

Middleton growth leads Canyon County

City leaders ask county to almost double Middleton's area of impact

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MIDDLETON — Greg and Jennie Gridley moved from Eagle to Middleton last year to have more land for their kids, less crowded schools and a rural atmosphere.

"We loved it in Eagle, but we were just ready for some elbow room," he said.

Residents say they hope to keep the rural feel, but the town north of Caldwell is blooming in new rooftops, which is what attracted Jeff Cox and his family from Texas six years ago.

Cox searched the Internet to identify places across the nation that had huge future growth potential; he chose Middleton from the results.

"I can look back now and know I made the right decision," said Cox, who purchased the Middleton hardware store and started a heating and air-conditioning business.

The Gridleys and Coxes are among hundreds of families who have settled in Middleton since 2000, making it Canyon County's fastest-growing town by percentage of population.

As of April 1, the town's population is 4,575 — a jump of 1,560 people or 51.7 percent in about five years, according to Community Planning Association estimates.

City leaders, feeling the pressure from development, crafted plans to extend city sewer and water east to the Ada County line, west to Interstate 84 and north to Purple Sage Road.

They want the county to almost double Middleton's area of impact — the limits to which the city anticipates it will grow — from its current impact area of 10,560 acres to a proposed 19,740 acres.

Officials say expansion is essential for them to plan for the future and maintain the quality of life residents enjoy.

"The growth that we have seen in Middleton is phenomenal," City Councilman Loni Parry said. "A larger impact area would make decisions easier."

Canyon County Planning and Zoning commissioners recommended denying the expansion during a hearing last month, stating that the timing seemed premature.

Developers with plans in the area supported the expansion, while a couple of Canyon County

residents who live near the Ada County line said they'd rather be annexed into Star, which is also interested in some of the land Middleton wants.

Canyon County commissioners are scheduled to consider Middleton's request May 31.

"It would give the city a say in how and when development happens," said Mary Berent, Middleton's planning and zoning official.

The growth

Even with nearly 52 percent growth since 2000, Middleton is not the Treasure Valley's fastest-growing town — Star and Kuna, just across the Ada County line, grew by more than 100 percent during the same period. But it's a notch above Nampa and Caldwell — 42 percent and 40 percent, respectively — and far beyond smaller Canyon County towns, where growth ranged from 5.8 percent to 22 percent.

Middleton's comprehensive plan lays out guidelines for land use, parks, roads, schools and sewer and water systems in the current and proposed area of impact.

When officials adopted the plan in July 2004, they thought it would take eight to 10 years before development built out to the impact area limits. But less than two years later, city subdivisions are poking outside the boundaries in several places, and rural developments are sprouting nearby, Mayor Frank McKeever said.

Since January 2005, more than 2,000 homes have been approved on more than 1,000 acres within Middleton city limits. There are 104 platted subdivisions with 2,354 residential lots outside those limits in the city's current area of impact, plus another 159 subdivisions with 3,135 residential lots in the area proposed for expansion.

Along with the housing boom, business development is on an upswing, Middleton officials and business owners say.

Sunrise Café, Casa Mexico and other new shops and businesses have opened in the past few years. And longtime businesses say they are prospering from the growth.

"We've been very well blessed," Cox said. He said he will need to decide soon whether to expand the building that houses his heating/air-conditioning company or build a new one.

"We're hurting for room now," Cox said. "The potential in this area is unbelievable."

Although small businesses have been popping up around town, Middleton has few large employers, and most residents commute to jobs in other communities.

The Middleton Economic Development Association is working on a long-term economic development plan to entice more business and industry.

The city installed fiber-optic cable and high-speed Internet connections to serve high tech businesses and work-at-home employees, laid sewer and water lines to areas south of the river to encourage industrial development, and is working on a new city Web site in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce to get the word out about their growing town, officials said.

"I'd like to see us turning out like Eagle, with a downtown core of shops, a Main Street that's pedestrian-friendly, landscaped pathways through the city," McKeever said.

The attraction

Middleton's place on the Treasure Valley map is drawing folks today just as it did about 135 years ago when a flour mill opened along the Boise River.

"It's location, location, location," said Sherry Maupin, a resident, Realtor and developer.

Most of the town sits north of the Boise River among gently rolling hills and flat land, within a few minutes' drive of Nampa and Caldwell and midway between Boise and Ontario, Ore. The ridge north of the city boasts views of the Boise Foothills and the Owyhee Mountains — a magnet for high-end subdivisions.

"I like the central locality," said City Clerk Ellen Smith. "We can be at any store in 20 minutes. We have decent restaurants and it's still small enough when I go to the grocery store, I see people I know."

Many Middleton families have one person working in Boise and one who drives to Ontario, Maupin said.

Residents have easy access to major arterials such as Idaho 44 and Idaho 20/26. They'll be 15 minutes from Nampa's new Costco, pegged to open this summer, and the adjacent Karcher Interchange will provide new Interstate 84 access by the end of this year, Maupin said.

Land prices and the trend toward larger residential lots also are drawing people from across the valley, she said.

The cost of Middleton property climbed from \$18,000 an acre a few years ago to \$50,000 and \$70,000 an acre last year, and is now about \$100,000 an acre for ground that's ready for development.

But Gridley said that's still low compared to \$200,000 and up for a buildable lot in Eagle.

Gridley said his seventh-grade son has run into many kids at Middleton Middle School who earlier attended Eagle Middle School with him.

"People can come from Ada County, buy five acres, build the same size house and be equal," Middleton School Superintendent Richard Bauscher said.

The Middleton School District has grown about 4 to 6 percent each year for the past six years, necessitating portable classrooms for even its newest schools, he said. Total student enrollment was 2,190 in the 2000-2001 school year and 2,773 this school year.

About 70 percent of the students who are new to the district this year came from other cities in Idaho, Bauscher said. The top five are Nampa, 22 percent; Boise, 17 percent; Meridian, 15 percent; Caldwell 14 percent; and Eagle, 6 percent.

Bauscher spends an hour a day working on growth issues, such as finding reasonably priced portable classrooms. But he said the district's relatively low teacher/student ratio and rising test scores attract families such as the Gridleys.

Gridley agreed, saying that Meridian School District teachers and curriculum were great, but the schools were too big.

"Eventually, you lose a little hands-on," Gridley said.

The future

A few newcomers and longtime residents say they like the new restaurants and stores attracted by growth, but they could do without the upswing in graffiti, vandalism and rush-hour traffic backups.

"Traffic gets a little bad," said Gridley, a Treasure Valley Realtor with the Woodhouse Group. "You sacrifice a little bit (by commuting), but we really like it out here."

He knows Middleton is growing and will eventually become an urban area, but he believes his subdivision of 44 homes will retain its roomy, rural atmosphere because lot sizes range from three-quarters of an acre to more than 2 acres.

"It's just a good feel," Gridley said.


Steve Rule, a businessman and former city councilman who has lived in Middleton all his life, said he misses the joy of pheasant hunting by the Boise River.

"It was a wonderful way of life," he said. "Now you can't get up and down the Boise River without trespassing on someone's property."

Though river access is now more limited, the area is developing for walking and biking, he said.

And new homes are coming regardless of whether existing residents want them, he said.

"The faces have changed, but ... it's a great place to live and always has been," Rule said

Enlarge 



Lisa M. Collard / The Idaho Statesman

Jeff and Kelly Cox, front, and their sons Weston, 18, and Austin, 17, back from left, relocated from Texas six years ago to take over running the True Value hardware store in Middleton. Jeff picked the Canyon County town because of its growth potential and says he made the right choice. They've grown the business and added an air-conditioning and heating service.

Original town of Middleton is one of the oldest in the state

Middleton is the oldest town in Canyon County and one of the oldest in Idaho. William N. Montgomery drew up the plan in 1863. Middleton got its name from its location halfway between Boise and the mouth of the Boise River near the town of Parma. The town originally was located about a mile southeast of the present downtown, but was moved after a flood. The historic town site is now within the city limits.

In 1871, a flour mill was built, drawing settlers from 150 miles around to grind wheat.

In 1872, the Boise River flooded, opening up a large channel and creating an island of Middleton and some farmland. Residents were forced to ferry to the flour mill and back.

By 1876, Middleton had a store, post office, schoolhouse, hotel, blacksmith shop and saloon and half dozen families.

In 1878, Indians clashed with settlers and several forts were built, two in the Parma-Dixie area and one south of the Boise River near the Ada-Canyon county line.

When work began on improving and straightening the valley road, the people of Middleton decided to move the town closer to the flour mill.

On Oct. 26, 1880, George Liggett, who operated the hotel, gave a grand ball to say farewell to the old town site. The town was gradually moved during several years.

The decision of the Oregon Short Line Railroad to bypass Middleton in 1883 almost ruined the town, according to "Middleton In Picture and Story," a local history. In 1907, the Boise and Interurban Company completed tracks through Middleton between Boise and Caldwell. The tracks were the same width as standard railroad tracks, allowing the Interurban cars to pull freight cars.

— Source: "Middleton in Picture and Story" by Middleton Centennial Book Committee



Darin Oswald / The Idaho Statesman
Madison Gridley, 4, hugs her dog while her father, Greg Gridley, plays fetch with another family dog in the front yard of their new home in Middleton. Greg and his wife, Jennie, both grew up in small Idaho towns and moved to Middleton from Eagle last year to provide more space for their children and pets.

Planning for growth

Middleton officials say they're feeling development pressure and need a major expansion of their impact-area limits to manage growth effectively. They've asked Canyon County to extend the current limits along the Boise River east to the Ada County line, west to Interstate 84 and north to Purple Sage Road. The limits would almost double the city's current impact area from 10,560 acres to 19,740 acres.

Color key

Proposed, expanded area of impact Current area of impact Middleton city limits



Trolley Station in Middleton is the former Idaho Power Substation, built about 1907 to power the Interurban streetcar line that made a loop around the Boise Valley. Nearby, but not pictured, is the original Interurban Station. The last car passed through Middleton en route to Caldwell at 6:04 p.m. May 17, 1928.

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The Idaho Statesman