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Educational Expert Working With Middletown To Improve, Upgrade Schools

Manuel Cordero Known For Innovative, Inclusive Approach

On Election Day 2022, local voters overwhelmingly approved regionalization and new school buildings.

Although Newport residents ultimately scuttled that plan by less than 400 votes, amid the success in Middletown, there was one persistent question from critics: How does this benefit the children educationally?

Enter Manuel Cordero. The founder and principal of CIVIC design is known as the “premier expert” and “go to person” in Rhode Island for reimagining what 21st century schools must be for students and educators to succeed in the world of tomorrow.

For the past few months, Cordero has been working quietly with Middletown to make sure its new middle-high school before voters during a special election — likely on May 2 — is exactly what the community wants and needs for the next 50 plus years.

“What you see here in Middletown is similar to other schools across the state,” Cordero said during a recent tour of Middletown High. “Through my work with (the Rhode Island Department of Education), you go into schools all over Rhode Island and a lot of them have a similar look and feel.



They’re 50, 60, 70 years old and they’re in tough shape below the surface. What we’re here to do is give Middletown students and teachers the schools and systems they need.”

Before the tour, a dozen educators, architects and school leaders met in the office of Jeff Heath for brief introductions.

Leading the way out his door and into the front lobby, the high school principal served as tour director. He was clearly extremely knowledgeable about everything in his school from the building itself to the classrooms, student needs and more.

As Heath provided details about the safety limitations of the school’s main foyer, Cordero stood nearby taking notes with a Pilot gel pen on plain paper held in place on a clipboard.

Then, Cordero asked about the available after-hours spaces for the community in the

Valley Road building. Heath admitted there wasn't much, maybe other than the gymnasium, something he'd like to change.

That sparked a discussion about how the schools needed to become a hub for the entire community, not just places where students learn from 7 am-3 pm and play sports and engage in other extracurriculars.



There was also talk about the need for more vocational technical spaces in the new facility, which is being billed as a grade 6-12 middle-high school on land just north of Gaudet Middle School on Aquidneck Avenue. Numbers from the town indicated the \$190 million bond to pay for the new school and other improvements would cost the average homeowner about \$2 a day.

The way the new structure is envisioned, sixth, seventh and eighth graders would go to classes in one section of the building, with high schoolers in another area. Consultants and educators have said the two student populations would not interact, but likely share resources like gyms and an auditorium.

Wood shop is the most selected course at Middletown High, followed by ceramics, giving additional credence to the need for more hands-on spaces, Heath said.

"We do the best we can with what we have, I'll say that," Heath said. "But there's so much more, so much that we'd do if we had the right spaces and there's only so much we can do here now. I know the same is true at the middle school now too."

Superintendent Rosemarie K. Kraeger said for the average person touring the schools, they don't seem so bad. However, when you look behind the scenes at items like piping, windows, air handling systems and other infrastructure, Kraeger said that's where the costly problems start multiplying.

"When I talk with kids who dropout, go for a GED or just give up and ask them 'Why?' they'll tell me what we teach in school doesn't connect with them," Kraeger said. "A lot of what they're asking for and looking for, independent studies, hands-on learning in flex spaces, things like that that lead directly to jobs, we can't offer that here with what we have now."

Stopping in one hallway intersection, Heath said he'd love to have a built in standing desk there and other strategic spots. That way, administrators could be out among students and get work done at the same time.

"With a space like that, it will blow you away what we can do," Cordero said in response, smiling. "You'll be amazed."



Moments later, Heath mentioned how only a small minority of the close to 600 students at the high school use lockers anymore. He suggested those areas be better deployed for seating and informal educational spaces.

"With the new school, we should have lockers for students who might want them, but take into account that they're carrying everything with them now," Heath said. "The

massive textbook we used to use? That's a thing of the past."

Cordero took notes as Heath explained the shortcomings of the counseling area, which was far from private as it should be.

"What we're hearing here isn't unusual at all," Cordero said. "Think of when this school was built and what the world looked like then. There was no internet. Education was a lot different. We have phones now where we can do everything and you come into an environment like this and it's like 'Wait. What?' We're teaching about technology on devices that most students far surpass at home. We need to change that."

Edward Brady, co-chairman of the School Building Committee, noted the overall health of the new school was critical.

"If you walk around, the classrooms have HEPA filters and open windows," Brady said. "Every window that can be open is open. Think about that. It's not even 50 degrees out and that's what we have to do, run fans. One of the big selling points of this project has to be the environment of this building."

After the tour wrapped up, Cordero said all the information collected would help with the design of the proposed middle-high school. That would spark a dialogue about what worked with the preliminary layout and where amendments would be necessary.

He said an important part in that process was surveys of teachers and staff and assimilating that feedback into the design wherever possible. Work was also underway to get input from residents and businesspeople too in coming weeks.

"I'm really excited to be here and design a school that works for Middletown," Cordero said. "When you talk to students and teachers about what they want and need, it's flexibility and welcoming spaces. There's a lot of pride here and there are sensible solutions that will work for everyone."



McKee, Middletown Officials Meet

Talks Go Well, Build For Future

Governor Dan McKee stopped at the Middletown Senior Center recently with good wishes.

Wearing his customary smile, McKee shook hands, posed for pictures and talked about initiatives he's pursuing upstate to help seniors and their families.

Earlier, Town Council President Paul M. Rodrigues and Councilman Dennis Turano met McKee over French toast at a local home. There, they discussed the need for more affordable housing, the new Middletown Outreach Department and the middle-high school on the May 2 special election ballot.

Although no firm commitments were made, Rodrigues and Turano said it was awesome to have an audience with McKee.

"He told us to keep doing what we're doing and that there's money available for affordable housing and the Outreach Department," Rodrigues said. "It was a great conversation and the governor is an everyday person who started right where we are. It helps him relate to us and what we're trying to do."

“I was really impressed,” Turano added. “He knows a lot about Middletown and said he uses our Outreach Department as a model when goes around the state. He told us we might be the only community in Rhode Island with something like it, if not the country. That was pretty unbelievable when I heard it and shows we’re on the right path.”

Walking into the facility at 650 Green End Ave., McKee was greeted with warm applause. Senior center clients were on hand for a home baked ham lunch and sides as Senior Center Director Arleen Kaulk thanked McKee for dropping by.



Addressing the crowd, McKee told a story about how he and his wife Susan were in the nation’s capitol recently for a governors’ function with President Joe Biden. To his surprise, Biden brought Susan up on stage and was singing her “Happy Birthday,” drawing laughter and more applause.

Then, McKee worked the room, speaking about the importance of the senior population to the Ocean State.

He mentioned his love for the Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge, a place he and Susan stop frequently to get outside and away from the rush of everyday life.

Several people asked about his mother Helen Willa McKee, who was immortalized for her feistiness in McKee’s campaign ads.

“I just had a great meeting with Paul and Dennis from the Town Council about things

that are important to seniors and about education,” McKee said. “Thank you so much.”

Rodrigues and Turano said they came away impressed by McKee, his enthusiasm for Middletown — and Rhode Island.

“It was a really good conversation,” Rodrigues said. “He’s someone who gets it and he said he’s here to help. I believe him when when he says that.”

“I know we want to work with him more to make things happen in Middletown,” Turano said. “The funding that’s available for the Outreach Department, I know Middletown is first in line and we’re going to be working hard on that initiative and others to make our town an even better place.”

Middletown Q&A

Lori Turner

Late last year, Portsmouth native Lori Turner was hired as the town’s first Healthy Communities Coordinator. Recently, we asked Turner questions about her work and more.

1 - Tell us about the new Outreach Department.

The mission of the Outreach Department is to support the efforts and meet the needs of all community members by delivering enrichment, guidance and wellness opportunities. The goal is to identify gaps in services for residents and work together as a community to meet those needs. I’ve also been helping individuals who call Town Hall in need of support and holding Outreach Department hours at the Middletown Public Library community room every Wednesday morning from 10-noon for people to drop in.

2 - You’ve been on the job for a few months now. Give us the story about one success of the department so far.

We partnered with the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center, East Bay Community Action Program and RI Community Food

Bank to bring the MLK’s Mobile Food Pantry to Linden Park. Johanny Sanchez from RI Food Bank offered Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) information and applications, Gerry LePage shared about resources EBCAP offers and the team of staff and volunteers from MLK served 17 families for a total of 40 people with groceries. The town and schools shared on social media and Megan Mainzer, the school’s homeless liaison, contacted families about this opportunity.



We’ve improved our Middletown Services page online at <https://mdl.town/Services> and are also in the process of creating introduction videos for new students for each of the schools. After meeting with Pam Martin, the School Liaison Officer for Naval Station Newport, I learned 26 percent of the

students in our district come from military families. These introduction videos will give students a glimpse of what a day in the life at their new school will be like before arriving and hopefully allay some of the fears that arise from being the new kid.

3 - What’s the biggest need in Middletown, based on your observations to date?

Middletown is a great community with a lot of resources, most notably its residents, businesses and local nonprofits. One need is to make it more affordable for the average working person to live here. Data I’ve seen shows that rents have gone up on average \$500 in the last five years. I’m grateful to the Newport Housing Hotline for their work and to the Town Council and town for making housing a priority and creating policies such as the tiered tax plan to help people stay in their homes.

4 - Provide advice to someone looking to get into a career helping others?

There’s always a place to volunteer that fits your interest. By volunteering, you’re able to learn first-hand more about the work, gain experience and be a resource.

5 - How do people contact you if they’re looking for help?

Call my office at 842-6599 or send an email lturner@middletownri.com.

History Here

Tuskegee Airman Discusses Distinguished Service For NUWC’s Black History Month celebration

One of the last surviving Tuskegee Airmen, Brig. Gen. Enoch “Woody” Woodhouse, visited the Naval Undersea Warfare Center Division Newport recently to share his military and life experiences as part of the command’s Black History Month celebration.

The 96-year-old Roxbury, Massachusetts, native spoke with insight, sentimentality and

humor, conveying how he joined the legendary all-Black fighter pilot unit and dealt with racism in and outside the military.

“It is very exciting to have Brig. Gen. Enoch ‘Woody’ Woodhouse with us today. This is a real piece of American history,” Division Newport Commanding Officer Capt. Chad Hennings said, when introducing the guest speaker.

Woodhouse began by recalling a date that would change his life forever —Dec. 7, 1941, the day Pearl Harbor was attacked.

“My mother said to my brother and I, ‘America is at war. I want you boys to serve your country,’” Woodhouse said. “Imagine a Black woman telling all she had in the world, her two sons, to fight for America while we grew up seeing pictures of Black people being lynched and mistreated.”

At 17, Woodhouse enlisted in the U.S. Army and eventually served in the U.S. Army Air Corps, the precursor to the U.S. Air Force. His brother became one of the first Black Marines.

“You do the right thing, no matter what your circumstances are,” Woodhouse said. “So what was the right thing? We signed up. I was going off to defend democracy, which perhaps didn’t defend me, but I did the right thing.”

It didn’t take long for Woodhouse to realize that doing the right thing wouldn’t always be easy.

Having never been farther south than New York City, Woodhouse was traveling on a train from Boston to Texas for basic training. When the train reached a scheduled stop in St. Louis, a white conductor tapped him on the shoulder and made him disembark.

A Black porter informed Woodhouse that Black people weren’t allowed to ride that train. The train he was allowed to ride arrived six hours later, causing him to show up late for his assignment, much to the chagrin of his white drill sergeant.

After basic training, Woodhouse was transferred to the U.S. Army Air Corps in Ogden, Utah, where he was assigned to Squadron F, an all-Black squadron. Squadron F primarily did housekeeping, such as upkeep

of the roads and peeling potatoes for the unit. Woodhouse was fortunate to get one of the more coveted jobs as a waiter in the Officer’s Club.

“It had its advantages,” Woodhouse said. “I got to eat good food and take good food back to the barracks. I shared my steaks.”

Woodhouse, who spoke several languages, always kept his favorite book close by – a work by 14th-century Italian poet/writer Dante Alighieri, who is most famous for writing “Inferno.” While cleaning the Officer’s Club one evening, a lieutenant spotted the book. Learning it belonged to Woodhouse, the impressed lieutenant told him he would help

him apply for Officer Candidate School.

Commissioned a second lieutenant at age 19, Woodhouse was assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group, better known as the Tuskegee Airmen, where he became paymaster/finance officer for the squadron, which consisted of 992 pilots and more than 14,000 other personnel. The squadron was led by Benjamin Oliver Davis Jr. and compiled an outstanding combat record in World War II.

“It was a trustworthy position because you were paid by cash,” Woodhouse said. “Every person was supposed to be paid on the first of the month. But a lot of our Black troops would be sent on TDY (temporary duty assignment). When they presented their orders to be paid by the first of the month, they were told the finance office doesn’t have sufficient funds or the finance office closes at 2 o’clock. Colonel Davis flew me out to every place where our men were on TDY to see that they were paid on the first of the month.”

Woodhouse continued to captivate the audience with stories from his days in the



military, including assignments in other countries. He then welcomed questions.

When asked what motivated him to keep going when things got tough, Woodhouse responded, "The main reason was I was sent out to do the right thing. My mother told me, 'boy, serve our country.' I didn't want to let her down. I wasn't raised like that."

Woodhouse concluded his presentation with his vision for America.

"My vision of America is not utopia," Woodhouse said. "Let's treat each other decently. Let's treat each other fairly, as we want to be treated. We shouldn't let our differences divide us. The future of America is indeterminate. It depends on all of us. We're making the vision for America. People can have different political views, but we should not let those different views divide us on our common voyage of making America a true democracy." — *Contributed*

Legislative Agenda Discussed

Town Council Meets With State Legislators To Set Priorities

The Town Council wants to keep area state legislators busy this General Assembly session.

Local leaders discussed at a recent meeting how they'd like to see lawmakers work on boosting school building construction reimbursements, state educational aid and assistance for upgrading infrastructure, among other items.

State Senator Louis P. DiPalma, State Representatives Terri-Denise Cortvriend and Alex Finkelman were on hand.

"It's great to see the items on the legislative agenda," DiPalma said. "I think they all resonate."

"I will do whatever I can to work with you," Cortvriend said.

"Whatever happens, we'll fight for Middletown and advocate for Middletown," Finkelman said.

Early every year, the council sits down with local legislators to go over a list of priorities for lawmakers to address upstate.

The idea is by meeting with council and town leaders, legislators better understand the time, energy and nuance that goes into each item addressed at the state capitol.



Some — like help redeveloping the lower Aquidneck Avenue area (also known as the Atlantic Beach District) — have been on the legislative agenda for years. Others — such as the school construction legislation — are new and address a time specific matter.

Town Administrator Shawn J. Brown went through Middletown's objectives, using a computer slideshow presentation for support.

The trio of legislators sat in the front row, listening to the town's needs and why the changes were necessary. Other items broached by Brown and council included:

- Changing how the student census is measured annually and adopt a three to five year moving average to smooth changes in the student population in the schools.
- Boosting the reimbursement for students requiring high-cost special education services.
- Increasing the reimbursement for English Language Learners.
- Growing the amount of support provided for after school programs, which have been shown to help student achievement.
- Providing funding to help pay for universal pre-kindergarten, should the program become a reality across the state.
- Supporting upcoming requests from the town for capital improvements to the lower Aquidneck Avenue business district.
- Backing the town's anticipated requests to Rhode Island Commerce and the state Department of Transportation for the redevelopment of 15 underused acres on West Main Road between Coddington Highway and the intersection with Valley Road.
- Moving up the timeline on a installation of a shared East Main Road bicycle path from 2029 to now.

Legislators said they welcomed suggestions from the town and would work to try to get passage of as many recommendations as possible.

"These are very reasonable requests and I think they could be seen favorably by all communities across the state," Brown said.