

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

CONNECTICUT

A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

All communities have difficulties viewing their surroundings as others see them—customers, visitors, potential residents, and potential businesses. Our views may be skewed by familiarization, a lack of differing perspectives and expectations, and a reluctance to be completely honest with our neighbors regarding difficult issues such as the appearance of buildings, customer service, or maintenance of public facilities.

The First Impressions community exchange program was designed to help communities learn about their strengths and shortcomings through the eyes of first-time visitors. It's a structured community assessment that offers a fresh perspective on the appearance, services, and infrastructure of each community.

How Does It Work?

Once communities are accepted they are matched with a similar community or neighborhood in terms of size, location, amenities or natural features. Both communities agree to recruit volunteer teams of 4-8 people, participate in training, conduct the unannounced visits and report on their findings within a timeline of 3-4 months. Participants become “secret shoppers” for the day and follow procedures to document their visit using a guidebook and uploading photos and comments. The guide ensures that evaluations and reports are thorough and uniform and requires minimal training. Reports from the program are often used as part of broader community assessment or planning processes to inform community policy and action.

By participating in the First Impressions program community leaders:

- Learn about their own community assets and opportunities or view them in a new light
- Develop a list of action items for community improvement
- Receive valuable feedback from a peer community
- Develop relationships, connections or partnerships with a peer community
- Learn about basic concepts in community place-making and development

Communities that participate are able to:

- Make immediate improvements to the physical/built environment in areas such as signage, beautification, historic preservation, recreation, infrastructure, business recruitment, or lodging
- Identify priority action items
- Integrate action items into community plans
- Create plans that integrate data from a variety of stakeholders including visitors and local residents
- Establish a system for monitoring change based on priority actions
- Obtain external funding to address priority issues
- Cooperate or communicate with peer communities on projects or programs

First developed in Wisconsin by Andy Lewis and James Schneider in 1991, First Impressions has gone through several revisions to integrate questions about timely and emerging community issues. First Impressions Connecticut, a partnership between the University of Connecticut-Extension and the Connecticut Main Street Center, is adapted from the Wisconsin First Impressions program.

What participants say about this program:

Hundreds of communities across the U.S. and Canada have implemented the First Impressions Program since it was developed by the University of Wisconsin, Cooperative Extension in the early 1990s. The program was introduced in Connecticut in 2015. As a result of the program communities often gain a new perspective on their own assets, learn about small changes that can make a big difference, or replicate development projects that other communities have used successfully.

According to one Connecticut team member, it was "...a great reminder of what matters; of the opportunity for enhancing what we have. I'm reminded that one town shouldn't try to be like another in all cases. Each town has its unique assets." Communities interested in participating can learn more and download the short application form at <http://communities.extension.uconn.edu/firstimpressions/>. For more information contact Laura Brown, University of Connecticut - Extension, laura.brown@uconn.edu, (203) 207-0063 or Susan Westa, CT Main Street Center, susan@ctmainstreet.org, (860) 280-2032.

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*"It was a learning experience for us. You can't help but approach it with a comparative mind."
"It's going to help us when we are going for state money; a really good tool to use for grant writing." - Connecticut Exchange Team Member, 2016*



For More Information:

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