First Impressions Connecticut

A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

Executive Summary - Putnam, CT

January 2015

Introduction

The First Impressions community exchange program was designed to help communities learn about their strengths and shortcomings through the eyes of first-time visitors. Volunteer teams undertake unannounced visits, record observations, and give constructive feedback to the exchange community. These reports are often used as part of broader community assessment or planning processes to inform community policy and action.

On November 6, 2015, three volunteers from the Town of Canton/Collinsville visited the Town of Putnam on a cool and cloudy Friday. The team conducted upfront online research but only one member had ever been to Putnam and that was many years ago. The team was pleasantly surprised with what they discovered during their visit, although they did have some concerns. The following is an overview of the highlights and re-occurring themes of the visit.

First Impressions Visit

For the first ten minutes of the visit, the team drove around town. The very first impression they had was of the numerous health care facilities, including the hospital. They also noticed the many older rental properties (duplexes and triplexes) and factory buildings. They commented that the housing in the immediate downtown area looked tired and run down. They also felt that it was not clear at first where the downtown was located coming in from Route 44. One team member noted that their *"first impression was that it (Putnam) was bigger than I thought and the construction was a surprise."*

Once the team got into the downtown their impression became much more positive. They felt that overall the downtown buildings look good and the bicycle displays and window displays added a dynamic feature. They commented positively on the walkability of downtown, the evidence of streetscape improvements and abundance of outdoor seating and dining.

They felt that way finding signage could be improved including the addition of a "you are here" dot on the map at the public parking lot, where they were very impressed to find a public restroom.

The team was also impressed with the variety of retail shopping available downtown and elsewhere throughout the town. They didn't feel that there was anything you'd have to leave Putnam to purchase (except maybe higher end clothing). They did comment that signage could also be improved for retail. The team said "they discovered the indoor marketplaces quite by accident (because there were no signs pointing them out) but they thought they were very cool.

The number and variety of restaurants also made a very positive impression on the visiting team. They commented on the friendliness of the wait staff at the Crossings, where they had lunch and appreciated the adaptive reuse of this historic structure (train station).

The river, river park, band shell and walking trail also had a significant positive impact on the team. They found the online information about the community events (DiscoverPutnam) and the number of events, impressive for a small town. They commented on the Farmers Market, Riverfire and various festivals and holiday parades.

"*...although we were there on a Friday morning. I particularly liked the central downtown area. It was scenic and kind of funky with an artsy feel* "

The team did note the lack of housing in the downtown, especially on the upper floors. They mentioned the numerous vacant mill buildings and saw this as a tremendous opportunity for businesses and housing. They did not realize there were three interstate highway (Rt. 395) access points in Putnam and saw this as an advantage as well.

When asked what was the most outstanding feature of the community one team member said it was: *"hard to pick one. I liked the energy of it, although we were there on a Friday morning. I particularly liked the central downtown area. It was scenic and kind of funky with an artsy feel."*

Wrap up

In the final section of the report the team was asked to sum it all up with the following questions:

List three positive things you observed about this community:

1. Great events
2. Solid base of attractions (antiques and river)
3. Variety of shopping and restaurants

What are three potential opportunities available to this community?

1. Way-finding signage
2. Advertising the variety of antique/retail shopping to Hartford area more
3. River and Mill Redevelopment

What are three biggest obstacles or challenges facing the community?

1. Perception of remoteness
2. Socioeconomic base
3. Condition of the many older mill homes

In the end both communities realized that they had much more in common than they expected. They both have bike trails and rivers and were both flooded in the 1950's. They both also learned something about their own community by participating in this program. The Canton team said they gained a better understanding of the opportunity to improve their own regional promotions, website and coordination of all retail shopping areas. They were so impressed by Putnam's events and downtown "decorations" including the bicycles and jeans, that they want to borrow those ideas for their own downtown.

Both towns wished that they had more time to spend in each town and with each other. They really enjoyed meeting each other at the wrap up luncheon and learning more about each other's first impressions. They hope to maintain this connection and to continue to learn from each other in the future through quarterly phone conversations and ongoing communications.

This report was prepared January 2016 by Laura Brown, UConn Extension, and Susan Westa, Connecticut Main Street Center based on raw data from team visits and notes from the community debrief session held on December 11, 2015. For more information visit

http://communities.extension.uconn.edu/connecticut-first-impressions-program/