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 May 13, 2016, seven volunteers from Windsor Locks visited Portland on a very rainy Friday afternoon. Several members of the team were familiar with the community or had driven through. They conducted upfront online research of the www.portlandct.org website, Facebook pages, and ctriverrafrtrace.org and found the www.portlandct.org site "very impressive" "easy to find and navigate." Based on this research, they were excited to visit and check out some of the activities in Portland. Despite the poor weather on the day of the visit, the team did have a number of significant recommendations. 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 drove around town. The very first impression they had was of the 175th banner on Main Street and historic buildings reminiscent of the city’s brownstone history. One team member commented, "...this is a community that shows pride!" They also noticed the significant residential neighborhoods with large, well maintained lots, and the agricultural feel created by old stone walls and farm houses. They commented that some of the
buildings downtown were in need to repair. Also, "because the community is at the intersection of several highways, it is a bit vehicle traffic oriented."

While the heavy rain was discouraging of significant walking downtown, the team noted a very good mix of uses and businesses "...law offices, housing, churches" along Main Street. While the downtown appeared somewhat walk-able, they commented that improvements in the streetscape, and improved connectivity between uses through sidewalk and parking enhancements could benefit the downtown area, particularly given the high traffic volume. "Traffic can be very heavy at times, making crossing the street difficult." "The sidewalk on Main Street could be wider...it got really crazy near the bridge..would need some creative design to make that pedestrian friendly." Some wondered why the town hall was disconnected from Main Street. They noted that the grocery store was not located in the downtown area and it might be nice to see more sit down style restaurants in the downtown to encourage pedestrian traffic. Several team members also noted the awkwardness of the industrial areas so close to the downtown that might discourage additional housing investment. The Quarry area and Brownstone Discovery Park, also walk-able to the downtown were noted as a tremendous, perhaps overlooked assets that could be better connected to the rest of the community

The team was also impressed with the tourism and agricultural opportunities outside of the downtown area, including greenhouses, farm markets, castle and winery. While the community seemed to have many tourism assets, some felt the signage could be clearer and that nearby industrial uses were off-putting. Saint Clements was noted as an excellent venue for large scale events to draw significant numbers of visitors but lodging options were limited. More substantive tourism marketing efforts, including farm, recreation or bridal maps, could be beneficial.

The quality and availability of higher end suburban style single family homes around town appeared very good, (both existing and new development), but rentals, multifamily, starter, and senior living options were very limited. They mentioned that while the new developments could be beneficial, for the community, the loss of green-space may deteriorate the community's unique historic, agricultural character. Given its prime location on the river and highways, the community also seemed ripe for increased small-scale...
commercial/industrial development. Balancing industrial development with tourism and local residential needs may be a challenge for Portland in the future.

When asked what was the most outstanding feature of the community team members said it was: “Beautiful and interesting...the long winding roads and stone walls, the green,... the farm stands.”

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. Beautiful residential areas and architecture
2. The river, parks, open space, and long windy roads
3. Brownstone Discovery Park

What are three potential opportunities available to this community?
1. Outdoor recreation
2. Focusing on agriculture and preservation of green space
3. Redevelopment of the downtown, historic district, park areas, and bridge gateway

What are three biggest obstacles or challenges facing the community?
1. Unattractive industrial development along river
2. High traffic volume
3. Small town may have a limited budget for marketing and infrastructure

The teams from Windsor Locks and Portland met together in Hartford on Tuesday May 23 to informally share the results of their visits. In the end both communities realized that they had much more in common than they expected. They both have tremendous opportunities for capturing more river recreation and challenges balancing industrial uses and residential demand (including struggles with truck traffic, and challenges to creating more affordable residential units). They both also learned something about their own community by participating in this program. "All of this was worthy...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."
Both towns wished that they had more time to spend in each town and with each other. They 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.

This report was prepared June 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 May 23, 2016. For more information visit

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