Pottstown’s special burden

Not long ago, the police chief of Middletown, Ohio, a town of nearly 50,000, gained nationwide attention with a Facebook post accusing nearby Ohio towns for using Middletown as a dumping ground for unwanted people.

Middletown, like Pottstown, has homeless shelters, drug rehabilitation facilities, free food and counseling services, and a public library accessible to all. These generous social services, the chief said, has encouraged other Ohio cities to dump homeless people in Middletown because they don’t want them in their city.

"Many times our officers respond to a person wandering around downtown only to find they were given a voucher for a cab from another city and sent here...."

"Our officers, medics, business owners have to deal with these issues and it drains services."

The chief said he was proud that Middletown looks out for the needy, but "we can’t handle the overload."

What’s true in Middletown, Ohio, is also true in cities and towns throughout Pennsylvania, including Pottstown.

Over the last 50 years, the middle class and the affluent have either abandoned or simply avoided traditional cities and towns, leaving an increasingly poor population behind.

On Tuesday, we pointed out the percentage of low-income students in Pottstown schools has increased from about 20 percent in the early 1970s to about 70 percent today.

Pottstown has twice as many low-income students as Pottsgrove and five times as many as Owen J. Roberts.

Low housing prices, public transportation, and an abundance of government and private agencies has made Pottstown a magnet for the poor.

Pottstown has about 440 Section 8 subsidized rentals. With less than 3 percent of the county’s population, Pottstown has nearly 20 percent of its low income vouchers.

Meanwhile, about 20 percent of all Pottstown real estate is tax exempt — including its two most valuable properties, The Hill School and Pottstown Hospital.

Social service agencies like Creative Health, the Pottstown Cluster, the YWCA, and the Salvation Army are also tax exempt.

Pottstown’s tax base has been shrinking for years. This is why we have among the highest real estate taxes in the commonwealth.

Given all these handicaps, it's amazing Pottstown is doing as well as it does. Some people live here, of course, only because they can’t afford anything else.

But there is a growing cadre of residents who value traditional, tree-lined streets, beautiful historic buildings that people have used and loved for generations, and neighborhoods with a sense of place.

There is a spirit of inclusion and acceptance you don’t find in the suburbs. We pay a "surcharge" of higher taxes to accommodate the poor and all their troubles. But many of us find it’s worth it.