High School—can receive career education while completing their high school degree or take College Credit Plus courses.

Butler Tech's newest career education track for high school students is one of the first of its kind in the country. Called the Aviation Exploration Pathway, the program teaches juniors and seniors about aviation theory, navigation and management, principles of meteorology forecasting, aircraft ground safety procedures and aviation maintenance.

"One of the things that we try to do with Butler Tech programming is not only

Students in the Butler Tech Aviation Exploration Pathway program at Middletown Regional Airport have opportunities to work with real airplanes.

look at what's in demand right now but also try to look out and see, in a couple of years, what are the in-demand jobs going to be because essentially we're trying to train for the future," says A.J. Huff, public relations coordinator for Butler Tech. With the proximity of the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Middletown Regional Airport and other businesses related to the aviation industry, Butler Tech saw that jobs like airplane mechanics, engineers and drone pilots would soon be in demand.

"Superintendent John Graft was with someone in the [aviation] industry and they said, 'We have a hair problem... Everybody that does this job either has no hair or gray hair,'" says Huff. "So we really need to get some young blood in there."

The program, started in fall 2019, takes just 25 students each year. Students spend half their day at Butler Tech's Fairfield campus taking classes needed for their high school degree and the other half getting real hands-on education at the Middletown Regional Airport.

Huff says that the airport has proven to

be the perfect location for the program.

"You have not only the hangar there, which it's amazing that the kids can go out and actually be around the planes, but there is some classroom space as well," she says. Students can thus spend time in a traditional classroom for lectures, work in the hangar to get some hands-on experience and use a comfortable study space ideal for group work and collaboration.

In addition to working with real planes, students have the opportunity to work with drones. In fact, all students become FAA-licensed drone pilots by the end of their junior year.

"A lot of current students are making money doing that! A couple of them have side businesses where they're flying for Realtors or doing festivals and things where they're getting some aerial shots for certain organizations," says Huff.

To join the program, students must apply during their sophomore year. A high GPA is not a requirement, but students do have to go through an interview process.



By utilizing space at the Middletown Regional Airport, Butler Tech's Aviation Exploration Pathway students can learn everything from the science of flying to airplane maintenance.

"In the interview process what we look for is passion and that sense of purpose and their desire to go into whatever field that they're applying for," says Huff.

The program has already proven to be popular—almost 800 were turned away last year because only 25 students can enter the program at a time.

And Butler Tech has plans to make the program even better next year. The school recently purchased its own airplane for students to work on.

"That will definitely ramp things up for next year because they're actually going to have their own plane that they can really get in there, not just point to the pieces and do different things but literally take it apart, look at all of the pieces and troubleshoot different things. They'll actually take that hands-on [aspect] to a whole different level having a true plane to work with," says Huff.

MIAMI UNIVERSITY REGIONALS

Miami University is more than its main campus in Oxford, with two regional campuses in Middletown and Hamilton and the Voice of America Learning Center in West Chester. Together, those additional locations are called Miami University Regionals and they're designed to provide a quality college education close to home.

to work approximately 24 hours a week at participating businesses will have their tuition covered in addition to being paid by their employer.

"If they can make it work, and we've got maybe 30 of them that are making it work right now, they graduate with no debt, zero debt, which is pretty sweet," says Perry Richardson, senior director of Media & Community Relations for Miami University Regionals.

Called Work+, the program was first developed by Ohio Sen. Bill Coley, who reached out to see if Miami would be interested. His hope was to not only have students graduate without debt but to also connect area employers with skilled workers. Only in its first year, the program's participating companies include thyssenkrupp Bilstein of America in Hamilton, Deceuninck in Monroe, The Fischer Group in Fairfield and the Butler County Regional Transit Authority in Hamilton. However, Richardson says that Miami is already working with several other companies to get them involved, too.

To join the program, the student must be enrolled at Miami University Regionals (not Miami University in Oxford) and must interview with a participating company.

"In other words, if the company doesn't think that this particular student is a

They're also offering opportunities that students can't find on the Oxford campus.

Students who are enrolled full-time with Miami University Regionals (which requires a minimum of 12 credit hours) and agree



Miami University Regionals' 2019 Fall Fest on the Middletown campus featured food, fun and inflatables. The event was designed to help online and regional students feel connected to the university.



A rendering of the expanded Rosa Parks Elementary. The project is projected to be completed in August 2021.

good fit then they won't hire them," says Richardson. "So they have to pass muster with the employers, but they've been doing that."

But even students who don't participate in Work+ can find much to like about Miami University Regionals. Students can choose from among 18 bachelor's degrees and the tuition is roughly one-third of what it is on the Oxford campus. Students can take classes in person on a regional campus, online or both.

"You can start and finish without ever having to go to Oxford. Because most of our students are local, they're not looking for the quintessential residential experience that Oxford provides. They're looking for the degree or the diploma," says Richardson. "We meet people where they are, they don't come to where we are."

In the coming years, Miami is also looking to transfer its entire engineering technology department for the regional campuses to Middletown, making what Richardson calls an innovation hub.

MIDDLETOWN CITY SCHOOLS

Over the last few years, Middletown City Schools has also been working on providing more for its students.

Its biggest and most noticeable project, the \$10 million expansion of Rosa Parks Elementary School, promises to do more than add additional space for students. It will also start the implementation of challenge-based learning in Middletown City Schools.

"It's like project-based learning but it's a little more robust," says Elizabeth Beadle, communications specialist for Middletown City Schools. In this type of learning, students take a hands-on role in solving a problem. Once students are introduced to a topic, they have to identify a problem and work to develop a solution. For example, during the pilot program, eighth grade Middletown students developed a tool to assist those with disabilities throw a softball during the Special Olympics.

"Rosa Parks [is] going to be our first elementary to completely embrace challenge-based learning," says Beadle. "Once we feel that the Rosa Parks staff has really embraced that model, we would then scale it out to our other elementary schools."

The school broke ground in March and anticipates finishing and opening the expansion in August 2021. With the

expansion the school will have 13 additional classrooms and its current learning spaces will be updated. The expansion will reduce the average elementary class size in the school district, giving students more individualized attention as well as a new way to learn.

Middletown City Schools is also providing more for its students by creating new clubs and classes. New at the end of the 2019-20 school year, Middletown's esports club allows students to learn about and compete in the fast-growing world of electronic sports (sports competitions that use video games). According to *Forbes Magazine*, global esports revenue surpassed \$1 billion in 2019 and that number is expected to continue to grow.

Miami University, which is heavily involved with esports and has the 11th best game design program in the country, has partnered with the school district to help students learn more about this growing field.

The school district hopes to grow the club so that there is a varsity team. The district would also like to have a class on the subject that students could use to earn college credit and teaches them how they can help develop these games. ■



Project POTENTIAL

The city invests in neighborhoods, future housing stock in newly designated historical district

While many people look at the location of the former Vail Middle School and see an empty lot, Middletown sees only potential.

The lot, located in the Oakland neighborhood just south of downtown, is phase one of what is being called the Oakland Redevelopment District. While the neighborhood was initially built because of its location near an AK Steel factory, over the years it had suffered from disinvestment and high crime rates.

When the city began looking for ways to help improve local neighborhoods, its attention quickly turned to Oakland and the vacant school lot.

“The Vail Middle School was torn down by the Middletown City Schools about 2 years ago, and it leaves a wide swath of land right in the middle of this neighborhood... So we purchased the school site at the end of the year last year with the intention that we will use it for the starting off point for the Oakland Redevelopment neighborhood,” says Susan Cohen, acting city manager for the city.

The city is talking with developers about adding condominiums and retail to the land that reflect the historic feel of the neighborhood. While this happens, the city will also be assisting current homeowners with historic renovations, updating Oakland Park and improving the infrastructure of the neighborhood—new paving, new sewage pipes where needed and new lighting.

“This neighborhood is so close to downtown and our river site and our airport and so many attractions that we really want to make it a focal point to say, ‘Hey, look, here’s a neat way to honor the history of the neighborhood,’ but also really put in some great new housing stock that we think people are going to get excited about. The Vail is sort of the cornerstone for that,” says Cohen.



Two proposed development plans for the former Vail Middle School lot

But the city is also looking to help those who are already there. Middletown has been working to create a neighborhood association for Oakland and on getting historical designations for the community, which could provide access to future tax breaks. And when it comes to updating the park, the city wants residents to weigh in.

“[We’re] really looking at the community saying we want to help you put in good infrastructure, what do you want and what would you like to see in this area. Really

developing a sense of community around that,” adds Cohen.

With the redevelopment of the Vail lot, as well as the private renovation of the old Carnegie Library already in progress, the city is aiming to have more people live, work and play in downtown Middletown and its adjacent neighborhoods.

“The focus [is] on making the city that real walkable, urban environment that people want and that we have the desirable housing to match those needs,” says Cohen. ■



An Arts Explosion

Middletown has more ways to explore and enjoy the arts than ever before

While Middletown has always been committed to the arts, this devotion has become even stronger over the last couple years.

The Sorg Opera House, for example, was built in 1891 but has recently found new life. Starting in 2012, the theater continues to be renovated and updated for modern audiences. While there is still more work to do, visitors can now see live concerts, shows and more in this historic venue.

Another provider of the arts, the Pendleton Art Center, offers local artists and art lovers spaces for creativity, art exhibitions and educational programs. Artists are able to rent studios for their work, and the Pendleton is currently home to painters, custom furniture makers, jewelry designers and more. While studio hours vary, all studios can be toured during Middletown's First Friday events on the first Friday of every month as well as on Second Chance Saturdays, which occur on the Saturday directly after the First Friday.

For more ways to learn about art, visitors can stop by the Middletown Arts Center (MAC).



The Miami-Erie Canal Mural at Central Avenue and Verity Parkway was painted by muralist Eric Henn.



The Middletown Arts Center

Founded in 1957, the MAC is the oldest arts center in the region. It hosts 20 free, family-friendly cultural arts exhibitions, with 15 held at the MAC and five held at one of the MAC's community partners (which includes the Middletown City Building).

"We're really happy that we can provide these exhibits at no cost and we welcome everyone to come view them," says Kate Dykes, executive director of the MAC.

In addition to the rotating exhibitions, the MAC offers a variety of classes in topics like painting, ceramics, photography, enameling, fiber arts and fused glass. It's also one of the only facilities in the area that offers silversmithing.

"I think that when people come here they're surprised by our facility, all of our equipment and tools, and by everything that we have to offer," adds Dykes. "Yet we have a really small hometown accessibility [where] you feel like you can try new things and explore new mediums and connect with other artists and collaborate."

Local artisans and businesses also call Middletown home. BeauVerre Riordan Stained Glass Studios, the oldest documented continually operating stained glass studio in the country, is housed in a turn-of-the-century building in downtown Middletown. Haute Fusion Glass Studio & Gallery is owned by self-



The Port Middletown Arts Festival features the work of professional artists as well as interactive stations.

taught fused-glass artist John Fernando, whose work has been featured throughout the Tristate. And the Chris Walden Gallery in the Windamere Event Venue showcases the work of celebrated wildlife artist Chris Walden.

Each year, Middletown also hosts its own arts fair, called the Port Middletown Arts Festival. Held in September, the event features the handcrafted works of artisans, live art demonstrations, chalk artists, food trucks, face painting, make-and-take stations, live music and more.

And don't forget Middletown's murals! There are several within the city, including the Shetter Carnival Mural on the back of the YMCA building and the Miami-Erie Canal Mural right in the middle of downtown Middletown. ■



By Bike, by Foot and by Boat

Middletown's trails and parks keep people moving

Those using the bike path can take a break and enjoy the view in Bicentennial Commons.

When you need to get outside and breathe in some fresh air, Middletown offers plenty of outdoor recreation to keep the whole family occupied. From bike paths to pickleball, there's something for everyone.

GREAT MIAMI RIVER TRAIL

For those looking to run, walk, bike or skate, Middletown provides plenty of opportunities thanks to access to the Great Miami Riverway.

"The Riverway, we call it 99 miles of connected communities, paved trails and riverway," says Dan Foley, director of the Great Miami Riverway. The goal of the organization is to have 99 miles of

interconnected trails that connect Sidney to Hamilton, allowing people to move from city to city without having to leave a paved trail that follows the river.

The next phase of the trail, connecting Middletown to Franklin, is already funded and expected to be completed in 2021. After that 1-mile stretch is finished, the Riverway is looking to complete the trail by funding trails between Sidney and Piqua and Middletown and Hamilton. "Knock on wood, if we can get that one done that would mean you could go from Sidney all the way to Middletown unimpeded," adds Foley.

Named the best bike path in the state by *Ohio Magazine* two years in a row, the Great Miami Riverway gives outdoor enthusiasts of all ages a chance to enjoy outside in a beautiful setting.

GREAT MIAMI RIVER

While the bike path is certainly a valued attraction, Foley says that residents and visitors shouldn't forget about the river.

"This river is pretty amazing," he says. "When you're on the river you see herring, you see all kinds of wildlife and it's just a great way to kind of disconnect and be outside."

During the summer, paddlers can bring their own kayaks and canoes so as to

better enjoy the river. When you need a break, Foley recommends fishing, as the Great Miami River is a great place for catching small mouth bass.

BICENTENNIAL COMMONS

At Bicentennial Commons, bike riders and runners can rest alongside those who want to enjoy the view of the river. The 11-acre park, which is part of the Metroparks of Butler County, is home to Middletown's River Center. Opened in 2018, the center has given the region a new event space on the Great Miami River Trail. Thanks to the facility, Middletown has been able to host events such as a hiking series and other outdoor adventures for the community to enjoy.

PICKLEBALL

The type of recreation Middletown is most known for, though, is a lesser known sport: pickleball. In fact, thanks to its 16 courts in Lefferson Park, Middletown is considered to be the pickleball capital of Ohio. A mix of tennis, badminton and ping pong, pickleball is a game that people of all ages can play. The sport has proven to be so popular in the area that the Middletown Pickleball Association hosts a tournament there every year in August, bringing thousands into the city. ■



The Ohio Challenge, which takes place near the Riverway at Smith Park, brings thousands of people to Middletown.



Central Avenue in downtown Middletown

