

Russell Library Engagement Findings

April – October 2024



Table of Contents

03 Introduction

04 Engagement Process & Methods

08 Findings & Takeaways

21 Future Considerations

Introduction

Earlier this year, Margaret Sullivan Studio, SP+A, Halvorson Design, and Tighe & Bond assisted with conducting a feasibility study for the location of the Russell Library.

Based on extensive community input, the Russell Library/ City Hall Feasibility Study Committee determined that there is strong support for keeping the library at its existing downtown location. The committee voted to redesign the library on its current site, preserving the historic church while constructing a new expanded facility. This decision reflects a commitment to integrating contemporary library services and design with Middletown's rich history.

This document summarizes key findings from the community engagement process and serves as a guide and framework for future planning, programming, and design.



What We Did

Engagement Process & Methods



Project Timeline

In 2024, our team assisted with a Site Feasibility Study to ensure that the Russell Library remains "Future-Ready" as Middletown continues to evolve. This process included comprehensive community engagement sessions to understand local needs, aspirations, and key design elements for the library's future. This page illustrates the project timeline and highlights key milestones.



Engagement Methods

We engaged Middletown residents and stakeholders through various activities, including tabling at existing events, interactive workshops, and open house sessions. These activities aimed to gather residents' ideas, needs, and interests, which informed specific programming, spatial, and design elements for the future library.

2

Open House Sessions

4

Focus Groups

2

Tabling Events

2

Community Workshops

690+

Completed Community Survey

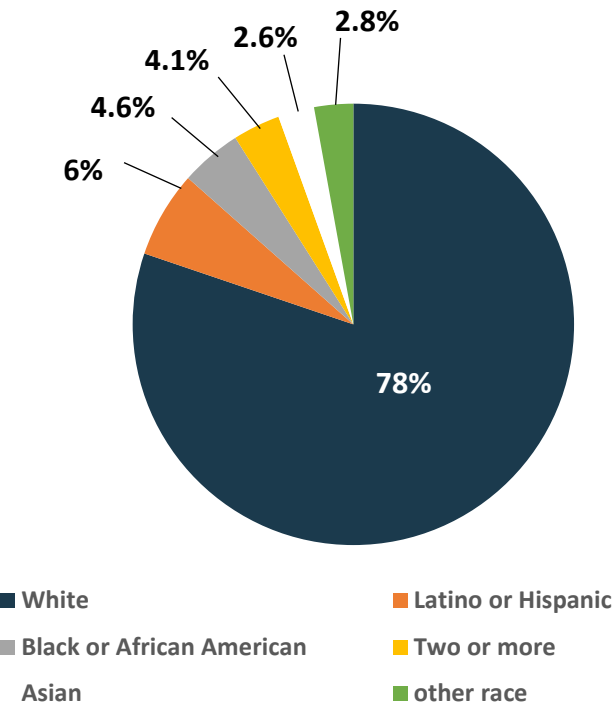
4290+

Minutes of Joy

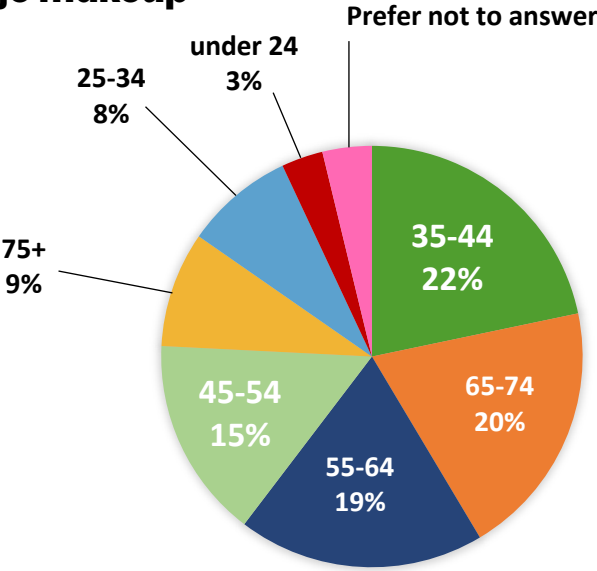
Demographics & Who We Engaged With

Understanding the rich cultural diversity and characteristics of the individuals we engaged with across Middletown provides valuable insights into the community’s unique identity. Below is a combined demographic overview of Middletown, along with self-identified representation from the community survey. This information was used to provide context for community representation.

Ethnicity makeup

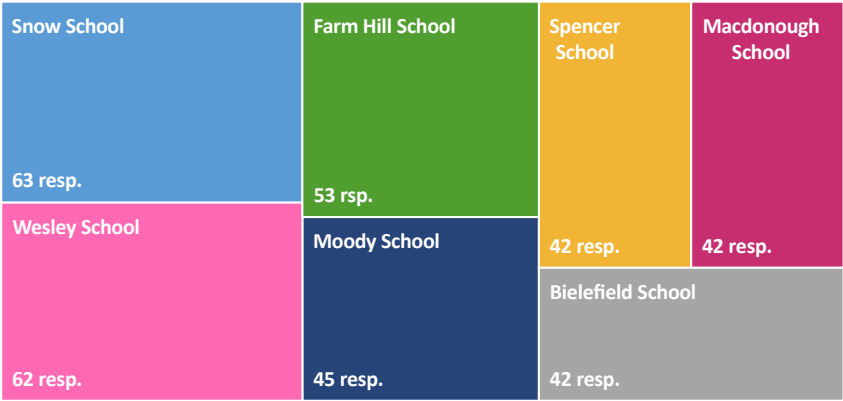


Age makeup

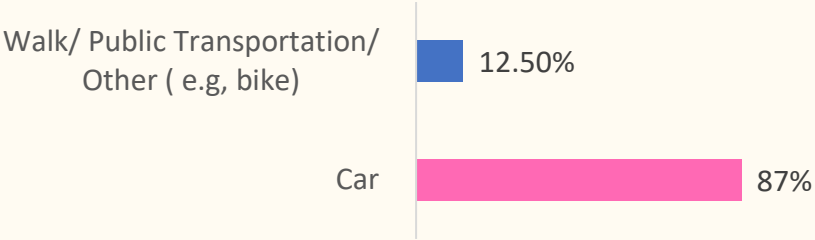


- An average 15 % of respondents have population under 18 years old in their households

Neighborhood/Geographic Area



How people get to the library



What We Heard

Findings & Takeaways



Key Findings



01

About the
Community &
Location



02

Community
Aspirations



03

Programmatic
Opportunities



04

Design
Characteristics
& Features

About the Community

From its earliest days, Middletown has been a city shaped by immigrants who have contributed to its rich tapestry of culture and identity. The presence of diverse communities brings vibrant perspectives and unique traditions that enhance the city's overall character. This growing diversity not only reflects the changing demographics of Middletown but also fosters a dynamic atmosphere where various cultural identities can coexist and flourish.

Middletown is a blend of urban amenities with small-town charm, where the community takes deep pride in its rich history, diverse culture, and lively atmosphere. As the home of Wesleyan University, it boasts a **vibrant arts scene and intellectual energy**. The community's close-knit spirit shines through in local events, festivals, and volunteer initiatives.



About the Community

Based on input from community sessions and surveys, we recognize Russell Library's strengths and challenges. By addressing these challenges and enhancing what the community values, we can better plan for the future needs of the Middletown community, making the library more engaging and enjoyable for everyone.

What does the community value most about the Russell Library?

The historical building and downtown location provide a unique and central gathering space for the community.

The engaging children's programs and services opportunities for young learners.

Community events and programs that foster connection and engagement among residents.

Friendly and helpful staff that make community members want to come to the library again and again.

Books with various selections/formats for the diverse interest of their community members.

Access to materials, resources, and technology support to assist all levels of learners.

Resources and services to support workforce development.

What are the barriers to enjoying the library?

The building is not accessible or easy to navigate.

It lacks flexibility, convenience, and affordable parking.

People don't know about the benefits and programs the library offers.

There is a limitation in the operational hours.

There is a perception that certain groups may not feel fully represented.

Lack of community gathering space in the library.

Lingering covid concerns deter community members.

There is no space that allows for noise or has a more vibrant atmosphere.

There is no designated space for coworking.

There is a lack of safety due to the building layout.

The current space feels unwelcoming and lacks a sense of support due to the outdated building.

Library Location

The consensus among community members is a strong desire for the library to remain downtown.

This preference arises from the downtown's pedestrian-friendly environment, economic vitality, and accessibility for a diverse range of residents. Serving as a vibrant hub for youth and family gatherings, downtown features an array of boutique shops, diverse eateries, parks, and recreational areas. Community organizations thrive here, hosting events that foster connection and civic engagement.

The library, as a cornerstone of this community, provides essential resources and programs, creating a welcoming space for all ages. Community members have expressed deep affection for the library's historical building, underscoring its significance as a cherished landmark that fosters connection and a sense of belonging.



Community Aspirations

The community **values the library greatly** and **trusts the library leadership** to further improve library services for all. Community members noted there are **opportunities** for the library to be a **stronger connector to resources through partnerships**.

The community has a strong **passion for supporting one another** and **advocating to promote equity** throughout the city. Community members see the library as a **vehicle for fostering** community gathering and casual socialization that can encourage people to **connect, share experiences, and engage** with one another.

A Space To Commune, Connect, & Grow Together



Accessibly Diverse Programming To Provide Enriching Memories



Preparedness For Times Of Uncertainty



Stronger Partnerships For A Connected Future



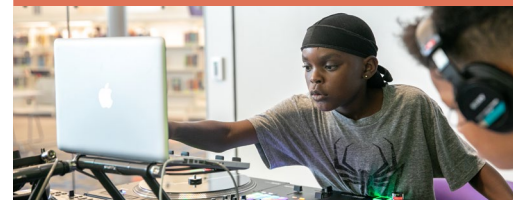
Accessible, Safe Services For Everyone



Balancing Innovative & Traditional Collections



Empowering Youth Through Diverse, Inclusive Programming



Economic Connector & Catalyst



Community Aspirations

The following are community-wide aspirations identified by participants as having the potential for deep impact and fostering a thriving Middletown for all. While these goals extend beyond the library's direct role, there are meaningful opportunities for the library to serve as a connector and supporter alongside other local organizations.

<p>A Space To Commune, Connect, & Grow Together</p> <p>There is significant excitement about creating a space that actively combats post-COVID loneliness by fostering meaningful community connections through creating inviting comfortable spaces.</p>	<p>Accessible, Diverse Programming To Provide Enriching Memories</p> <p>Residents are eagerly seeking diverse programming opportunities; such as author events, concerts, plays, film screenings, arts programs, community gardens, and volunteer activities. These programs should be consistently scheduled to engage the varied interests of community members and make enriching experiences and lifelong memories more accessible.</p>	<p>Preparedness For Times Of Uncertainty</p> <p>Residents are interested in establishing as a public resource that services during emergencies, offering shelters, charging stations, or showers to support the community during unprecedented times like natural disasters. Specifically, expanding services through 24-hour pop-up facilities like kitchens or cafe, to accommodate emergency situations better.</p>	<p>Stronger Partnerships For A Connected Future</p> <p>The most resounding excitement is around coalition building and strengthening partnerships to proactively respond to local needs, such as educational support and referrals to familial and social services. This collaboration with non-profits, city institutions, and educational entities aims to foster prosperity and improve the quality of life for all.</p>
<p>Accessible, Safe Services For Everyone</p> <p>Residents are seeking accessible services and spaces that ensure everyone can fully engage in a diverse array of opportunities. Barriers such as unclear signage, restrictive hours, or mobility issues can be addressed by creating inclusive outreach service models that bring resources and safe spaces to those facing various challenges.</p>	<p>Balancing Innovative & Traditional Collections</p> <p>Residents are excited for the opportunity to explore new technology, enjoy continued access to basic collection needs (e.g., print media, subscription media), and have innovative resources in their community that support their personal interests, creative explorations, and economic development.</p>	<p>Empowering Youth Through Diverse and Inclusive Programming</p> <p>Residents are especially excited about the enhanced youth offerings and intergenerational experiences in the new library. They anticipate innovative ways to connect with youth, support families, and promote life-long learning, career development, and play.</p>	<p>Economic Connector & Catalyst</p> <p>Residents are excited for the library to be a connector to foster community coalitions and collaborations among individuals, organizations, and local businesses, while also offering resources and services to support community workforce development.</p>

Programmatic Opportunities

The community has expressed a desire for more programming and services, including intergenerational or concurrent youth and adult program opportunities. While **Russell Library already offers a wide range of programs**, many residents are unaware of them. Additionally, **the current building limits the ability to expand these programs and introduce new offerings** that community members are asking for.

There is a **strong community interest in programming that celebrates Middletown's history and natural beauty**; including outdoor film series, historical programs, and a **community sketchbook**. Residents also expressed a desire for more arts, digital, and educational programs.



Programmatic Opportunities

The community has shown strong interest in new and enhanced offerings from the library. The library’s physical space needs to evolve to better support the wide range of interests, activities, and programs they want. This page highlights the programs, activities, tools, and resources most desired by the community.

<div>Culture & History</div> <div>The community is interested in culture and history programs like historical tours, local history and genealogy programs, and general history programming.</div> <div>Tools and resources the library would need for culture and history programs can include museum passes and diverse formats of research resources.</div>	<div>Digital & Tech-Oriented</div> <div>Digital and tech-oriented programs like coding classes, community Twitch streaming, and robotics are of great interest to the community.</div> <div>Tools and resources the library would need for digital and tech-oriented programs can include a Nintendo switch, 3D printer/pen, robotics to-go kits, etc.</div>	<div>Socializing</div> <div>The community is interested in social connections like cultural sharing of supper, community sketchbook, and coffee talk and teatime: social hour.</div> <div>The library would need tools and resources for socializing programs, such as a Library of Things and Legos.</div>	<div>Learning & Personal Growth</div> <div>Learning and personal growth programs like home economics classes, writing and journaling clubs, and STEM activities were of great interest to the community.</div> <div>Tools and resources the library would need for socializing programs can include language learning, college admissions test prep, and lawyers in the library.</div>
<div>Intergenerational & Family-Oriented</div> <div>The community is interested in intergenerational programs like family story time, intergenerational music festivals, and family game nights.</div> <div>Tools and resources the library would need for intergenerational programs can include instruments, graphic novels, Manga, and gaming systems.</div>	<div>Health & Well-being</div> <div>Health and well-being programs like referrals to Social Services, Mental Wellbeing Consulting, Workout Classes, and Nutrition Classes are highly desired by the community.</div> <div>Tools and resources the library would need for health & well-being programs can include mental health resources, and kitchenware for cooking classes.</div>	<div>Creative Expression</div> <div>Creative expression programs like dance classes, poetry workshops, and music-making workshops were highly sought after by community members.</div> <div>Tools and resources the library would need for creative expression programs can include dance studios, painting materials, and sewing machines.</div>	<div>Nature & Outdoor</div> <div>Nature and outdoor programs like community hiking, outdoor STEM workshops, sensory gardens, and herbalist workshops were of great interest to the community</div> <div>Tools and resources the library would need for nature and outdoor programming can include gardening tools.</div>

Design Characteristics & Features

To meaningfully reflect the identity of the Middletown community, the following design characteristics have been shaped by community input to guide the future design of Russell Library.

These characteristics capture the look and feel, as well as the experiences and design opportunities envisioned by community members.

By identifying the desired design elements, features, qualities, and spaces, the reimagined Russell Library will continue to provide a safe and welcoming environment that promotes equity and fosters a love for lifelong learning.



Spaces and Places

This page showcases the key spaces and places identified through community input sessions. These insights reflect the needs and desires of community members, highlighting the essential areas that will enhance the experience, functionality and accessibility of Russell Library. With a flexible, modern facility, many of these opportunities can take place in one space.



Community Cafe



Art Gallery



Community Living Room



Event Space



Quiet Areas



Community Theater



Art Studio



Reading Nooks



Co-working Zone



Library of Things



Teen Zone



Community Garden



Outdoor Play Space



Outdoor Reading Areas



Rooftop/ Terrace

Experience Principles

Experience Principles are designed to create consistent and impactful experiences that shape future design, ensuring that every interaction within the library not only meets the community's needs but also reflects their values and aspirations. By prioritizing these principles, the library can develop spaces that foster engagement, learning, and a sense of belonging, ultimately enhancing the overall experience for all users. The experience principles reflect the Russell Library's Mission statement: "We empower people to grow, connect, strive and thrive."



CONNECTED

The library acts as the vehicle to support socializing and group activities, building a **shared sense of community and belonging**. It encourages a **welcoming** space where people feel **comfortable, connected** and **content**.



CURIOUS

Inspiring exploration and curiosity, the library invites users to discover **fun** new ideas, skills, and concepts through hands-on learning and creative activities to **encourage lifelong learning and intellectual experiences**.



FULFILLED

By offering **diverse** and **enriching experiences** that meet the emotional, intellectual, and social needs of the community, the library serves the community **holistically, energizes them, and responds to community needs and interests**.



RELAXED

Providing **tranquil, thoughtful, and calming** experiences that **encourage contemplation, self-expression**, and offer individuals a **refuge** from the noise and busyness of everyday life. A relaxed library experience allows individuals to **recharge, reconnect**, and **simply enjoy themselves**.

In the Future Russell Library will be for



Teens headed to the **community cafe** to **script code** with some friends for their robotics club. They are very **happy** about having a space to hang out and work with friends.



A father-son duo going to the **outdoor play space** to **socialize and play** with other kiddos. They are **excited and relieved** the library can provide that experience.



The senior who loves to **relax** in the **art studio** because she can **knit and chit-chat** with everyone. She's so excited to **talk and create** with other local artists.

What's Next

Future Considerations



Future Planning and Activations

Space & Site Features

- Design ADA-accessible and safe spaces.
- Increase restrooms throughout the library.
- Install clear signage throughout the library.
- Provide free parking or a shuttle service to the library.
- Create communal and social gathering spaces.
- Support and honor the historical and natural setting of the existing building.

Programming & Activation

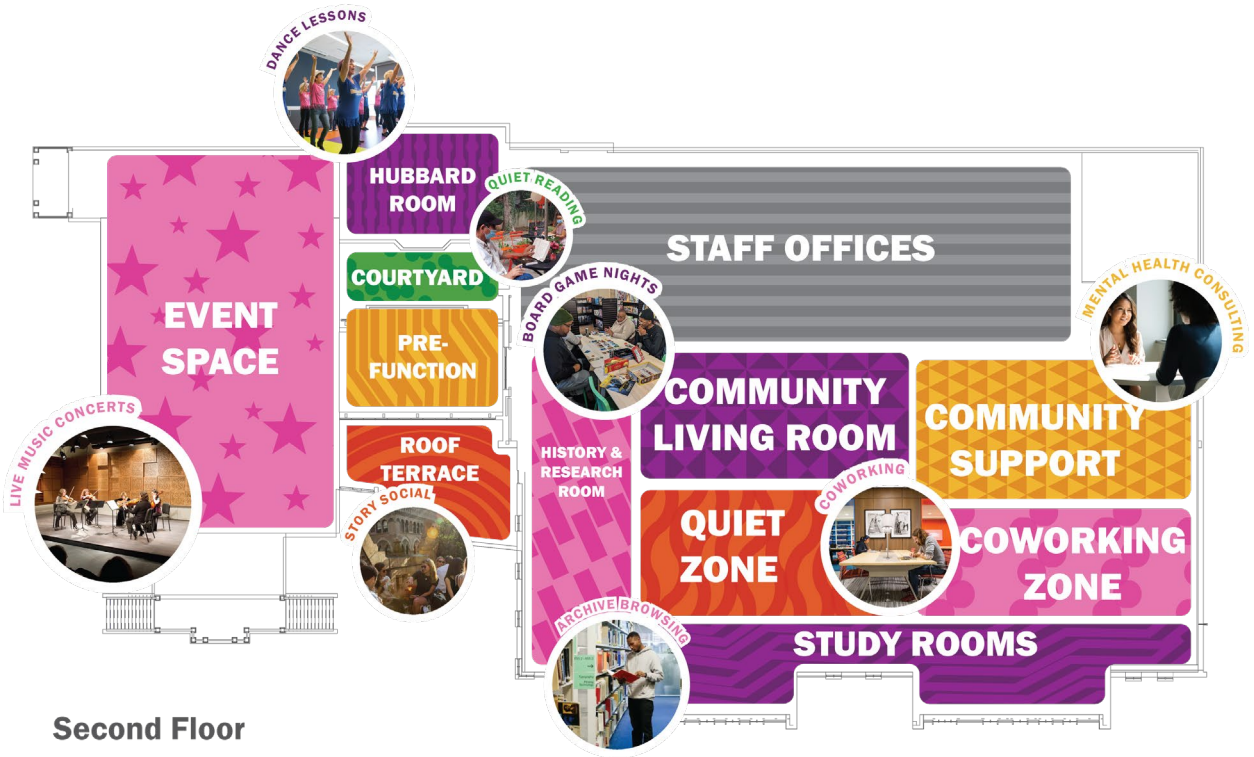
- Strengthen community partnerships.
- Create a community map to identify partnership opportunities.
- Offer more constant programming and services.
- Develop concurrent adult and youth programming and intergenerational spaces.
- Explore the possibility of establishing a library branch or outreach program near schools and in outlying neighborhoods.
- Galvanize volunteer opportunities to support creative programming.

Opportunities to Expand Library Services

- AME Zion Church
- Westfield
- Senior center
- Highlands/ Westlake
- Area near Tynan memorial park
- Riverfront
- Recreation center
- Bookmobile
- Enhanced physical or mobile support near elementary and high schools
- Homebound services

Concept Plans

These concept plans present a preliminary reimagining of the future Russell Library. They are designed to support the unique qualities of Middletown, align with the community’s aspirations, and embrace various programmatic opportunities.



Acknowledgements

We extend our deepest appreciation and gratitude to the Middletown community for your engagement, valuable insights, and support. Your input is the driving force behind our work; empowering us to nurture a growing, thriving, and flourishing Middletown. We would also like to give a special thank you to the following individuals and organizations.

Community Organizations

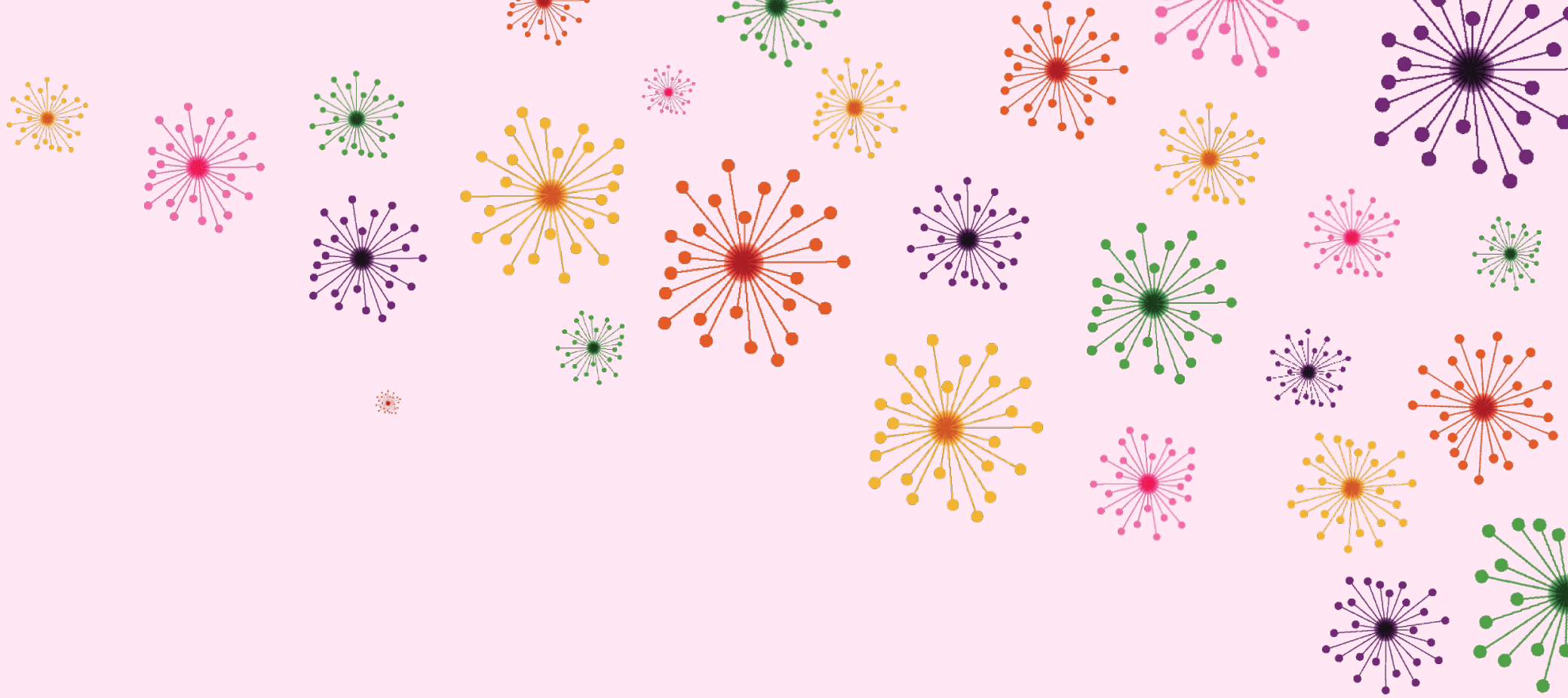
Community Health Center
First Church
Middletown Farmers Market
Middletown PAL
Middletown Recreation Center
Macdonough School
Middletown Senior Center
Third Congregational Church

Feasibility Study Committee Members

Anthony Mangiafico, Chair
Mayor Benjamin Florsheim
Eamonn Wisneski
Jonathan Pulino
Joseph Samolis
Ramona Burkey
Sandra Russo-Driska
Sheila Jones
Stephen Nelson

Design Teams

Halvorson Design
Margaret Sullivan Studio
Silver Petrucci + Associates
Tighe & Bond



Thank You!