

Port authority checks out site of former Swallen's building

Middletown leaders suggest facility could be 'jobs center'

By **THOMAS GNAU**
COX NEWS SERVICE

M I D D L E T O W N — Middletown government welcomed the Butler County Port Authority to the former Swallen's building Tuesday, pointing to the mostly empty structure as a place city leaders want to transform into a jobs-sustaining engine.

"If the right employer came along, we would make, I guarantee, a fantastic deal basically to unload the building," said Marty Kohler, Middletown's planning director.

The city has owned the building at the southeast corner of Broad Street and Manchester Avenue since Swallen's closed in May 1992. Since then, the structure has gradually seen use as a site for city's chamber of commerce exhibitions and a venue for events scheduled by the Middletown Convention & Visitors Board, such as recent gun and pet shows. The building is now called the "Middletown Exhibit Center."

But city leaders want more for the building and the surrounding downtown.

"Our desire for this building is to turn it into some type of jobs center," Middletown City Manager Bill Becker told port authority members, who held their April meeting on the building's first floor.

The building presents some challenges. It has no elevator or windows, although outer walls can be remade, Kohler said. Each floor offers some 44,000 square feet of space but is also dotted with posts from floor to ceiling.

But the building has a loading dock and is attached to a 700-space parking garage, which is also owned by city government.

The city has considered housing and office uses for the

structure, but nothing has worked, Kohler said.

"We would like to see jobs downtown," he said. "That's the No. 1 key."

John Fonner, secretary to the port authority board of directors, noted that a county fiber loop is just outside the building.

The authority board, formed by Butler County Commissioners last summer, often meets in different locations around the county as it establishes its scope and learns about local development needs.

In a scheduled presentation, Trenton City Manager Patrick Titterington told board members that his city of some 10,200 residents will likely remain a "bedroom-dominated community" for the foreseeable future.

But he added, "To be frank, residential development doesn't pay the bills."

Trenton is in the 10th month of a moratorium on new residential development, Titterington said. Whether that moratorium is renewed remains to be seen, but he said industrial development is a key goal for city leaders.

"It's not going to happen overnight," he said.

In other business, board member Joe Magdich moved to have Fonner speak for the board in opposition to a recent state budget amendment that some contend would cut revenue yielded by Tax Increment Financing and Residential Improvement Districts.

TIF districts harness tax revenue resulting from new, value-adding development to improve public infrastructure directly serving that development. Kohler said Middletown plans to rely on TIFs to help develop areas around the planned replacement Middletown Regional Hospital, which will be built northeast of Ohio 122 and Union Road beginning this summer.

Contact **Thomas Gnaou** at (513) 705-2833, or e-mail him at tgnau@coxohio.com.