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, August 11, 2017 ten volunteers from Enfield visited Windsor on a beautiful warm and sunny Friday. The team had a variety of previous experiences with Windsor and were generally expecting a "mid-sized suburban community that is well run and has a fairly diverse population. I believed that the community had a good mix of homes, businesses and recreational activities." Most were expecting a revitalized downtown with significant industrial development that had replaced former agriculture uses. One participant was very aware of Windsor’s significant history as one of Connecticut’s earliest settlements. They conducted upfront online research of the websites (www.townofwindsorct.com, www.windsorcc.org and www.firsttowndowntown.org) as well the Facebook pages, and found the "town’s website was well organized for residents and had several useful community links. There wasn’t much available about initiatives, events, etc. " 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 34 off of 91 and headed north on Route 159 the community appeared "very run down." However others coming in from other entrances noted "It felt safe and welcoming to me,".. "Many sites to see, parks, trails, historical locations and monuments!" The team also explored entrances through the Amtrak station and the Rainbow State Boat launch noting how close these were to the downtown. Several commented the notable mix of housing throughout the community.

The team enjoyed exploring walking the downtown area and noted "the historic appearance of the center of town is very appealing and the integration of new and old is handled well." They were impressed that the community has been able to maintain its historic character but noted some of the vacant and underdeveloped properties downtown create a mixed experience for visitors, particularly given how spread out the main street area is. They also noted that while the restaurant and retail options in the downtown seemed to be high quality, there were few options. The team suggested that improving window displays, attracting higher end retail, developing historic walking tours, or boosting the presence of arts and culture downtown could make the downtown more attractive. While the downtown was very walkable they noted that the sides of the main street felt divided and increasing the flow of circular foot traffic on the green may improve traffic to businesses on either side. The presence of the Geislers, CVS, Chamber building, library and shopping centers downtown were viewed as tremendous assets. With only one exception, several noted the customer service they received at restaurants, realtor’s offices, and retail stores was generally good.

Throughout the visit, the visit team continually commented on the many but seemingly underutilized community assets for tourism. "In my opinion downtown is more geared for convenience shopping rather... Great overall appearance, great use of historic buildings and integration of newer ones. Signage is very good and streetscapes/plantings are beautiful and well maintained. The displays took a little away from the overall look. Perhaps making better use of vacant storefronts if owners are amenable, would enhance the overall look."
than for destination shopping meaning that it is more set up for residents than visitors."
Northwest Park and the boat launch, the Reservoir, the Farmington River and nearby walking paths, the theater, historical buildings, and the nearby train station were noted as amenities Windsor might promote better for tourism development. "Access to the Connecticut River was notably lacking... Water access is an important draw for visitors. Historic sites should also be better promoted."

The team noted a good mix of apartments, single family homes, and apartments but few multifamily homes that would serve low to middle income earners. Realtors noted that existing availability was very low but there were still good options available. Given Windsor's prime location as an industrial hub with proximity to the highway, airport and Hartford, the community had a surprisingly limited number of professional services. They also noted that the industrial areas are removed from the downtown and not walkable; possibly an indicator that those workers do not make use of downtown or other community amenities. The train station came up significantly throughout the team’s visit as both an understated and possibly underutilized amenity. While amenities for teens were limited, Windsor seemed to have much to offer for families, seniors and residents of various ages. These included the pool, high quality library, bocce courts, dog park, and numerous community events and festivals including the farmers market and "Shad Derby."

In their exploration, the team had a fortuitous encounter with "Bob" of "Where's Bob?" fame

https://www.windsorcc.org/news/ChamberNews/having_fun_with_wh/. We loved finding Bob..it gave us something to feel connected to your community with. He was really knowledgeable.” said one participant. Throughout the visit, talking with Windsor residents came up as a true highlight; an indicator that the people of this community enjoy where they live and act as ambassadors for their community.

When asked what was the most outstanding feature of the community, team members had a variety of comments including: "The people of Windsor are the most outstanding feature!" "Northwest Park" and "the historical section."
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, knowledgeable, people
2. Conveniences related to location: train station and surroundings
3. Natural amenities including Northwest Park, the boat launch, and river
4. Downtown area, history, restaurants and new homes

**What are the potential opportunities available to this community?** (no particular order):
1. Fill storefronts, promote commercial and retail growth, encourage circular foot traffic in the downtown
2. Focus on arts and cultural development including use of the old theater
3. Continue to support balanced, responsible growth
4. Enhance public transit options and connectivity

**What are the biggest obstacles or challenges facing the community?** (no particular order):
1. Deteriorating strip malls/lack of retail
2. Aging population
3. Maintaining residential areas and attractiveness for visitors

The teams from Enfield and Windsor met on Thursday, September 21, 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 design standards, benefits of colocating the Chamber and tourism offices in a central location in the downtown as well as their successes around events like Chili-fest and the Shad Derby to encourage civic engagement in the community. Both discussed the need to stay closely connected to existing businesses. Enfield described a youth mural project that Windsor might adopt to encourage the arts and fill vacant storefronts.
The teams really 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 21, 2017. For more information visit

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