A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement
Executive Summary - Danbury, Connecticut
Conducted by the visit team from Meriden, Connecticut
October, 2017

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, July 27, 2017 seven volunteers from Meriden, Connecticut visited Danbury on a cool and cloudy Friday. The team had little knowledge of or previous experiences in Danbury and were generally expecting "an older formerly manufacturing community...an old sleepy town with lots of traffic." The team's online research revealed a variety of events related to the arts and they found the city and Danbury Main Street website easy to navigate and informative but the social media presence was limited. Based on this research, they were excited to visit. The following is an overview of the highlights and re-occurring themes of the visit. Additional detail can be found in the raw data report available from members of the visit team.

First Impressions Visit
For the first ten minutes of the visit, the team was asked to drive around town from various entrances. The first impressions were variable. The entrance coming in from Exit 5 to Main Street the community appeared "nothing noteworthy. Typical Main Street of any city, shops in various stages of life, most open, some closed." but "it grew more pedestrian friendly and attractive as we reached the downtown area." The team also explored entrances through the train station noted it was difficult to find with "no apparent signage or
maps at the train station pointing to downtown or amenities." Overall the team found that the amount, quality and uniformity of signage could be improved. The team enjoyed exploring walking the downtown area and noted "...walking around I was impressed by the vibrancy downtown. Great mix of ethnicities, nice old buildings being reused appropriately, lots of green[space] and working fountains." They were impressed by the variety of ethnic restaurants (although few offered sit down options) as well as the diversity of uses in downtown spaces including dental, banks, churches, groceries, and a limited amount of retail. Notable was the overwhelming friendliness they encountered among business owners and passersby. "The staff were pleasant and willing to talk. There were a significant number of number people, current and former students, that generally had good things to say about the city, its recent activity and enjoying working and living there. One business owner remarked that she had moved away and had come back to the city and enjoyed it both to live and for her business." The team found the downtown to be easily walkable and parking to be easy and accessible although there was a significant amount of traffic. They were impressed by the inviting "small spaces" and pocket parks tucked in around the downtown area that invited visitors to explore, particularly around the "entertainment district." While the Metro North train provides easy access to New York, other public transportation options (including the bus station at the end of Main Street) such as buses or taxis were not very visible or inter-connected and schedules were hard to locate. They noted that signage, lane markers and accessibility for bicyclists could be improved.

Tourism did not appear to be a significant focus for the city although the team noted many assets that could serve to attract tourists including the Asian, Peruvian, Ecuadorian and Latino restaurant and shopping options, the WestConn campus, Palace Theater, regional arts organizations, the train museum, historical society, arena, ice rink and the river (as well as other nearby natural amenities such as Candlewood Lake). It was notable that while Danbury has significant employers (Praxair, United Technologies, Hospitals Western Connecticut State University, etc.) there was limited evidence of their support of or presence downtown. Given the proximity of Danbury to other large employers, highways, and
New York City it seems to be in an ideal location for additional economic and industrial development.

It was clear to the team that Danbury has focused on bringing in high end housing, such as Kennedy Apartments, but the team had trouble locating affordable living options in the downtown. This was an issue that came up as a hindrance to downtown living in discussions with residents. There were significant number of easily accessible social services for a variety of residents throughout the community and civic engagement was evident through the wide variety of clubs organizations. The team was fortunate to visit during one of the "Downtown Chow Down" events and were impressed by the Mayor's presence at the event.

Overall the team had the feeling of a "community on the upswing." Reflecting the consensus of team members, one commented "What a fantastic visit!" "My impressions after walking around are so much better that what I experienced from the car." When asked what was the most outstanding feature of the community, team members had a variety of comments including: "The degree of activity and positive attitude of its residents," "Seeing the mayor engaged with residents," and "Good use of small spaces."

**Wrap up**

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

**List the positive things you observed about this community** (no particular order):
1. Friendly people, community pride
2. Excellent use of small spaces
3. Success of downtown revitalization including ethnic restaurants arena, artists

**What are the potential opportunities available to this community?** (no particular order):
1. Improve retail and housing options - facade improvements
2. Capitalize on Westcon students
3. Improve walkability and connectivity

**What are the biggest obstacles or challenges facing the community?** (no particular order):
1. Housing costs and quality issues
2. Social connectivity and access - scattered/disconnected amenities (language and racial biases)
3. Physical connectivity and access - transit and signage

The teams from Enfield and Windsor met on September 27, 2017 to informally share the results of their visits. They both felt this program was a great learning opportunity. They also learned something about their own community by participating in this program. The teams discussed the costs and benefits of implementing a downtown improvement district, parking issues, encouraging arts in the downtown, form based codes, student housing challenges, and rivers as a natural asset or liability in a downtown.

The teams enjoyed meeting each other at the wrap up luncheon and learning more about their first impressions. They hope to maintain this connection and to continue to learn from each other in the future.

This report was prepared October 2017 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 September 27, 2017. For more information visit

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