

MIDDLETOWN

Seniors seek better space at center

Many plans for a new community center have fallen through over the years.

By **CHRIS ENGLISH**
STAFF WRITER

With Middletown stymied in its efforts to build a new community center with space for the seniors association, many seniors said they would settle on some improvements and more space in the township-owned building they already occupy, the community center on Trenton Road.

"We could use a large room we could rent out to outside groups for dances and other things that would give us more revenue," said senior Ivy O'Connor.

"We try to make the best of the space we have, but we could use some enlargement," added association president Margaret Clark.

The seniors association, open to residents 55 and older from all municipalities, has 1,100 members, though not all attend the functions there, said manager Lydia Konopka.

The supervisors and other township officials have tried for years to get a new community center, but various proposals have fallen through.

Most recently, a deal with Reedman/Toll Auto World that would have given the township land for a new community center and dealership owner Bruce Toll a new shopping center stalemated over various objections from the supervisors.

There was also talk of renovating a township-owned barn at the Middletown Community Park into a community center, but that was never a serious possibility, said supervisors chairman Robert McMonagle. The location was not good, he said, and the point became moot when Youth Services officials said they would likely exercise their automatic five-year option on their lease of a large part of the building.

"This [Trenton Road] building is dilapidated and we need more room," said senior Julienne O'Brien. "But they've talked about things so long and I don't think it will ever materialize."

Most of the supervisors originally resisted an expansion-renovation at the current site because the property, a little more than 5 acres, was not deemed big enough for future expansion. However, the tide might be shifting back toward doing something at the Trenton Road location, said Supervisor Jasper Caro.

"If there is not adequate space, then build up [add more stories]," he said. "Maybe we could have the community part of it on the upper floor and leave the seniors downstairs."

Supervisor Chuck Thompson said he's sitting in on executive board meetings of the seniors association to work on improvements at the center. He said some, like replacing the cafeteria floor, should come soon.

New township Manager Ray Stepnoski has also been very receptive to doing whatever he can to improve the center, said Konopka. The Trenton Road building also houses some township recreation programs.

Financial considerations will play a heavy role in whatever can be done toward a new or improved community center, McMonagle said.

In addition to rising expenses and other monetary demands, the township is spending more than \$5 million on two current projects, a new public works building and a new building to house substations for the Langhorne-Middletown Fire Co. and Penn-del-Middletown Emergency Squad.

"It's possible this could become a voter referendum," said McMonagle of plans for a new or improved community center. "This issue has always been driven by the seniors who want a new center, but it's hard for me to justify a huge expenditure for a segment of the population. If we can do it in a fiscally responsible manner, it would be a nice thing."

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Dorothy Keal and Emily Baude crochet with friends at the Middletown Community Center on Trenton Road. The women make hats for preemies, chemotherapy patients, the homeless and underprivileged children. KIM WEIMER / **STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**