



MIDDLETOWN NOW

SPRING MEANS PICKLEBALL IS BACK

MEET THE MAN WHO TURNED
MIDDLETOWN INTO THE
PICKLEBALL CAPITAL OF OHIO

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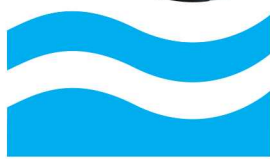
MIDDLETOWN, OHIO
Butler & Warren Counties

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Letter from the City Manager

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL IN MIDDLETOWN



**ASHLEY N.
COMBS**
City Manager

Middletown,

I am honored to be appointed as the permanent City Manager of Middletown. I am grateful to the Mayor and City Council for their trust in my abilities and this incredible opportunity. As City Manager, I will initially focus on three key areas: operational efficiency, neighborhood sustainability, and economic development. I look forward to serving the community and dedicating myself to making Middletown the best place to live, work, play, and invest!

I'm thrilled to share that Middletown is buzzing with incredible projects! We're currently working on the Renaissance Pointe development, Towne Mall redevelopment, Paperboard remediation, Downtown Refresh, new Fire Stations, City Parks renovations, and so much more. Exciting changes are unfolding between I-75 and Downtown Middletown. As spring approaches, our passion for Middletown continues to grow!

In February, the City released a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for the Towne Mall redevelopment to attract a developer. We truly appreciate the insights that residents shared through the community survey and Town Hall at Towne Mall. We can't wait to see what responses we receive for the RFQ and how it will shape the site's future. This site will complement the Renaissance Pointe project to bring exceptional, family-friendly amenities to the City! We look forward to sharing updates with you every step of the way.

We're looking forward to the grand opening of the Monsoon Bay Water Park at the Atrium YMCA in the City's East End later this year! This new destination will bring a new summer fun experience to families. Best of all, you don't need a YMCA membership to enjoy the fun. We can't wait for you to dive in!

Last year, our City kicked off new initiatives to clean and beautify our neighborhoods. I'm happy to announce that the Trash Bash came back on April 26th and was a huge success! This City-led event allows residents to dispose of trash, litter, and debris at specific drop-off locations. The City is also updating the Home Improvement Repair Program and expects to roll out the next round of applications in the coming months. Follow the City of Middletown's social media pages for updates on these great opportunities. Let's continue to work together to beautify our neighborhoods!

In March, the City recently kicked off the "Downtown Refresh" project in Middletown. The process started with a community survey followed by an inspiring Town Hall meeting. We thank you for your incredible feedback and passion for the downtown! City staff is dedicated to reviewing your ideas and creating a plan for further investment and revitalization. Be on the lookout for updates and more opportunities to get involved in this project.

April is here, meaning Earth Day has come and gone! Did you know that Middletown is a designated Tree City USA community? The City has held this status since 2007 because we committed to providing our residents with a healthier, happier, and more livable environment by maintaining and expanding our tree canopy. The perfect way to enjoy our trees is by visiting a City Park! The City's Park Board is working hard to plan and implement renovations to all parks across the City. The next Parks to be completed are Goldman Park and Oakland Park. Goldman Park will feature new ADA-accessible playground equipment, ensuring that children of all abilities can have fun together. Oakland Park renovations are also underway, and the park will feature new amenities such as pickleball and basketball courts, playground equipment, and shelter. We look forward to ribbon cuttings soon and hope you'll join us in celebrating!

City staff is genuinely grateful for our residents' incredible dedication to participating in our community engagement activities over the past few months. Your involvement ensures that our projects reflect your needs, paving the way for a brighter future for generations to come. Thank you for joining us to create a stronger, vibrant community!

Thank you for choosing Middletown! We are excited to connect and hope to see you soon at our events, meetings, or around the community!

Wishing you a colorful and joyful spring filled with incredible new adventures! We can't wait to share the exciting projects that are about to blossom—stay tuned for amazing things ahead!

Sincerely,

Ashley N. Combs

CITY NEWS

First Two Firehouses are Now Occupied!

The Middletown Division of Fire moved into the first two new fire stations in the first quarter of 2025! Those stations are Station 82 at the corner of S.R. 122 and Atrium Boulevard and the new Fire Headquarters at the corner of Yankee Rd. and Cherry St. Operations are now full at those stations. A community open house is being planned to provide the opportunity for residents to tour the new facilities.

The other two stations, 85 (located on Sophie Ave. at Stolz Rd.) and 81 (on Charles Ave. at Henry Ave.) will be completed in the coming months.



Ashley Combs Named Permanent City Manager

Middletown City Council voted unanimously at its regular meeting on March 4 to appoint Ashley N. Combs to the permanent city manager position, effective immediately.

"I'm honored to be appointed to the position of city manager for the City of Middletown, a community I have grown to love over my nine years working here," Combs said. "I want to thank City Council for trusting me with this position and I look forward to continuing the good work in making Middletown a better place to live, work, and play."

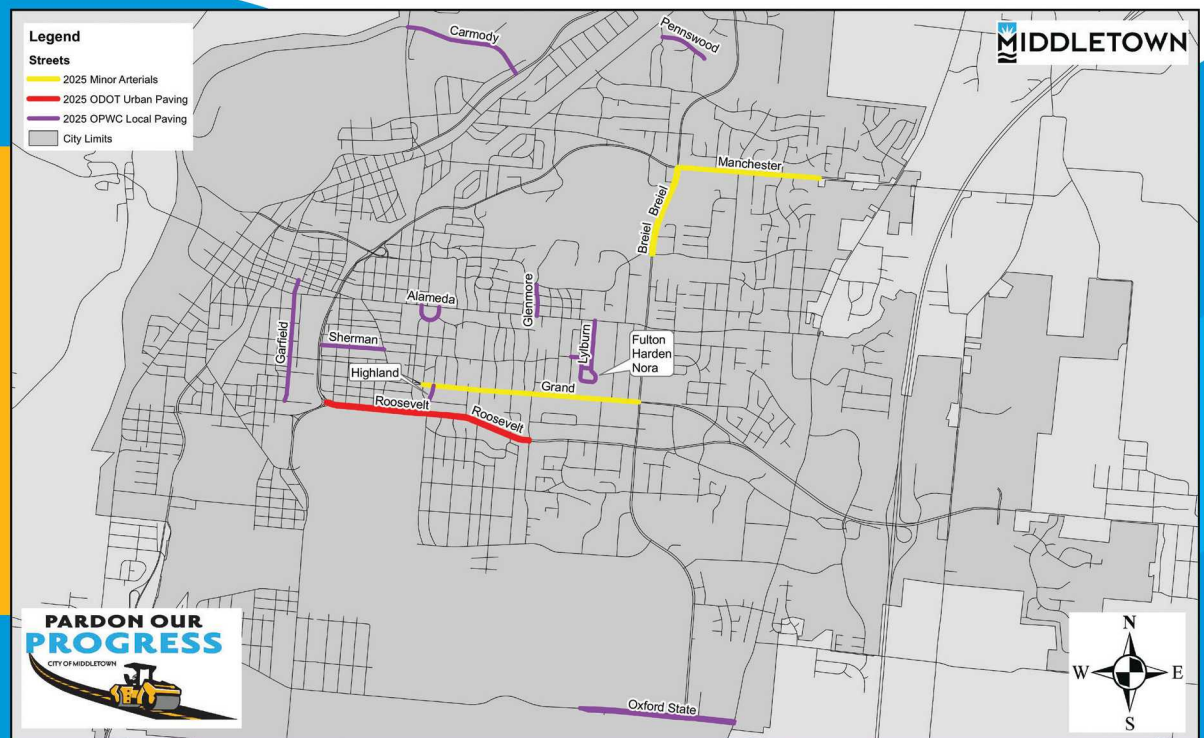
Combs has been employed with the City of Middletown since 2015 when she began as a City Planner, rising through the ranks as a planning director, development services director, assistant city manager and most recently, acting city manager. As assistant city manager, she oversaw community and economic development, human resources, information systems, the Event Center of Middletown, and communications.

Combs had been acting city manager since Jan. 1, 2025.



Street Paving Continues in 2025

The City of Middletown is continuing its street paving program this year! Check out the map below to see which streets are scheduled to be paved this year!



TWO POWERHOUSE CHAINS BOOST I-75 REVITALIZATION

Two new chains are now anchored in Middletown with one location opening in early March and the other opening later in 2025! After months of delays during the construction phase, Starbucks opened its first standalone location at the corner of S.R. 122 and Towne Boulevard in early March! The new location includes a drive-thru and carryout orders of the iconic brand's signature drinks and bites. This is the second Starbucks location in Middletown, with the other being located

inside the Towne Boulevard Kroger. That location is expected to stay open.

The City of Middletown announced on March 14 that Chick-fil-A will be returning to the City of Middletown later this year. The social media post on Facebook to announce the arrival of Chick-fil-A quickly received over 1,000 reactions and hundreds of



comments. The location will open along Culbertson Rd. next to Tire Discounters. Chick-fil-A had a location in the Towne Mall during the height of the mall, but has been closed for over a decade.

TOWNE MALL REDEVELOPMENT LATEST

On Feb. 19, the City of Middletown issued a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for a possible partnership on the Towne Mall Redevelopment Project. The deadline for submissions was Wednesday, March 19. The City is currently reviewing the submissions.

The purpose of the Towne Mall Redevelopment RFQ is to find a development entity with the vision and experience to create a signature redevelopment effort and who will work with the City in a public-private partnership to fully execute and complete the agreed proposal.

Before the RFQ was issued, a community survey was taken to help shape and guide the redevelopment effort.

According to survey results, 75 percent of respondents said they would like to see some sort of retail or service commercial use. This includes entertainment, shopping, restaurants, and family activities. In addition to the survey, a Town Hall at the Towne Mall open house event was held in December,



which allowed city staff to directly interact with the community to discuss ideas, interests, and considerations using poster boards and conversations. These results similarly reflected the online survey. The full results of the online survey are available upon request.

DOWNTOWN REFRESH TOWN HALL

On March 11, the City hosted a Downtown Refresh Town Hall where community members were given an opportunity to view a presentation from the City regarding the past, present, and future of Downtown Middletown. Following the presentation, the floor was opened for discussion on how the City should proceed with a refresh of Downtown. Results from the community survey and the discussion from the Town Hall will be made available on the city website.



COMMUNITY EVENTS

Dessert Week and St. Patrick's Day Kick Off 2025 Events Season

The City of Middletown opened the 2025 City Events season with Dessert Week during the week of February 10-16. Desserts from 12 different restaurants and eateries across Middletown were featured in the event. Those restaurants were Bourbon's Kitchen, Brent's Smokin' Butts & Grill, Broken Barrel, Foodeez, Grecian Delight, J&E Root Beer Stand, Primo Italian Steakhouse, Starvin' Marvin, Steel City Pizza, The Cracked Pot, The Swire Inn, and Triple Moon Coffee Co.

In March, the City held its annual St. Patrick's Day celebration in Downtown Middletown! While the parade was cancelled due to rain, the Bar Crawl and kids' activities remained a popular event. Kids activities were moved inside to Triple Moon Coffee Co. with face painters at Triple Moon, DC Roadhouse, and Broken Barrel. Over a dozen bars and restaurants were a part of the Bar Crawl, offering drink specials throughout the night. The City thanks all of the businesses for remaining open and making St. Patrick's Day happen despite the rain.



Middletown Celebrates Arbor Day and Earth Day!

As a Tree City USA, the Keep Middletown Beautiful and the City of Middletown hosted their annual Arbor Day Tree Planting event at Goldman Park on Friday, April 25! Representatives from Pilot Chemical, the City of Middletown, and the Middletown Park Board helped in putting dirt in the ground to plant the tree. Dave Pearce from the Middletown Park Board also gave a brief history of Arbor Day in Middletown.

Keep Middletown Beautiful also held its annual city-wide cleanup service day activities on Saturday, April 26. The city-wide cleanup began at the Event Center of Middletown (3907 Central Ave.) before volunteers scattered across the city to pick up trash and beautified neighborhoods. Afterwards, a lunch was provided for all volunteers.



Where Life's SPECIAL MOMENTS Take Center Stage



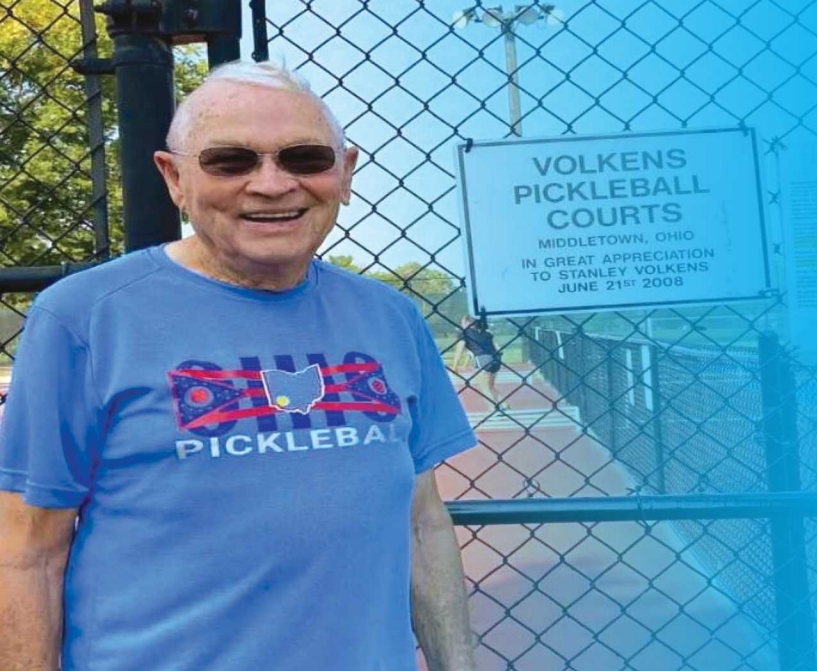
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**“HE HAS
A PASSION
THAT I’VE
NEVER SEEN.
HE LOVES
THE SPORT.”**

MIDDLETOWN: THE PICKLEBALL CAPITAL OF OHIO

MEET THE MAN BEHIND PICKLEBALL IN MIDDLETOWN—STANLEY VOLKENS

By: Clayton Castle

Drive by Lefferson Park on a beautiful, sunny night in the middle of July and you’ll see a nearly full parking lot, both at the park entrance off Breiel Boulevard and the Berachah Church parking lot. No, it’s not because of baseball or softball being played on the adjacent field. Although those can attract a crowd.

The tidal wave of activity is coming from the 27 pickleball courts on the southwest corner of the park - each court with up to four players competing and other players on the sidelines waiting their turn for a crack at the winner.

Go to the courts on any given night and you’ll see players of all ages and races, some traveling from all over the region to Middletown - just to play America’s fastest growing sport, pickleball.

Pickleball is often described as a hybrid of tennis, badminton, and ping pong. It can be played with two or four players volleying a wiffleball-like ball until one team scores 11 points. However, only the serving team can score a point. It’s a game that works every muscle in the body, but is not as strenuous as tennis, which makes it the perfect sport for adults of all ages.

In fact, the man responsible for bringing pickleball to Middletown and establishing the city as the “Pickleball

Capital of Ohio” was well into retirement when he discovered the sport.

That man is Stanley Volkens.

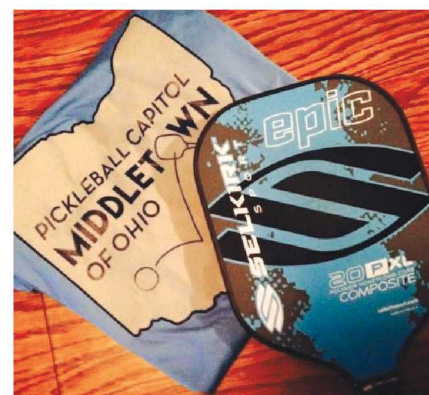
Volkens was retired and living in Mesa, Arizona when he first discovered pickleball - and his now-wife Marcia. Marcia is a

Middletown native and brought Stanley to Middletown in 2006, where he decided to lead the charge in converting old, unused tennis courts into pickleball courts.

“It was a really nice May evening, we drove around Middletown and saw 16 or 17 tennis courts in public parks that did not have one person playing,” Volkens, now in his mid-90’s, told Middletown NOW. “The next morning, I called the park board and the lady named Abby (Ison) answered the phone. I told her ‘I’d like to have permission to turn one of your old tennis courts and let us play pickleball on it.’”

That park was Gardner Park. Next, Volkens needed to get people there to play pickleball.

“I put it in the newspaper ‘free pickleball lesson,’” Volkens recalled. “Well, a few people came, including two girls who were very active in the community, very friendly and outgoing and they just loved the game so they were telling everyone about it.”





One of those “girls” was Cheryl Wyatt, now one of Stanley’s closest friends and avid pickleball players.

“My sister was with AK Steel when they had the lockout and she wasn’t really doing anything,” Wyatt said. “We both played a lot of co-ed softball and our team sort of dismantled so we didn’t have any sports to do.”

Wyatt said she saw the blurb in the newspaper and decided that she and her sister would try to play pickleball at Gardner Park. They played for two weeks before Volkens jetted back out to Arizona. However, he stayed in touch with the sisters, discussing the growth of the sport across Middletown parks.

“It was addicting, very addicting,” Wyatt said.

The sport grew so big that pickleball moved to Lefferson Park in 2007 and by 2008, there were six dedicated pickleball courts. It was that move that made Stanley determined to make Middletown the “Pickleball Capital of Ohio.” In 2017, the Middletown Pickleball Association (MPA) was established. MPA has gone on to advocate for more pickleball courts, expanding up to 27 courts at Lefferson Park. The 501(c)(3) organization also hosts tournaments, round robins, and takes care of the courts.

Michell Cook is an avid pickleball player, a board member of MPA, and the tournament director. She had never heard of pickleball when she moved to Middletown from Mason 15 years ago.

“I moved in with someone who was very involved with pickleball and the courts were walking distance from our condo,” Cook said. “She would tell me ‘oh I’m gonna go

to pickleball, you should come’ and all I thought was the stereotypical thought that everyone has of ‘oh that’s for old people like shuffleboard.’”

Two years later, she was playing in tournaments and began volunteering, helping with check-in and filling water. Eventually, Stanley put Michell in charge of the courts while he vacationed to Arizona in the winters.

“Well, nobody tells Stanley no, so I took on an endeavor that I had never done before,” Cook said.

The impact of Volkens has been felt far and wide in the world of pickleball. When asked her thoughts on Stanley, Cook began to well with tears.

“He has a passion that I’ve never seen. He loves the sport,” Cook said. “He wants everyone in the world to play it. And he’ll do whatever he can. He’s like a grandfather to all of us. To know him is to love him. He believes in Middletown so much and he is the reason we have what we have.”

Wyatt echoed those sentiments, recalling 20 years’ worth of memories with the man who changed her life and the life of hundreds in Middletown. After all, the Middletown Pickleball Association has over 600 members.

“Stanley is somebody that is near and dear to my heart,” Wyatt said. “He’s very caring. He loves this game of pickleball. He loves to be active. He’s very special to me.”

Volkens is a humble man, but he is incredibly pleased with the explosion of pickleball over the last decade - particularly in Middletown. Much of it due to his efforts.

“That makes me very proud that I had something to do with it,” Volkens said. “Many people say pickleball changed their life.”

Volkens is now residing in a senior living facility and hasn’t played pickleball in a couple years, but the legacy and impact of his efforts will be felt across Middletown for generations to come. In partnership with the MPA, the City of Middletown opened nine more pickleball courts in 2024 at Lefferson Park, bringing the total to 27 pickleball courts. At 94 years old, Volkens attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony with his wife, Marcia.

Through MPA, there are several leagues that players can participate in. On Saturday mornings in the spring and summer, there are round robin matches.



HEALTH MINUTE

By: Jackie Phillips Carter, Middletown Health Commissioner

WEATHER IS NO EXCUSE NOT TO MOVE!

The weather is finally turning warm, sunlight is getting longer, and flowers are beginning to blossom once again! Spring can have many literal and figurative meanings, but I like to think of Spring as the season of moving and getting active outside!

As it gets nicer outside, I encourage you to go for a walk, whether its to the mailbox, down the block, or for a set time. Ideally, you want to get at least 30 minutes of exercise a day. You don't need to do it all at once either. Those minutes can be broken up in 10-minute segments. Even walking, not running, for 30 minutes a day can have significant health benefits. According to the Cleveland Clinic, those health benefits include:

- Reduces risk of heart disease, cancer, and other health issues
- Reduces stress
- Helps you lose weight
- Reduces blood sugar
- Improves your immune system
- Improves sleep

Even if the weather is bad, you can still find ways to move and get active. Personally, I have a friend that I walk with every day during the work day. When the weather is bad, we walk laps inside our building. Many people have a mini treadmill that goes under their desk so they can walk in place while they work. Others will at least stand at their desk.

Additionally, there are other things you can do to move your body that don't include walking.

Light stretching has many of the same benefits of walking, as does lifting weights, no matter how light or heavy. Or if you're all alone in your office or home, turn on some music and DANCE!

If you do decide to walk, getting started can be difficult. Here are some tips, again from the Cleveland Clinic:

- Start out slow – don't push yourself too hard!
- Track your steps – If you set a goal and meet that goal, the reward of success can be beneficial to both mental and physical health!
- Find a walking buddy – Like I said earlier, I walk with my friend every day for 20 minutes. It allows us to catch up, help each other, and boost our mental health!
- Provide an incentive – If you go without a friend, listen to the latest book or podcast while you walk!
- Don't be hard on yourself – Life happens! Don't be too hard on yourself if you have to take a shorter walk or miss a day!

As long as you're moving your body IN SOME FORM OR FASHION every day, you can work towards living a better and healthier life.

This would also be a great opportunity for the City of Middletown Health Department, the Middletown Community Foundation, Hospice Care of Middletown, and Middletown Connect to promote its program called Walk With A Doc, an event every third Saturday at 9 a.m.! Attendees will hear a short talk by a health professional about a certain health topic, followed by a 45-minute walk. The event begins at Rosa Parks Elementary.

Happy moving, Middletown! If we pass each other on the sidewalk while walking, let's high five!

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