

FUTURE IN FOCUS



An Updated Strategic Plan
For The Russell Library

2026-2030



Russell Library empowers people to grow, connect, strive, and thrive.

Our strategic goals are to:



Strengthen community



Create a safe and welcoming destination



Foster a thriving economic ecosystem



Promote a lifelong love of learning

We endeavor to be future-ready for Middletown.

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Introduction

Future-Ready for Middletown: A Strategic Plan for the Russell Library has guided the work of the Library since its implementation in January of 2021. Designed to serve as a five-year roadmap, the plan reflects the time in which it was written, which was characterized by the tumult of a global pandemic, bitterly divided politics, and the ongoing national reckoning around racial justice. The plan was designed to prepare the library for change, unpredictability and volatility, and in the intervening five years it has more than lived up to that charge. It has served as a living document, guiding resource allocation, priorities, and even staff expectations on a daily basis.

While much continues to change in Middletown, our state, our country, and the world, challenges such as divisive politics, economic instability, and racial justice have only become more pressing over the last five years. As the Trustees reviewed the strategic plan with an eye towards renewal, we quickly realized that the Library's four strategic goals – 1. *Strengthen Community*, 2. *Create a Safe & Welcoming Destination*, 3. *Foster a Thriving Economic Ecosystem*, and 4. *Promote a Lifelong Love of Learning* – remain as relevant now as they were in 2021. With that in mind, the Board launched a thoughtful and intentional process to gather timely feedback from Middletown residents in order to evaluate the current landscape and produce an update to the Strategic Plan. This document is the result of that work. We are confident that we have thoughtfully incorporated the feedback of hundreds of Middletown residents into our existing strategic framework to form a strong new plan, and that the Russell Library remains *Future-Ready for Middletown*.



**We empower
people to
grow,
connect,
strive,
and thrive.**



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Methodology

From September 2025 through January 2026, the Library Board engaged with stakeholders throughout Middletown, ultimately speaking with nearly four hundred residents across multiple generations. It is worth noting that, unlike the community conversations held in 2019-2020, which were organized and conducted by a paid professional consultant, this time we (the Board) consisted of Middletown residents talking to fellow residents, aided by Wesleyan students enrolled in Professor Mary Alice Haddad's Fall 2025 Comparative Urban Policy course. Touchpoints such as local news, pressing topics, and local history and culture provided shared reference points to both interviewers and respondents as fellow residents, serving to further enrich the engagement process.

Our outreach included the following:

- Brief, structured conversations at community events and sites focusing on children, tweens and teens, adults and seniors, including Pumpkin Fest, the Farmers Market, St. Vincent de Paul, Middletown Recreation Center, Chamber of Commerce events, Play Pals and teen programs at the library, and Kids' Night at Van Vleck Observatory.
- Individual interviews with civic, nonprofit, and institutional stakeholders, including elected officials at the municipal and state levels, economic development staff, the Chamber of Commerce, the NAACP, Middlesex United Way, clinicians, clergy, local artists, and community organizers.
- A public survey available via the Library's website and in paper form at the Library.
- Interviews with library staff, trustees, and members of the Friends of Russell Library.



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***This is a
very fun
library.***
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Engagement Prompts

While the format varied by location and audience, conversations were guided by the following questions, inspired by the [Harwood Institute for Public Innovation](#):

1. What kind of community do you want to live in?
2. Why is that important to you?
3. How is that different from how you see Middletown now?
4. What are some of the things that need to happen to create that kind of change in Middletown?
5. What are the biggest challenges facing Middletown residents today?
6. How do you think our community's needs will evolve over the next few years?
7. Which of these needs do you think the Russell Library might help to address?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to add or any ideas you'd like to share with us?

Russell Library staff were invited to answer the questions above, and they were also asked the following questions, which are more specific to their roles and skills as employees:

1. How would you describe the Russell Library's role in the Middletown community today?
2. What changes have you noticed in the needs or demographics of library patrons in recent years?
3. Are there groups in our community that you feel the library is not currently reaching or serving well?
4. How could the library better support lifelong learning, a thriving economic ecosystem, and strong community in Middletown?
5. What trends (technology, education, social issues) do you see affecting how the library serves the community over the next 5 years?
6. Is there anything you think the library should STOP doing, or that you would change if you could?
7. What would success look like at the end of this next strategic plan?
8. What's one thing you're proud of that Russell Library has accomplished recently?
9. Is there anything we haven't asked that you think is important?

What kind of community do you want to live in?

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Findings

Respondents gave a great variety of responses to the interview/survey questions. After an exhaustive examination and synthesis of the responses, we noted that the answers could be grouped into a few clear themes:

- **Economics:** Residents are strapped for cash as the cost of living continues to increase, so they are looking for good value with regard to public services. Rising residential property taxes remain a notable concern. The effects of artificial intelligence (AI) on the job market and the economy in general constitute a volatile wild card.
- **Societal Cohesion:** People are feeling the negative effects of isolation from one another caused by a variety of factors, including smartphones, social media and the general pace of daily life. Respondents of all ages expressed longing for “third spaces” as well as activities that bring people back together in a more human context and encourage a return to basic kindness and civility.
- **Challenges for Youth:** Our young people are grappling with a rapidly changing landscape that scarcely resembles anything faced by previous generations. Mental health remains a topic of great concern. At the same time, youth literacy rates and test scores are in decline, raising serious concerns about young people’s preparedness for the future, since proficiency in *all* types of literacies is key to combating misinformation and strengthening participation in our democracy.



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***I couldn't
really live
without
the library.***
”



Strengthen Community

As outlined in detail below, our findings aligned well with the four strategic goals delineated in the library's current plan. This serves as both a sobering reminder that many of the challenges facing our community remain unresolved, but also as a testament to the enduring relevance and integrity of the existing plan.

Goal 1: Strengthen Community

Stakeholders continue to view the library as the essential "glue" for a cohesive and responsive community. Feedback indicates a desire for the library to continue providing traditional library services such as materials lending and public programs, while also leaning into the role of serving as a platform to facilitate human connection. Possible instruments for this may include the following:

- **Active Civic Engagement & Dialogue:** Residents want a space for community conversations about current topics and issues. They envision the library as a nexus for mutual support, volunteerism, and connection. They want and need the library to provide spaces that empower residents to engage with one another in order to form and strengthen bonds.
- **Celebrating Local Identity and Communities:** There is a recurring suggestion for the library to serve as a platform to empower residents to build a sense of shared history and pride across communities, including the Wesleyan community. The library is positioned as a natural place to foster these connections.



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**You're truly
the heart
of the
downtown
community.**
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Create a Safe and Welcoming Destination

Goal 2: Create a Safe and Welcoming Destination

The library is praised as a "safe harbor," but the inadequacies of the current facility's infrastructure are cited as barriers to future success.

- **Modernized, Accessible Infrastructure:** A 21st-century library facility is seen as the single most important step toward being "future-ready," so it will be crucial to move forward with current plans to rebuild and expand the Russell Library on its current site. Improvements would encompass ADA and code compliance, energy efficiency, flexible public spaces including meeting/study rooms in multiple sizes and configurations, "community classrooms," and more. Persistent negative perceptions regarding paid parking near the library are also seen as a barrier, particularly for families and seniors; some respondents suggested solutions such as a "library card validation" system for parking. While modernization of the library facility is imperative, respectful renovation and restoration of historic portions of the current facility – i.e. the "church" and the Hubbard Room – will also be essential in order to preserve cherished elements of Middletown's history.
- **Intentional Design for Wellness:** Community feedback highlighted a need for spaces specifically designed to strengthen social infrastructure, such as quiet areas for peace and reflection, sensory-friendly spaces, and natural/biophilic elements (e.g., outdoor-oriented spaces or natural sounds) to reduce stress. This theme was particularly resonant with teens, who expressed exhaustion from a digitally-intense lifestyle.
- **A Welcoming Space for All:** The library must remain a space that all may inhabit in peace, and where everyone feels welcomed. Strategies may include Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, representation for non-English language communities, and uniform enforcement of the library's Code of Conduct so that all may use the library in comfort.



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**Your library is my favorite
place in the whole world.**
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Foster a Thriving Economic Ecosystem

Goal 3: Foster a Thriving Economic Ecosystem

In a time of rising costs and housing insecurity, the library is increasingly viewed as a "financial equalizer."

- **Economic Support Services:** Programs like "Lawyers in Libraries," job search and upskilling/reskilling tools, and career-specific resources (e.g., for nursing, IT, and trades) are highly valued by community members.
- **Small Business & Workforce Development:** Residents want the library to support the Middletown talent pool through access to technology training resources and apprenticeships in partnership with local businesses and organizations.
- **Hands-On Skill Building:** Both staff and public feedback strongly support programs and services that foster skills and entrepreneurial development.
- **Library as Economic Engine/Cost-Saver:** Continue to provide high-value, high-demand collections, services and programs that help residents maximize their return on library investment during challenging and volatile economic times.

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We're going to dinner downtown before the show [A Christmas Carol]. A lot of good restaurants on Main Street.

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Great Wolf Lodge has nothing on Russell.

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Promote a Lifelong Love of Learning

Goal 4: Promote a Lifelong Love of Learning

Education is an oft-cited 'antidote' to current challenges like misinformation and post-COVID learning gaps.

- **Media Literacy & AI:** With residents feeling overwhelmed by "too much information," there is a clear mandate for the library to offer guidance on how to vet information, navigate AI, and hone digital literacy skills.
- **Bridging Academic Gaps:** Multiple stakeholders requested free tutoring and academic support services for K-12 students to address social-emotional and learning gaps that became acutely apparent following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **STEAM & Youth Innovation:** To engage the next generation, residents want high-rigor, fun programming like coding, robotics, and gaming competitions that expand upon book-based learning.
- **Lifelong Civics:** Suggestions include civics-based programming for both students and adults to foster a better understanding of government and democracy.

Libraries are not static repositories of books but living spaces of growth and curiosity, capable of enriching minds at every age.



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Conclusion and Next Steps

Now that we have established a strategic framework, it will be the job of library staff and leadership to translate it into concrete, high-impact action steps. We realize that the library cannot be all things to all people, given our fiscal, staffing, and infrastructure limits, but by focusing on the priorities described in this document, leveraging community partnerships, and listening to our community, we are confident that we will continue to fulfill our mission to “empower people to grow, connect, strive and thrive.” Thanks to the hundreds of community members who took time to provide input, our updated strategic plan will continue to inform the daily work of the Russell Library staff and Trustees, just as it will guide ongoing planning for a 21st-century library facility. We invite you to share this plan with your family and friends: ask questions, use the library, and join us as we all work towards a better future for Middletown.

We’re ready.

Russell Library Board Strategic Planning Committee

Andrew White, Chair
Jennifer Hadley
Diane Smith

Ramona Burkey, Library Director
Sarah Schulenburg
Eamonn Wisneski

Special thanks to Professor Mary Alice Haddad and the Fall 2025 Comparative Urban Policy Class at Wesleyan University.

Go to www.russelllibrary.org/future for more information and supplemental documents.

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***Russell Library can play a key role
in reigniting curiosity and imagination in
an age dominated by digital distractions.***

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Photo captions:

1. Russell Library opened its doors to our community on April 5, 1876. In 2026 we celebrated 150 years serving as Middletown's principle public library!
2. At our 150th "birthday" party, State Librarian Deborah Schander posed for a photo op with a life-sized, pixelated version of Russell Library's Founder, Frances Russell.
3. Library Director Ramona Burkey engaged with residents during Middletown's 6th annual Juneteenth celebration at Harbor Park.
4. Staff and an intern distributed Free People Read Freely buttons and stickers, promoted the Russell Library Games, and gave hand fans to attendees during a very hot Pride Fest.
5. Mayor for a Day students test the ball pit in our Activity Room.
6. Whoops! That's the wrong kind of carriage! A young patron hitched a ride in a wheely basket intended for books. It was so cute we couldn't resist snapping a pic.
7. Another young patron feels the love at a Valentine Card Decorating program in the Activity Room.
8. Business owner and Common Council member Ava Hart signed on as a participating location during the Russell Library Games. Here she is shown with the "signlet" that over 40 businesses, libraries, museums, and community organizations displayed for players from April - November 2026 in commemoration of Russell Library's 150th year.
9. Staff sign Middlesex Community College students up for Russell Library cards at their Student Resource Day.



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