



Extension



2016

August 19th

First Impressions: Rochester

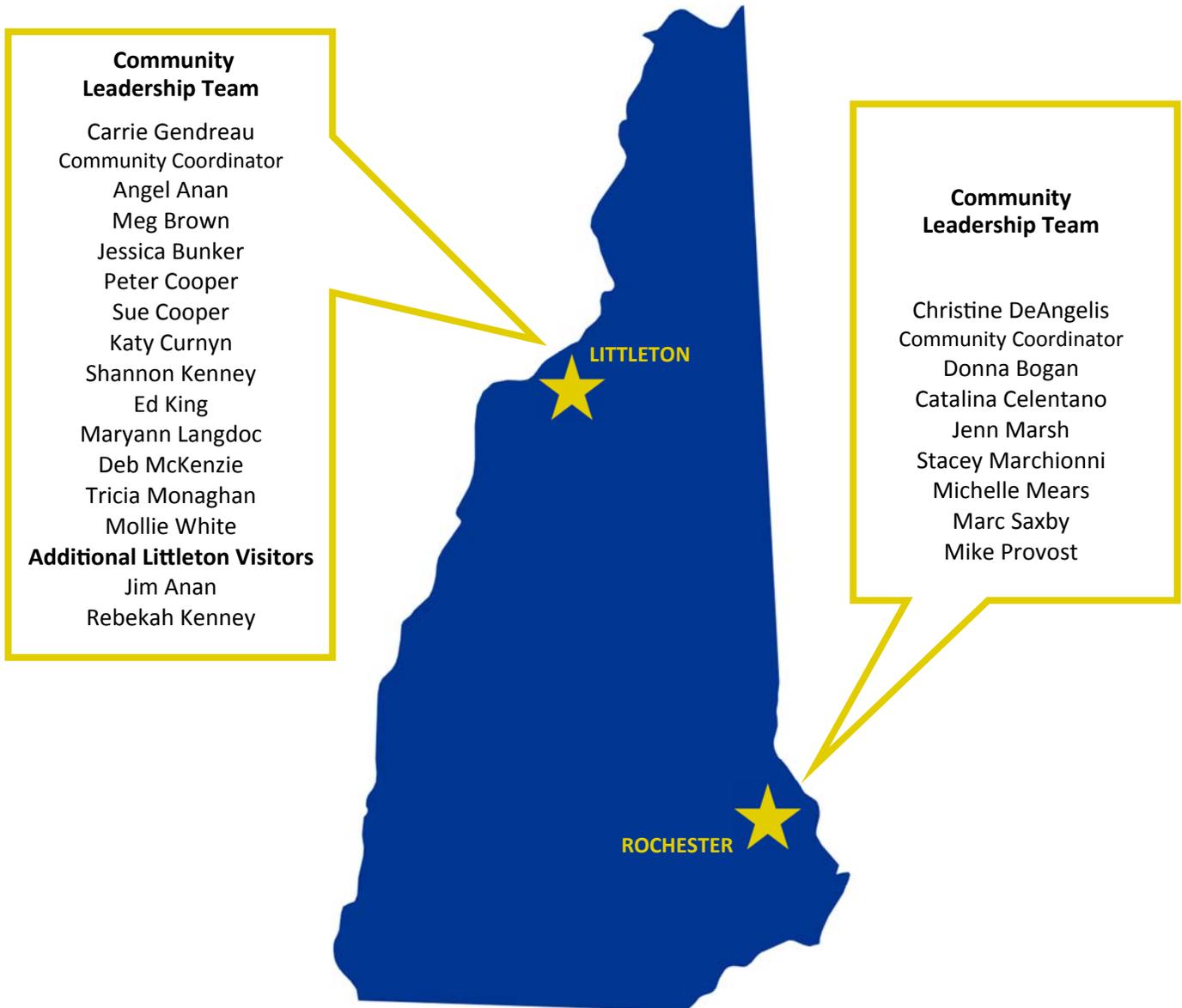


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# Acknowledgements

Thank you to the community volunteers who are passionate about improving their communities and provided their time and effort to implement the First Impressions program.



The First Impressions program has been adapted by University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension to meet the current and future needs of New Hampshire Communities. First Impressions was developed in 1991 by Andy Lewis, University of Wisconsin Extension Associate Professor, and James Schneider, Grant County, Wisconsin Economic Development Director. Since then, the program has been adapted by states across the US as well as in Canada. UNH Extension's First Impressions program stems from a 2015 Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development Grant in collaboration and partnership with the extension services of the Michigan State University, the University of Connecticut, the University of Minnesota, the University of Vermont and the University of West Virginia.

# Introduction

The look and feel of a downtown can influence the decisions of potential residents, visitors, and businesses. A vibrant downtown serves as a gathering place, a place for people to dine, shop, and conduct business. New Hampshire First Impressions is designed to help a community learn about their downtown’s existing assets and opportunities for improvement as seen through the eyes of first time visitors. This is accomplished by matching two communities to conduct “secret shopper” assessments in the other community and report their findings.

Possible outcomes include:

- Improving the visual appearance of a downtown
- Strengthening the marketing and promotion of a downtown
- Enriching the climate of a downtown for new businesses, residents, and visitors

The First Impressions assessment consists of training meetings, a Pre-Visit Survey, a visit to the other community to conduct the assessment, and a Post-Visit Survey. During the visit, team members are using the following characteristics to conduct the assessment:



The First Impressions assessment is completed by community volunteers with no expertise regarding these characteristics. Throughout the report, these characteristics are identified as assets and opportunities. Assets are the strengths in the downtown—where characteristics exist and are excellent and well-maintained. For example, a well-maintained trail or a bench in a nice location would be considered assets. Opportunities are those characteristics that exist or do not exist, where there is room for improvement. An example of an opportunity for improvement might be lack of bike lanes, or a broken sidewalk.

## Littleton and Rochester: Matching Communities

Two communities are matched who have a similar downtown based on a number of criteria, such as size, location, amenities, and natural resources. The Town of Littleton and the City of Rochester were matched based on physical characteristics. Both communities have a similar sized Main Street, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile. The Town of Littleton and the City of Rochester are both close to a major highway, and have major roads directed through their downtowns. Both are aesthetically similar in design infrastructure and historic characteristics, like period lighting, brick façades, historic mill sites, and opera houses. Finally, both communities have Main Street programs, and are in close proximity to a river.

### Littleton:

Nearby highway: I-93  
Main Street throughways: US302, NH18, NH116  
River: Ammonoosuc River  
County: Grafton

### Rochester:

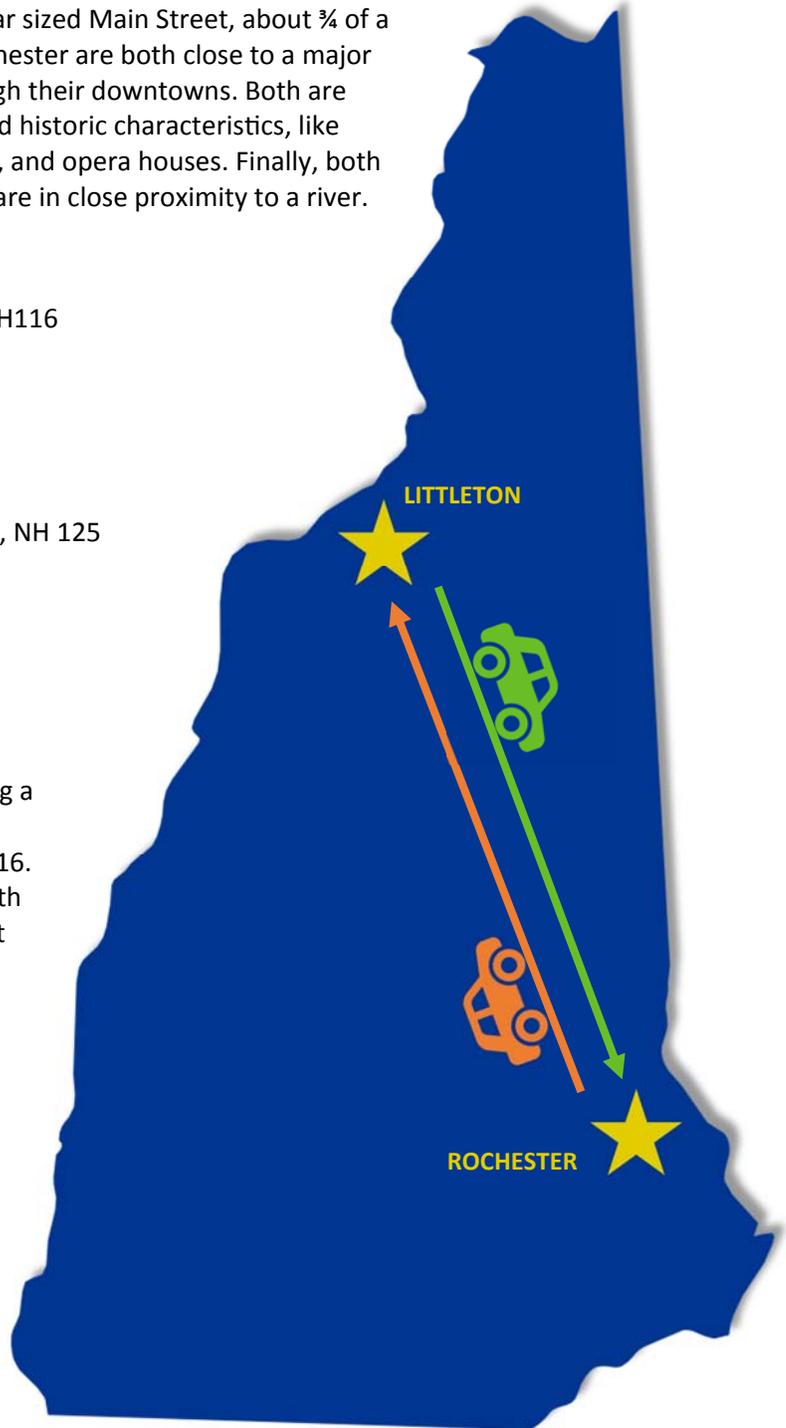
Nearby highway: Spaulding Turnpike  
Main Street throughways: NH202A, NH108, NH 125  
River: Cocheco River  
County: Strafford

## Forming the Community Leadership Team

Both communities began the process of forming a diverse and representative First Impressions Community Leadership Team early summer 2016. Community Leadership Team members met with UNH Cooperative Extension staff to learn about First Impressions, what characteristics are important in a downtown, and how to conduct a downtown assessment.

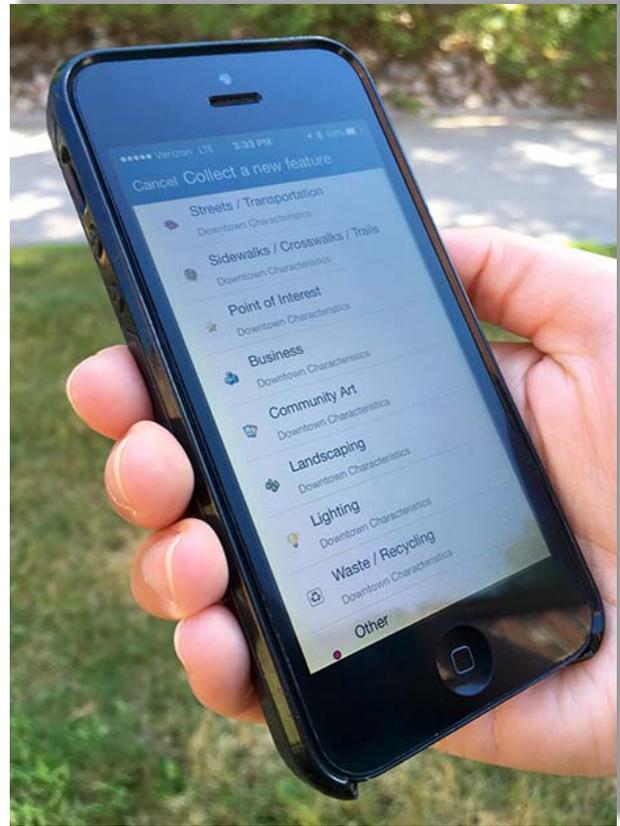
## Pre-Visit Survey

The Pre-Visit Survey is completed by Community Leadership Team members online prior to conducting the visit. The survey collects information about team members' demographics, such as age, gender, and town of residence; and requires team members to conduct internet research on the community they will be visiting and reflect on the quality and availability of information on webpages as well as social media. Finally, the survey requires team members to reflect on any perceptions they may have about the community prior to their visit.



## First Impressions Assessment Visit

During the First Impressions visit, Community Leadership Team members have access to two tools to conduct their assessment: the use of a mobile application: Collector for ArcGIS, and paper booklets. Collector for ArcGIS is a free mobile application that allows for data collection in the field. When a team member uses Collector, they select a characteristic from a list, fill out a description, observation, choose a rating on a scale of poor to excellent from a drop down menu, and have the opportunity to upload a photo or video. Once submitted, the information is stored as a point on a map. In addition to the mobile app, team members are able to use a paper booklet to collect their data. The booklet replicates the data collection process of the app: team members circle a characteristic from the list, and then write the location, description, observation, and select a rating on a scale of poor to excellent.



## Post-Visit Survey

Following the visit, Community Leadership Team members complete a Post-Visit online survey. This survey allows team members to reflect on their visit and rate the downtown overall. Team members also reflect on their initial perceptions and whether they would like to live, visit or open a business in the community.

## Post-Visit Community Leadership Team Debrief

The Community Leadership Team meets about two weeks following their visit, where they debrief, reflect on their experience and brainstorm assets and opportunities for improvement to provide to the other community during the Joint Community Leadership Team Debrief Meeting.

## Joint Community Leadership Team Debrief Meeting

The Joint Community Leadership Team Debrief Meeting is scheduled for Thursday, September 8, 2016, at the Pines Community Center in Northfield, NH. Both teams from Littleton and Rochester will gather to network, share their experiences completing the First Impressions assessment, and present the assets and opportunities for improvement discovered during their visits.

## Community Report Out Meetings

The Town of Littleton and The City of Rochester will both host Community Report Out Meetings during the month of October 2016 to share results with community members. A representative from the other Community Leadership Team will present the findings and then community members will break into small groups for discussion and action planning.

# Key Findings

## Assets

Assets are the strengths in the downtown—where characteristics exist and are excellent and well-maintained.

**Friendly People.** The friendly people in Rochester was a central theme of the First Impressions assessment.

Team members highlighted the great service at restaurants and businesses as well as friendly residents smiling and saying hello outside on the sidewalk.

**Beautiful Parks and Tree-Lined Streets.** The Littleton visit team also took note of the natural resources and green spaces throughout in downtown Rochester. These included welcoming parks, tree lined streets, well-maintained flowers and landscaping, and the riverwalk.

**Buildings and Infrastructure.** Rochester's great infrastructure was also highlighted as a prominent asset. Members noted the historic buildings, wide sidewalks, river walk, period lamp posts, lots of greenery, a town common, a town square, historic library and Opera House.

**Location.** The location of Rochester was also noted as an asset. The visit team saw it as an asset that Rochester is in close proximity to Portsmouth, the Seacoast, Lakes Region, ocean and mountains. Rochester could use location to their advantage to attract businesses and visitors, and recruit families to move to town.

## Opportunities for Improvement

Opportunities are those characteristics that exist or do not exist, where there is room for improvement.

**Business Recruitment.** One of the opportunities for improvement identified by the Littleton visit team was to recruit additional businesses to fill vacant spaces in downtown. Visitors noticed that the current selection of businesses such as the comic book store, 80s toy store, tattoo and tobacco shops gave the feel of masculinity. A recommendation would be to consider recruiting additional businesses to increase diversity, appeal to a wider audience, and create a more vibrant and interesting downtown.

**Hours of Operation.** Several visit team members identified that some businesses and public facilities were not open on Saturday, such as the Rochester Public Library and the Chamber of Commerce. It was suggested that downtown businesses might coordinate their hours, as some businesses opened later than others.

**Signage.** Another opportunity for improvement identified is to work on signage, both street signs, as well as wayfinding signs to help visitors navigate points of interest in the downtown area, such as the Opera House and Main Street district.

**Image and Branding.** Visit team members noted an opportunity for Rochester to consider its image and branding. Members were unclear why Rochester was called the Lilac City. At the debrief, members of the visit team reflected that they were pleased by Rochester given their perception of the city prior to visiting.

**Web Presence.** The visit team had mixed reviews for Rochester's web presence. Team members noted that the City Website was targeted to residents, and informative, but could be improved to highlight things to do for visitors. The Chamber Website could also be improved to direct more information to visitors, such as a list of businesses and points of interest downtown.

# Before the Visit

## Community Leadership Team Meetings

The Littleton Community Leadership Team began meeting in early summer 2016. Community volunteers were invited to join the team in order to form a diverse and representative group. The Littleton Community Leadership Team consisted of Littleton Chamber of Commerce members, local business owners, community and spiritual leaders, and new residents. A concerted effort was made to bring in new volunteers who were interested in bettering Littleton’s main street and downtown.

The Littleton Community Leadership Team held five meetings prior to visiting Rochester in order to learn about First Impressions. Team members learned about what makes a community vibrant, and reviewed the downtown characteristics that comprise a First Impressions assessment. The team also was instructed how to complete the assessment using the mobile application and the paper booklet.

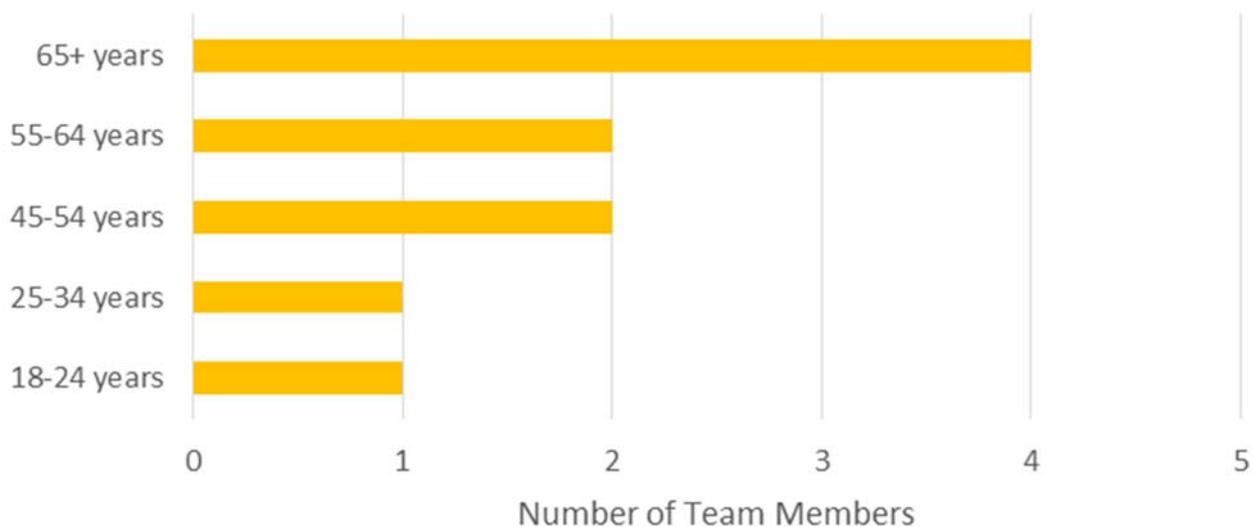
## Pre-Visit Survey

The Littleton Community Leadership Team completed the Pre-Visit Survey prior to visiting Rochester. The survey provided opportunity to research Rochester on the internet and social media and describe their perceptions. The results of the survey follow:

### Demographics

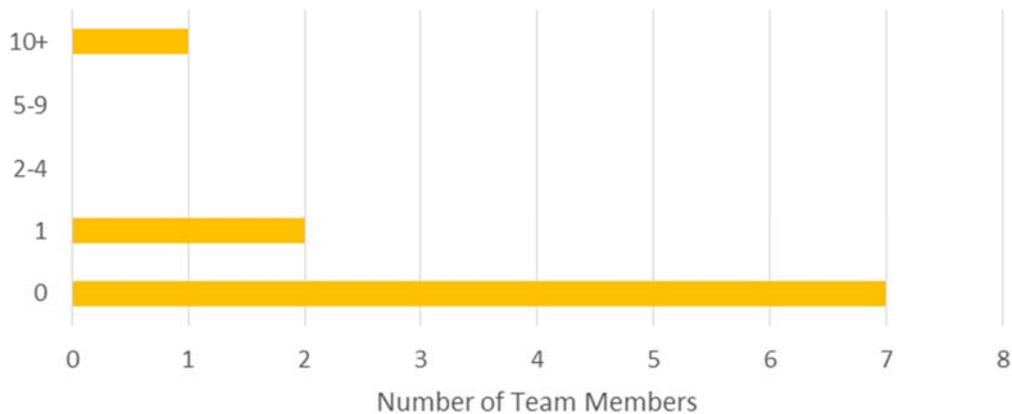
The Littleton Community Leadership Team was composed of eleven females and one male. All members live in Northern Grafton County, including Littleton, Bethlehem and Easton. Members of the team represented a good diversity of age groups, as displayed below.

### Age of Littleton Community Leadership Team



As evidenced, the Littleton Community Leadership team was a diverse group of individuals. Age is an important consideration of these demographics because people of different ages view things differently and may have different expectations of a downtown.

## Number of times team members have visited Rochester prior to First Impressions



Interestingly, prior to the community exchange, only three of the team members indicated that they had previously visited Rochester.

### General Impression

Team members were asked to record their impression of Rochester, NH before completing any research. The following are their responses:

- I didn't know anything about Rochester.
- Haven't heard of it.
- It's near Portsmouth.
- I think that towns in the southern half are wealthier and have more going on.
- Good websites. Nice place.
- I used to come regularly for work, but didn't explore much. I was told the community had a growing senior population.
- A tough town.



## Internet Research

Team members were asked to use a search engine (like Google.com) to search for “Rochester, NH” in order to record what websites are at the top of the each search. Each team member recorded the number of different websites. The websites recorded were: RochesterNH.net, RochesterNH.org, Wikipedia, Tripadvisor and Mapquest. This review can provide Rochester a brief insight into the effectiveness of their online materials and marketing. Some of the comments by the team members were:

### RochesterNH.net (City Website)

- Ok, slightly informative, but not very enticing.
- Was very informative. I enjoyed it.
- The visitor page was helpful with good information.
- Not useful.
- Link to the Museum of Art doesn't work.
- Nice, not a lot of graphics (could have more).
- Mostly committee reports and agendas.
- Unfortunately, what was listed as good about Rochester, was not actually in Rochester.

### RochesterNH.org (Chamber Website)

- Easy to navigate, but quite cluttered---too many subpages.
- No dining/food tab or description or pictures of shops.
- Wanted to read their list of members and see if there were any that piqued my interest. There didn't seem to be many members on Main Street.
- Didn't tell me why I would want to visit Rochester, only how easy it is to get there.
- Items on page seem more directed at the Rochester community and not the visitor.
- I wasn't compelled or excited to visit based on the site.
- It was ok.
- Very helpful and insightful.
- Offered lists, phone numbers, maps, and some links, but the format didn't keep my interest.
- Offered nice video tours, some with real people, but the video promoting arts and culture needs work.
- I really like the idea of discounts right on the website.

### Wikipedia

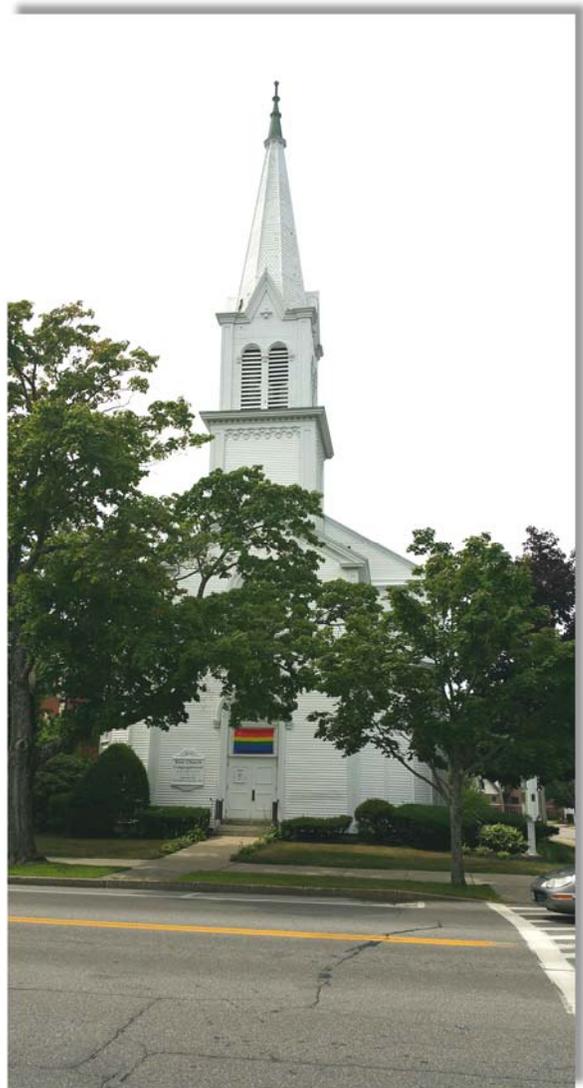
- Wikipedia was the best.

### TripAdvisor

- A bit of a disappointment, didn't outline anything specific to do in Rochester – too general.

### Mapquest

- Information was interesting but it was all about the history of Rochester.



## Social Media

Team members were also asked to use social media to search for information about Rochester, NH. The following are comments on the quality and usefulness of information obtained:

- First thing that came up was a friend's post, "Drinking and eating lunch at Buffalo Wild Wings Rochester, NH".
- A video of children and youth singing at the First United Methodist Church in Rochester, NH.
- A news update about a fire in Rochester, NH.
- Facebook was helpful for checking out local restaurants and ratings.
- 2.7 rating for City of Rochester Facebook page.
- The Chamber Facebook page was full of neat event promotions, but not too much on members.
- On Facebook, I had to type in "Rochester Chamber" to find the page.
- On Facebook, I mostly found town pages geared more towards Rochester residents.
- On Facebook, I found some good pictures.
- On Instagram, I only found Rochester Recreation.
- Made me want to see outdoor sculptures.
- Very positive.

## General Information

All team members reported they were able to find general information about Rochester, NH.



## Desire to Visit

Team members were asked if they would want to visit Rochester, NH with family or friends, and to share why or why not. Three team members said that they would like to visit Rochester, NH with family or friends, three team members responded that they would not and two responded with a maybe. Comments are below:

### Yes

- Sure — it doesn't seem like a tourist place per se but it seems like a place that is worth driving through for lunch or an afternoon. The websites and Facebook don't make it sound like something to go out of my way to see, I don't really see something that grabs me but if you live nearby it seems like a place to see.
- Yes, there are a lot of cultural, fun and exciting activities going on.
- Lots to do, it looks like a nice place to live. But I wouldn't go there unless I had a specific reason, like visiting friends or a specific business or place.

### No

- No, because Portsmouth is nearby and I know that it's a fun town with lots to do.
- There doesn't seem to be enough going on in Rochester to plan a day or even a few hours with family and friends. Looking at a map, Rochester seems out of the way from the routes I usually take to go places as well. If it were like Portsmouth, I would make the effort to visit. But it doesn't seem to be.

### Maybe

- Maybe drive through. Looked like some interesting restaurants on Yelp.
- Maybe, videos don't really address points of interest — almost too general. With the exception of the Opera House, they don't highlight places of interest would draw you into visiting Rochester. One of the videos seem to show a fort, but no mention was made of it.

## Welcoming

Team members were also asked if Rochester seemed welcoming to people to visit, live or open a business. Three members responded yes, and four responded no, and two had a mixed response. Comments below:

### Yes

- Yes. They are very business friendly.
- It looks like a nice place to live. I would need a reason to pay a visit. To open a business, I would need info beyond that of any website. The websites do portray Rochester as a positive place.

### No

- Seems welcoming because of the videos and pictures. But, to open a business there aren't any shots of downtown or the sense of a flourishing economy.
- Nothing seemed at all compelling.
- It seems like any other American town or city.
- No, there isn't any energy there.

### Maybe

- Not sure, the site mentions access to Boston Logan and the Manchester airport, but are still which are quite a distance from Rochester. Videos of the area seem very nice.
- The Town website seems to emulate that of typical town sites, so I spent more time on the Chamber website. Based on that experience, it seems like an up-and-coming town.

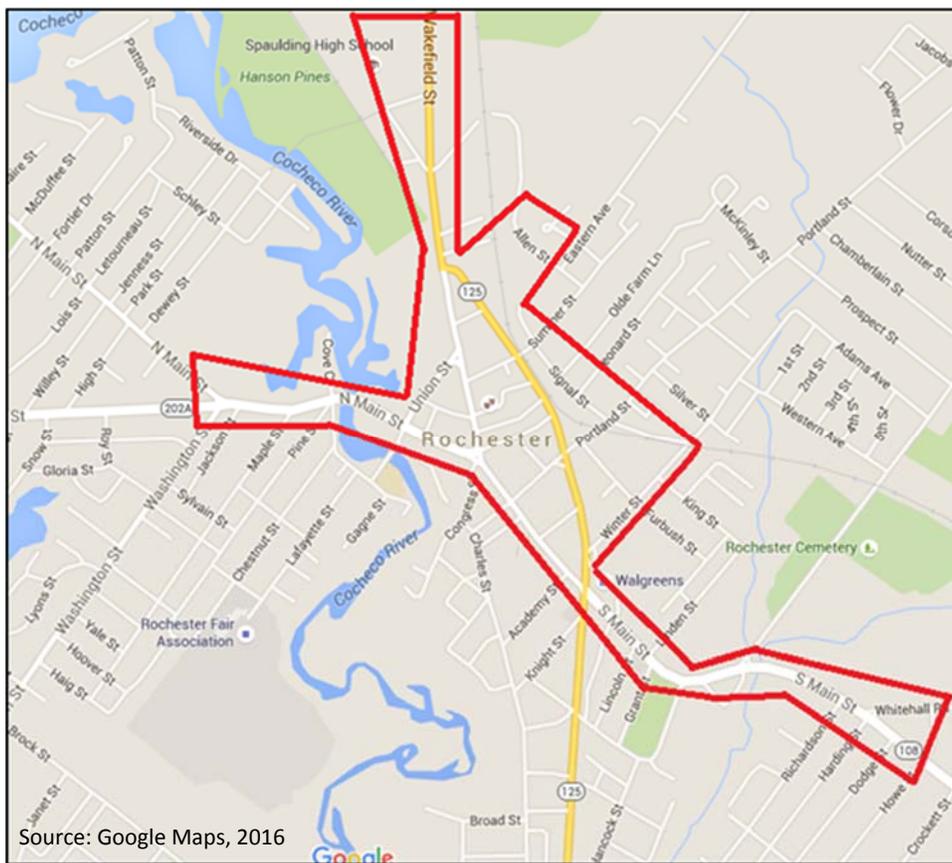
# About the Visit: Littleton Visits Rochester

The Littleton Community Leadership Team consisted of thirteen community volunteers. The volunteers visited Rochester on Saturday, July 30th. The weather was 74° and sunny. Visitors arrived around 10am, and spent time exploring, shopping, eating, and enjoying Rochester, and departed around 2pm.

## The Assessment Area

The Rochester Community Leadership Team defined the First Impressions assessment area as shown on Map 1, below.

**Map 1. City of Rochester Assessment Area**



## Findings

The following narrative is representative of data collected through Collector for ArcGIS during the visit, comments from the Post-Visit online survey, and comments during the Littleton Community Leadership Team Debrief Meeting. Ten team members utilized the mobile application Collector for ArcGIS and three team members used the paper booklet.

The data is organized by the downtown characteristics team members identified, and the comments have been coded as assets and opportunities. Assets are the strengths in the downtown—where characteristics exist and are excellent and well-maintained. For example, a well-maintained trail or a bench in a nice location would be considered assets. Opportunities are those characteristics that exist or do not exist, where there is room for improvement. An example of an opportunity for improvement might be lack of bike lanes, or a broken sidewalk.



## Assets

### Atmosphere

The visit team shared many positive thoughts about the atmosphere created by the downtown businesses. This often was in conjunction with appreciating the fun businesses available. Some comments included:

- A little dusty, but on the whole it looks fun.
- Beautiful atmosphere in this restaurant.
- Lots of character – pleasant interior.
- Love the window display.
- Good diversity of collectibles – had a good time.
- Unique and funky shop.
- Well organized used book store.
- Good density of going businesses.
- Easy access.

### Friendly People

The visit team had a high number of positive comments and assessment regarding the service of the business owners, staff and employees in downtown Rochester. Good natured and friendly interactions were described and praised. Comments included:

- Nice Staff/Owner.
- Excellent Staff.
- Best friendliest service ever.
- Wait staff was excellent.
- Very nice people.
- Gas Station was friendly and full service!



# Businesses

## Opportunities

### Atmosphere

There were several opportunities for improvement noted about business atmosphere. The majority of this feedback concerned empty storefronts on Main Street. Comments included:

- North Main seems to have a lot of empty storefronts.
- Very quiet at 10:30 in the morning.
- Very few people walking around (especially for a Saturday in July).
- Not much retail within walking distance of downtown
- The focus of main street businesses feels too one-dimensional.
- Everything is so scattered – no critical mass.
- Begging for a funky mural!!!
- Not much for locals or tourists.
- More cool architecture. Historic signs?
- Big event happened in May – it's July.
- Fill stores with artists, use low rent in area to encourage artists to downtown
- Perhaps an anchor store in downtown.
- Need a quick lunch time food place.
- No grocery store in downtown area.
- National chains seem to be pushing out local, new businesses need to be different.





## Assets

The visit team found a few examples of community art, such as the mural and iron gateway along Factory Court next to the Revolution Taproom and Grill, and the daytime concert held at the public plaza at Wakefield Street and North Main Street.

## Opportunities

With a few exceptions noted by the visit team, generally speaking, the team felt there could be more community art projects and murals around the downtown area.



# Displays & Signage



## Assets

### Information

There were many positive comments about the historic and informational signs around town. Some of the comments were:

- Detailed and easy to read.
- More beautiful, historic buildings, good Signage – found business district.
- Had to stop and observe this old house – historic markers (date of houses) throughout town.
- Signs for businesses are great.

## Opportunities

### Information

The visit team had a few challenges reading or finding signage, generally while driving. Comments included:

- Landscaping blocks sign.
- We never saw the Opera House.
- Opera House is poorly signed, some people had difficulty finding it.
- Could easily miss the Main Street sign while driving.
- No street sign near Chamber of Commerce.
- Could be freshened up.
- Sidewalk had garbage and lots of broken glass.
- Signs for cross streets missing.





## Assets

The visit team appreciated the lovely historic bridge, riverwalk and entrance to Rochester's downtown, but felt it was underdeveloped.

## Opportunities

Beyond the Riverwalk and bridge, the visit team thought other entrances to downtown Rochester were too plain and non-descript—like a drive through community.





## Assets

There were several positive comments about the landscaping throughout the Rochester's downtown area and the visit team appreciated the commitment by community organizations to sponsor greenery around town. Some comments included:

- Trees on sidewalks are very appealing.
- Great idea for community involvement.
- Lamp posts, flowers and flags are nice but small.
- Intersection with nice flower plantings in medians and an ad for Rochester opera house but no directions.
- Flowers, flags and landscaping in and around the downtown.
- Nice lawns, generally well cared for, good landscaping.

## Opportunities

The visit team noticed areas around downtown Rochester that could use some improvement around landscaping.

Comments included:

- Dead tree.
- A lot of graffiti all around the town.
- Quite a lot of trash where there are no receptacles.
- Gateway to the river district with so much potential!





## Assets

The visit team appreciated the period lamp posts throughout the Rochester downtown. Some comments were:

- Lovely old style lighting with hanging baskets.
- Beautiful old light posts along the street. This one has a bus stop sign with schedule!
- Pretty unique.





## Assets

The visit team enjoyed the numerous parks and recreational facilities in and around the Rochester downtown, but found a need for additional signage. Some of the comments were:

- Neat and clean. Welcoming. Feels safe.
- Lovely stable bridge with water lilies.
- Seating, trees, food and music underway.
- Very clean looking pool with additional children's pool.
- Open green space with trees and playground.
- Nice trees, like quaint fence, portapotties available.
- Looks popular, lots to do there, walkers, picnics, swing set, track, and covered trash.
- Very pretty square
- Easy access, needs signage
- Would have liked more signage at the entrance





## Assets

### Appearance

There were many comments noting the beautiful appearance of several points of interest including the Chamber of Commerce, Frisbie Memorial Hospital and a number of churches in the Rochester downtown. Comments included:

- Looks nice. Obvious where hospital is located.
- Chamber is downtown. Nice looking.
- Welcoming sign and appearance. It is nice to see that they have Fellowship meals for the community.
- Repurposing historic buildings is valued.
- Church looks very welcoming and lovely landscaping.
- Beautiful exterior, but they were closed on a Saturday.
- Ads for farmers market and other in window.
- Interesting historical information.

## Opportunities

### Appearance

The visit team took note of several areas where improvement could be made to points of interest, especially regarding to appearance. Some comments included:

- Riverwalk. Good idea. No charm.
- Beautiful wrought iron fence drew us across the street. Disappointed. Poor landscaping.
- No signs for "No Dumping".

### Information

The visit team also noted opportunities for improvement, such as providing more information at points of interest.

- It is a Saturday in the summer and the Chamber is not open.
- Got a chamber book - 2012 edition.
- Historic marker? We wanted to know what this building was.





## Assets

### Appearance

There were many positive comments noting the well maintained municipal buildings, high school, and library. Comments included:

- Beautiful campus, gorgeous brick building looks collegiate.
- Beautifully maintained historical building and landscaping.
- Most municipal buildings are well kept and nice looking.
- Gorgeous brick library in excellent shape. Hours posted right out front.
- Nice looking, good signs, good parking, street light at entrance, well put together.
- Hospital and signage for it are nice.
- Free pool for residents.
- Opera House is a great asset, should be used to catalyze more activity on Main Street.
- Great high school and public facilities---matches well with affordable and attractive housing.

## Opportunities

### Access

The visit team identified several opportunities to improve the public library, Opera House and others. Some of those comments included:

- Library not open on Saturdays in June, July, August – 9 to 4 on Sat rest of year.
- Library handicap accessibility doesn't go all the way to the parking lot.
- Ran into a person returning books and they were disappointed. Didn't seem to be an outside drop off available.
- Library needs historic sign.
- Seemed really hard to figure out where the Opera House was
- I can't find a public bathroom!





## Assets

The visit team make several positive comments about seating including:

- Lovely gateway and outdoor seating.
- Clean, many benches.
- Inviting place to sit but signage unfortunately says no loitering.





## Assets

The visit team enjoyed the wide sidewalks and pedestrian infrastructure in and around the downtown Rochester area.

## Opportunities

There were a number of areas where sidewalks and crosswalks could use some improvement. Some of those comments include:

- Crosswalks have signals but no sounds for blind people. More focus on handicap accessibility.
- Busy intersection in front of Chamber building. Sidewalks need repair and cleaned, weeded, repaint crosswalks.
- Hang umbrellas, planters or something to draw the eye up to highlight the arch.
- Opportunity to have traffic calming infrastructure within downtown.





## Assets

There were several comments noting the ample and free parking in and around the Rochester downtown, and at least one noted the availability of bus service, and another a feeling of safety. Some comments were:

- Two hour parking. No meters.
- Notable that there is bus service.
- There is quite a bit of municipal parking.
- Trees and clean street.
- Nicely maintained and landscaped, ample spots, free!
- Well marked.
- Found this parking lot quite easily by a sign on the road.
- Seems safe.
- Free parking!

## Opportunities

The visit team identified a couple of opportunities to improve traffic might benefit downtown Rochester. Some of those comments were:

- Heavy traffic was intimidating to pedestrians crossing the street.
- Traffic speeding through.
- Found a municipal parking lot sandwiched between some rundown apartment buildings that didn't feel comfortable.
- Large building downtown with limited parking.
- Bus stop had graffiti.
- Remove old parking meter posts next to trees.
- Difficult to exit off of the expressway.





## Assets

At least one member of the visit team noticed availability of trash receptacles in part of the Rochester downtown.



## Opportunities

Other members took note of several other places around the main street that could use additional trash receptacles and clean up.



# Other

## Assets

The visit team positively assessed several aspects dealing with housing and community. Comments included:

- Kindness of the community, fellowship kitchen meals.
- Nice salt box brick building two-story with condominiums.
- Use of old mill for housing.
- An active Chamber and Main Street group is great.

## Opportunities

The visit team identified some challenging areas around housing in the Rochester downtown. Comments included:

- Nice downtown condominiums, would rate higher if the places around it were nicer looking.
- Old mill converted to apartments, but no stores selling essentials up this end.
- Community seems to be without a concrete vision.



# After the Visit

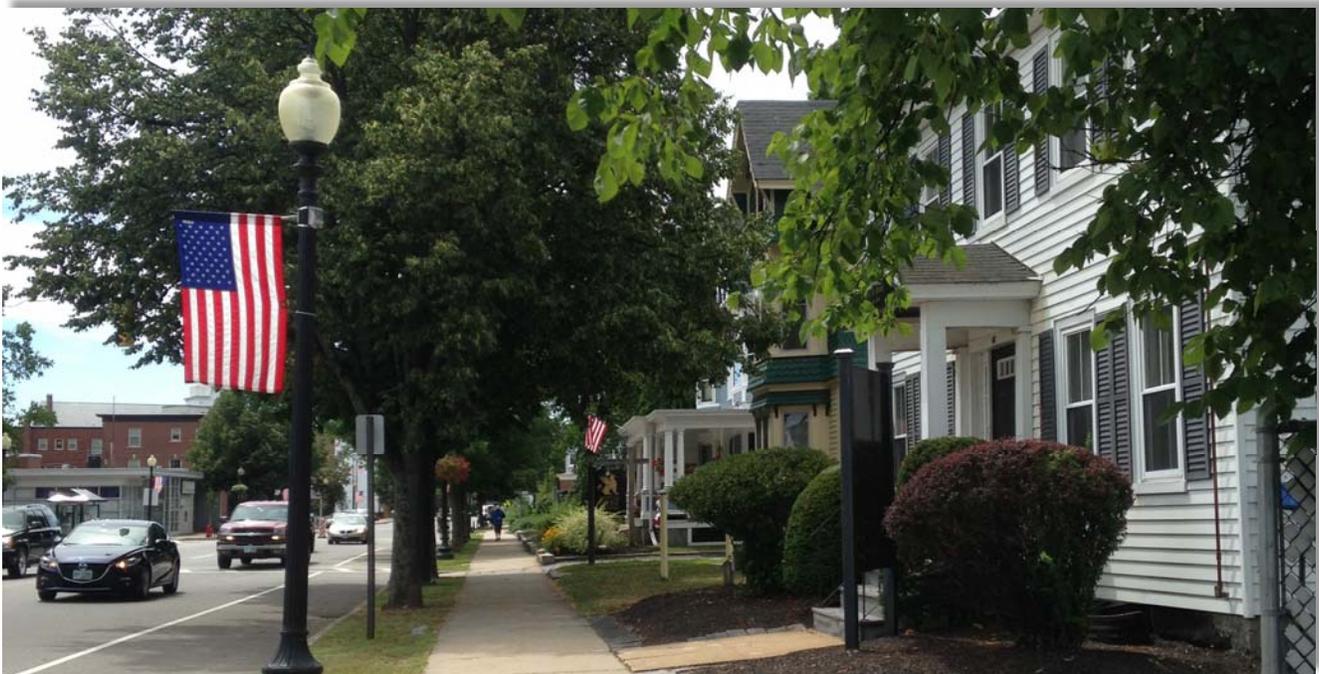
## Post-Visit Survey

Following Littleton's visit to Rochester, Community Leadership members completed the online Post-Visit Survey. The survey provided team members an opportunity to reflect on their visit and rate the downtown overall. Team members also reflected on their initial perceptions and whether they would like to live, visit or open a business in the community. The results of the survey follow:

### Five-Minute Impression

Team members were asked to record their five minute initial impression of Rochester. This initial impression can greatly impact a visitor's long lasting impressions of a place. Comments were:

- It seems like they've started to revitalize their downtown but it seems to have stalled. No energy or activity.
- Drove in by the "Welcome to Rochester Lilac City" sign---very nice welcoming sign. The streets were fairly quiet; not much traffic at 10:15 a.m. Streets appeared clean and well sign-posted. Some older buildings but most neatly kept. Ample street parking at that time of day.
- First impression was positive. A very welcoming wall sign welcoming me to "Lilac City". Although I expected to see more run-down buildings, there weren't that many. Streets were clean and very quiet. Street parking was very adequate at that time of day.
- We came in over the bridge and parked in the first lot on the right. First impressions was pleasant and positive. That was quickly replaced as we saw stagnant water, broken sidewalks, empty storefronts, and an absence of people — an uncomfortable feeling as we walked into town.
- I loved the brick buildings and signage around Town upon entering. It was easy to find parking and know where everything is. However, the vacant storefronts and lack of pedestrians stuck out immediately.
- Positive. Drove through town and parked at Common which was well used.
- Seemed clean.
- I liked the flowers and street lights. I never felt like I got 'downtown' and didn't quite know where it was.



- Good bones and architecture, needs TLC. Lots of public parking which is nice.
- Coming in from Route 11 was impressive. A lot of new retail construction in Farmington's South end. There wasn't, however, any signage that said "Welcome to Rochester". The public parking near the riverwalk was convenient. I noticed right away that there are a lot of empty store fronts.
- In the past four years since I have been to Rochester, things have changed. Although the drive to downtown Rochester had a lot of good retail and shopping opportunities, many of the businesses downtown were empty. It's become more residential. We had hoped to go shopping, but the business I wanted had closed. Sadly, there was trash around the welcome sign and graffiti around town. However, there was lots of great parking.
- Not really rundown, but tired looking.
- At first, we couldn't tell if we had arrived on "Main Street". Since it wasn't busy we thought maybe the East Rochester Main Street was the real one — driving there we discovered it wasn't.
- In the actual downtown, not the entrance, I first saw the historic churches and the little storefronts in the historic buildings and I was eager to get out and check out any unique shops that might be there, like unique crafts, specialty foods, coffee shops, antiques, and look for a place for lunch. As traffic slowed I realized that that was not the case. A great old downtown, but no stores of interest and no shoppers either.
- Not many people and not much business activity.

## An Identifiable Brand

Team members were asked if they could identify a brand during their visit to Rochester. Their comments were:

### Yes

- There seems to be a masculine brand to the downtown ---smoke shops, tattoo parlors, comic book stores, bike shops, pawn shops, gold exchange---not to say these don't appeal to some females but on the whole they feel more "guy friendly", and further to a certain type of male.

### Maybe

- Signage was the same and consistent.
- The Lilac City is the only reference we saw to a slogan or brand.
- We were wondering if Lilac City was once a brand as we saw it on several business names. If yes, suggest working with that again, so much you can do with that.

### No

- I didn't pick up on any branding of Rochester.
- Not that I could find, not that I noticed.
- Didn't see any. Supposed to be the Lilac Town, but saw nothing to indicate that.
- Why aren't they using the Lilac Capital anymore? Saw it on some signs but didn't see any actual lilac bushes, or things on menus, etc. going on the lilac theme.
- An identifiable slogan or brand did not jump out at me. I get the feel that this is more of a bedroom community where housing is inexpensive and people go the Lakes Region or the Portsmouth area to work and play.



## Using Your Senses

The survey asked team members to describe Rochester through their senses: taste (food and drink), smell (air in the downtown), and sounds (parks, roads, trains, construction, music, social gatherings).

### Taste

- We had wonderful food at Revolution! Their menu was diverse. We had everything from fried pickles and beer battered chicken to cheesy polenta with curry cauliflower. Rochester does have quite a few restaurants — but it was interesting to note when we asked locals and shop clerks they kept giving us restaurants outside the assessment area, like the Pink Cadillac Restaurant. It became clear that for locals, their first thought was not downtown.
- The Garage at The Governor's Inn was fun and funky. Good beer, brewfest, big Caesar salad with real chicken.
- The downtown food and drink was the liveliest trait of Main Street. I found a good variety, and loved the Thai restaurant I ate in.
- Good food at the restaurant we ate at: Revolution Grill and Taproom.
- Pleasant pedestrian walk.
- The "taste", as in Revolution, was the best part of the day. If I lived nearby, I would definitely take the trip in just for that restaurant.
- The downtown area was clean overall. The few restaurants we found offered different food choices. Although we looked for a coffee bar or tea house, a resident we asked told us Dunkin Donuts was the only choice. We chose a gastropub for lunch, Revolution, which was excellent. Quality of food, wait staff and atmosphere was worth the trip. Every resident that we stopped to ask for info was very nice & helpful.
- I found a cute little ice cream shop back set back from the main street — sweet deliciousness!
- The overall "taste" of downtown Rochester would be bland — unmemorable. There were pockets of flavorful delights like mini M&M's.
- Not flavorful, a little gritty.
- Downtown was like a loaf of whole wheat bread. The historic churches and little storefronts were seeds that add to the breads color and attractiveness. The texture of the bread were the banks, lawyer, and church community buildings that keep the area together. And a little bit of flavor, as there are too few "Go to" places that residents and visitors would want to visit.



## Smell

- The flowers by the lights were lovely and brought a brightness to the streets. Some of the streets, even right downtown, smelled like back alleys. A number of buildings right downtown had graffiti, trash, and other non-positive smells. It looked unkept.
- Tree-lined streets make it feel fresher and greener.
- I didn't smell too much, but the air felt heavy. I attribute that to the heat and humidity. No restaurant or nature smells, but nothing horrible either.
- Through traffic dominated the smell.
- I smell "green" trees. There were lot of old and young trees downtown. I smell burgers over by the Revolution Grill. I smell the exhaust of the trucks waiting at the red lights.
- No particular smells, neutral.
- We noticed no offensive smells during our walk. In fact, some of the smells from the restaurants were rather nice. Since there was not a lot of traffic (until later in afternoon), we didn't notice much traffic smell. No visible trash. Streets were clean. Flowers and trees added a nice touch.
- I've mentioned it before but I was impressed at how clean the streets and parking lots were. It seemed easy to find places to sit in the shade and in general I thought the downtown was quiet, in fact maybe too quiet, because I didn't see any shoppers or many others just walking around downtown.
- Fresh air, lots of good trees smells near parks and historic district.
- Stale, vehicle exhaust — overall. The fresh park flowers were delightful.



## Sounds

- There was an event in the park right downtown by the sculpture — sounds of laughter. It wasn't clear if it was open to the public, so we chose not to stop by the event. There was a sound of silence in front of the library. It's sad to see such an important community place closed on a Saturday when the children in the summer could really use it.
- People gathering in the little green space for an outdoor concert. Kids playing at the pool.
- Traffic.
- One gathering in very center of town had music.
- I hear fast moving traffic. I hear children in the common down off of South Main. I hear music at the gathering on the triangle off of North Main. Walking down the Main Streets, I don't hear conversation or yelling kids because there is no one around us.
- At first, way too quiet, not a lot of cars and practically no people. Until we got closer to the park, then the volume significantly increased with traffic, people and construction. It was nice to hear music around the monument as a church was feeding the hungry.
- It was very quiet, I only saw other people for our town and a few others.
- We were very surprised at how quiet the main street was throughout most of the morning into early afternoon. There were a few cars parked on the street but, for a downtown area, very little traffic. There wasn't much happening on this Saturday. I would almost describe it as "sleepy".
- Traffic noises, music in parks, kids playing.
- Vehicles traveling. In the park, kids laughing.

## Unique Attractions

Team members were asked to reflect on what local restaurant, specialty shop, or attraction would bring them back to Rochester in the future:

- Union Street Antiques & Collectibles Group Shop is one of the area's finest group shops. The items were diverse and soooo well priced. The people were very friendly.
- Stonewall Kitchen was not in the assessment area, but it's a treasure to have — any "foodie" would know it and respect it as one of the best New England gourmet companies.
- The Garage at the Governor's Inn.
- I would return to Papaya Thai. It was the best Thai food I've ever eaten.
- Revolution Grill and Taproom. They weren't open yet but the waitress was busy setting things up but took the minute to say, "Hi" as I walked by — those little things can make a difference.
- Annie's Book Stop.
- The florist was amazing! A real gem in your town.
- BP Gas Station was full serve and the gentleman was funny and friendly. It was a great way to start the day.
- The 80's toy store and the Jetpack Comics.

## Live, Work, Play

The Post-Visit survey also asked team members to consider whether or not they would consider living in Rochester, opening a business in Rochester, or visiting Rochester.

### Would you consider living in Rochester?

When asked if any of the visit team would consider living in Rochester, six said yes, and the other seven said no. The proximity to Portsmouth was a positive factor. Some of their comments were:

#### Yes

- A woman we spoke to at a yard sale talked very highly of living in Rochester.
- Close to Portsmouth and Durham with possibly lower rent than Dover or Newmarket.
- Proximity to ocean and mountains.
- Although quiet, the downtown area holds a lot of possibilities.
- If I were to secure work in the Portsmouth Area.

#### No

- A reputation for having a crime and drug problem.
- I would only choose to live there if I were working in Portsmouth and Rochester was cheap.
- There are too few people around, I might be nervous to go out at night, traffic is too much and too fast.
- Not sure---residential areas I saw were mostly apartments and not private homes.
- Again, not wanting to relocate. There's no shopping, no real restaurants, nothing for teens, children (aside from the park).



### Would you consider opening a business in downtown Rochester?

When asked whether any of the visit team would you consider locating a retail, professional or a non-profit business in Rochester, all but one said no. However, the one visitor who indicated yes, commented:

- Seems like a good time to buy in. Towns around colleges will likely be the up-and-coming spots.

For those that said no, the main factors were lack of activity and vacant buildings.

### Would you consider visiting here with family or friends?

When asked if any of the visit team would consider visiting Rochester again, only four members said yes, one said yes and no, and the remaining eight indicated no. Their comments included:

#### Yes

- I've been to the Opera House and they occasionally have good shows.
- Just for lunch, not an overnight or extended stay.
- Collectible shop across from Revolution, Union St. Antiques and Stonewall Kitchen.
- I wanted to find out more about the Reggae Festival. I might stop at Dudleys if I am heading to Portsmouth.

#### Yes and No

- Maybe for a few hours, but it wouldn't make my list as places to spend a whole day - there just aren't enough tourist things to do.

#### No

- Only if I had someone in Rochester I was specifically visiting. Otherwise, there would have to be some specific draw, because there isn't enough to do. Currently, there isn't enough shopping or entertainment to draw us.
- Although I loved the Thai place, Rochester is too out of the way to justify returning.
- There isn't really enough to do on a weekend.



## Missing Attractions

The Post-Visit survey also asked team members to consider what was missing from Rochester's downtown. Comments:

- A "feminine touch".
- More foot traffic.
- Interesting stores, clothing stores, stores that would draw people in, "Oh, I have to look in here" stores, name brand outlets, baby stuff stores, restaurants that don't look like bars from the outside. Apartments and condos with owners that come out and spend money downtown on food, entertainment, and home furnishings, and hardware.
- A movie theatre, retail, small market, coffee shop, public restrooms, boutiques, art & craft studios, specialty shops, coffee/tea shops or bakery, etc.
- More weekend hours. The town has really good bones, good potential, but really needs to focus on a general overall clean-up — landscape pruning, businesses clean up, etc.
- More positive energy and vibrancy.

## Change in Perception

The visit team was asked to reflect on whether their pre-visit impressions fit the impression they got during their visit to the Rochester downtown. Some of their comments were:

- I thought of it as a pass through business area and that is what it seems to be.
- In just the few years since I was here last, shops have left.
- I didn't find it too dirty, but I didn't feel warm and fuzzy either.
- Websites were very good---much better than reality.
- Even though I wasn't anticipating much, my visit fell short.
- After checking Rochester on Facebook as seeing what seemed like a running police blotter of crime, we expected it to be far more run down and rougher than it was. Surprisingly, downtown was far cleaner and nicer than we anticipated.
- Just based on population and proximity to Portsmouth I was expecting more.



## Outstanding Feature

The Post-Visit survey asked team members to reflect on the most outstanding feature of the downtown. Comments:

- The churches looked very clean, felt welcoming, had clear signage and offered meals and programs.
- Loved the town common and the high school looked gorgeous.
- I think the center of Town with the statue, greenery, and flowers, as well as the beautiful church/opera house near the Chamber office.
- The beautiful municipal buildings—new and old. The historic churches. The historic storefront area that shows what used to be.
- Pleasant streets and landscaping
- The park, florist and Revolution Taproom and Grill.
- The roads in town.
- Well-maintained, clean streets & sidewalks. The town is laid out nicely with a nice balance of commercial/retail space and municipal services and you can easily drive around the triangle to find street parking. The park is in a nice location that is adjacent to downtown.
- The parks, the flowers and lighting, walkability, library.
- The historic houses, many used by service businesses.
- Revolution Taproom and Grill. The Library looks amazing.



## Obstacles/Challenges

Team members were also asked to identify obstacles or challenges in Rochester's downtown. Comments:

- Continue to renovate and improve storefronts, housing stock, sidewalks, sitting areas, signage and other infrastructure, with particular attention to the North End of Main Street and the River District — think vibrancy, safety and attractiveness.
- Attention should be given to developing a sense of place — how do you draw people, especially families, downtown and keep them there for extended periods of time? Activities? Unique and specialty stores? An anchor business?
- How do you develop a more vibrant entrepreneurial culture? Can you provide incentives or packages for businesses to come or relocate downtown?
- Focus on how local residents and businesses speak about Rochester. Focus on the positive, learn about the businesses downtown and talk about them positively. Become passionate advocates for your community. Help people to reinvest in their own community.

## Opportunities for Improvement

Team members were asked to report opportunities available to Rochester's downtown. Comments:

- With a great downtown configuration, proximity to major markets, historic features, prime available retail and office space, and a river district, Rochester has the exciting opportunity to decide who they want to be and attract businesses that meet their goals.
- There are some great hidden gems, restaurants and well known institutions, like the Opera House, in this community, they provide an opportunity to build a Rochester brand and theme and bring in tourists.
- Vacant storefronts are an asset for showcasing local artists! There's an opportunity to do this and more in the downtown area — think more murals, sculptures and concerts.
- With housing available and beautiful schools, there's an opportunity to attract more families to Rochester.
- You have very friendly people and a welcoming community, more time should be given to developing an even stronger community spirit.

## Positive Things about Rochester

Team members were asked to provide positive things they observed about Rochester's downtown. Comments:

- Rochester has beautiful infrastructure — from historic buildings, wide sidewalks, river walk, period lamp posts, lots of greenery, a town common, a town square, lovely and active church communities, a very nice high school grounds, historic library and even an opera house. Rochester has a lot of great assets to build on.
- The downtown has well-maintained streets and sidewalks. The through traffic along Main Street provide an opportunity to drive retail traffic, especially with the ample free parking and generally good signage. The town is very walkable and nicely laid out with a good balance of commercial/retail space and municipal services.
- The businesses downtown have staff and owners that are very nice and helpful, and the overall impression is of a community that cares about their residents.



## Reflections from the Rochester Community Leadership Team

The following two questions are from the Post-Visit survey completed by the Rochester Community Leadership Team. These questions ask team members to reflect on their experience participating in First Impressions and consider how they may apply their new ideas and knowledge to Rochester.

### Did this experience change your impression of Rochester's downtown?

The majority of team members (5) stated yes, the experience changed their impression, while only one member said no.

- We need to develop our riverfront and do more with landscaping and entrances downtown.
- I liked it more — I now look for the small details. Rochester is doing a great job.
- We have a lot of work to do to make our downtown a place people want to visit.
- Rochester has a long way to go.

### Did this experience give you any new ideas about what is needed in Rochester's downtown?

All six responding team members indicated that the experience provided new ideas about what is needed in their downtown. Comments:

- We need more commitment from City Council to make changes happen.
- We should have more positive displays/signs, like, "Have a fabulous day."
- Yes. A lot regarding two-way traffic. Also, using the back of buildings as additional retail space.
- We need more successful shopfronts.
- We could develop consignment shops, a brewery, rentable office areas for startups or work from home businesses, or a movie theater.
- We could have more family friendly restaurants, a walkable downtown, and small quaint shops.



# Next Steps

## Joint Debrief Meeting

The joint debrief meeting between the Rochester Community Leadership Team and the Littleton Community Leadership Team was held on Thursday, September 8<sup>th</sup> 9am – 11am at the Pines Community Center in Northfield, NH. This meeting provided an opportunity for both teams to get to know each other, network, as well as share their First Impressions assessment report.

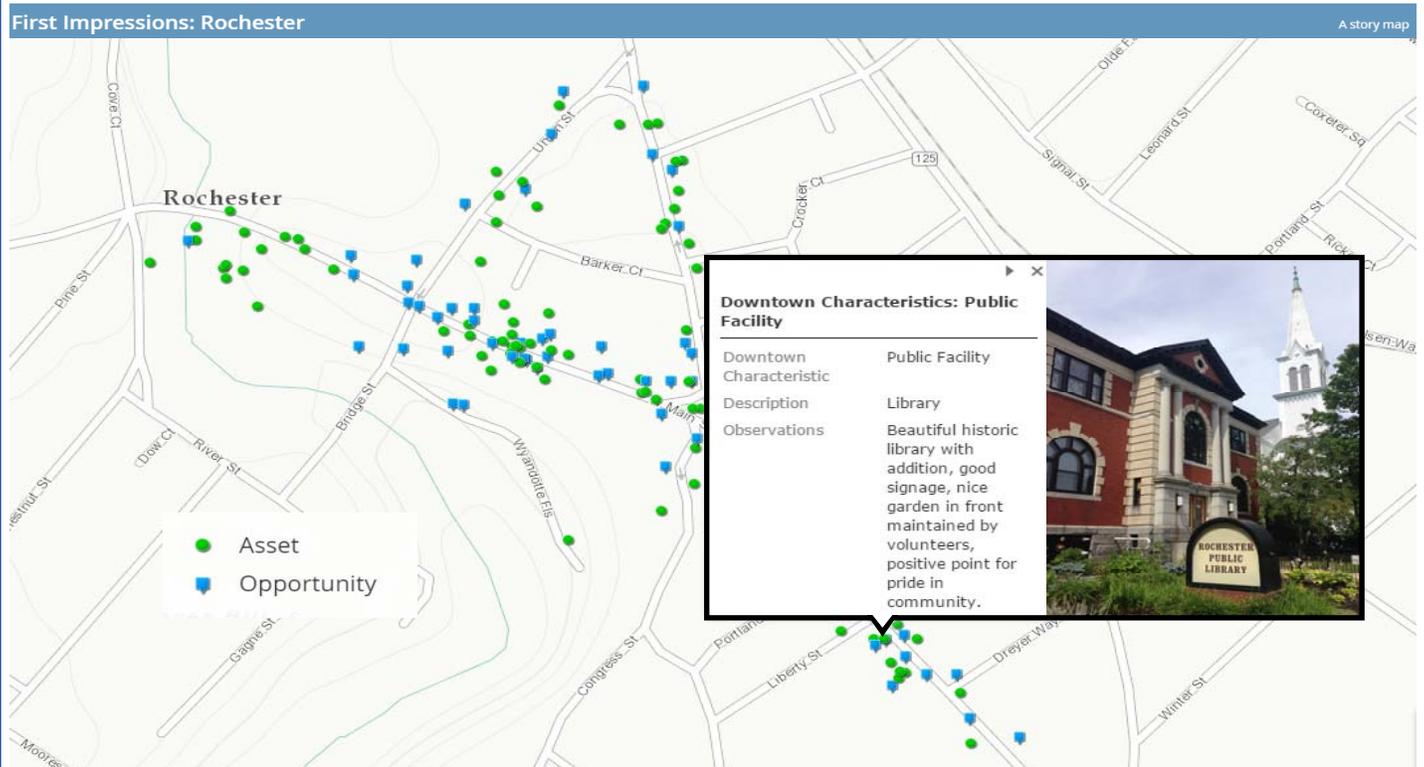
## Community Report Out Meetings

The City of Rochester and the Town of Littleton will both host Community Report Out Meetings during the Fall of 2016 to share results with community members. The meetings are scheduled for October 26 and November 1, respectively. Both meetings will be held from 5:30 PM to 8:00 PM. A representative from the other Community Leadership Team will present the findings and then community members will break into small groups for discussion and action planning.



# First Impressions: Rochester Assessment Map

All of the assessment data is stored on an online interactive map. To view that data, visit: <http://arcg.is/2bgQGpy>



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