A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

Executive Summary – Windsor Locks, CT
Conducted by the visit team from Portland, CT
June 2016

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 2, 2016, seven volunteers from Portland visited Windsor Locks on a very rainy Monday morning. Everyone on the team was familiar with the airport and had a sense of the industrial part of town. They were excited to learn more about the rest of the community. The team conducted upfront online research. They found the town’s website very easy to use and noted the number of related Facebook pages. They especially liked the First Selectman’s page and Windsor Locks Moving Forward. Despite the poor weather on the day of the visit, the team did have a number of 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. Their first reaction was mixed. They were impressed by the flowering trees on Main Street and the well maintained community buildings and residential areas, but felt that the “...abandoned industrial buildings detracted significantly from the overall appeal.” The team commented on the abundance of sidewalks and the very nice bike trail. They also commented on the wonderful opportunities associated with an international airport.
While the heavy rain discouraged significant walking downtown and even impaired visibility while driving, the team noted that there is a very good mix of uses throughout the community. There is significant industrial development near the airport and associated commercial uses, such as hotels. The team was impressed with the variety of residential neighborhoods, newer and older, large and small single family homes, and multifamily options. The team noted exceptional community facilities including the town hall and library complex, the schools, the public safety complex, the multiple recreational facilities and town pool.

The team did identify the lack of a significant grocery store and other shopping opportunities as an issue. They were impressed with the presentation at Vinnie’s flower and deli store. They also felt that although there is some mixed use development downtown there is an opportunity for more residential above commercial uses.

Overall, the team felt that there was significant redevelopment opportunity in the downtown area. They suggested that the Ocean State Job Lots plaza could be improved by adding a building in the parking lot, close to the street (since there’s an abundance of parking). Of course redevelopment of the Montgomery Mill would be a significant game changer, putting more people right on Main Street. They were pleased to learn that the train station is moving back downtown and that steps are underway to redevelop the historic train station. The team did note that the there was “a lack of a unifying theme downtown and that the streetscape was in need of an overhaul.” They also identified a need for more crosswalks and slowing traffic down through the downtown area.

The attitude of residents and business owners toward the community was also mixed. While many were positive and proud of their community, others were frustrated by a perceived lack of progress and the condition of some buildings in the downtown business district. The service at a local diner was excellent and friendly, and the downtown donut shop was identified as “the place to be.”

The Portland team recognized the significant potential of the river – reconnecting to it - but they understood the many challenges, especially with the adjacent railroad. The signage to the Canal Park was confusing but the team noted the potential of building on this valuable resource.

**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. Industry, accessibility and an international airport
2. Beautiful town hall and other community facilities, including a bike trail
3. A variety of housing options

What are three potential opportunities available to this community?
1. Downtown Revitalization, including reuse of the old train station & the Montgomery Mill
2. Reconnecting with the CT River and enhancing the canal trail
3. Improving connections between the airport area and downtown

What are three biggest obstacles or challenges facing the community?
1. Railroad parallel to Main Street & the river/canal area
2. Vacant buildings
3. Small amount of land available for new development

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/