A Program for Community & Innovation District Assessment & Improvement

Executive Summary – New London/Groton, Connecticut

Conducted by the visit team from New Haven, Connecticut, June 11 & 14, 2018

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 can be used as part of broader community assessment or planning processes to inform community policy and action. This program was adapted in 2018 to include key components of innovation districts. The community visits focused on innovation assets within these districts.

Five volunteers from New Haven, Connecticut associated with Elm City Innovation Collaborative visited New London/Groton on two separate days: June 11 and June 14, 2018, both sunny and warm weekdays. The following is an overview of the highlights and re-occurring themes of the visits based on the raw data report from team members as well as a debrief meeting of both visit teams held on August 29, 2018. Additional detail can be found in the raw data report available from members of the visit team.

Prior to the visit
The team was not sure what to expect prior to the visit having had very few experiences in New London prior. One team member said “I felt like it was going to be a small town...cute local shops, limited public transportation, some good restaurants/organizations.” but another expected “a worn out grungy city with a strong arts culture.” Team members were asked to review relevant websites and social media platforms prior to their visit. Online research included visiting the CURE, Thames River Innovation, and UConn Avery Point websites. These sites provided a generally good but mixed impression, with team members recognizing that CURE was in the midst of rebranding and they “didn’t see a lot of websites of interest to residents.” The team felt improvements could be made in coordinating the marketing and branding effort online to reduce clutter and create a more unified message between economic development entities. In preparing for their approach by train, the team found
negotiating the online train schedules between Metro North, Amtrak and Shoreline East to be confusing.

The overall sense of the district area was of an “interesting” and “engaged” city which, despite the low foot traffic, was friendly and welcoming. “I like the proximity to the water and the greenness. But I would want some sort of walkable thriving downtown center.”

First Impressions Visit

For the first ten minutes of the visit, the team was asked to enter the innovation district from various entrances. Team members coordinated the visit to review assets in both New London and Groton and entered by car, train, and water taxi. Overall the impression of New London by train was “stunning and exciting,” “welcoming and quietly vibrant,” but signage was somewhat lacking between the station and downtown area. Team members noted that the limited schedule and that tickets cannot be bought with credit card on the train (only cash) are hindrances to train travel. The entrance by water taxi was “attractive and well maintained.” Some wrote that entering Groton had “less of a feel of arriving somewhere,” and innovation destinations in that area including UConn Avery Point and CURE were not signed or easily accessible. The team noted that both areas of the district might benefit from improved water taxi service for commuters between New London and Groton.

The team raved about the walkability of the downtown with a “small town feel with really unique and curious storefronts” appreciating the restaurants, historic buildings, dynamic arts scene, flowers and plantings, and “bright lights” institutions like RD86, Spark, BioCT, Muddy Waters Café and Hygienic Arts. A theme through the report and debrief meeting however was a feeling that the downtown suffers from some disinvestment evidenced by building vacancies, empty window displays, and a lack of daytime activity. While this was not universal throughout the downtown, the empty storefronts and deteriorating properties contrasted with properties being renovated and some thriving and exciting opportunities.” Also some “There were not a lot of people walking around.” Many noted a variety of. Additionally, wayfinding signage could be improved for some in navigating downtown streets. Some team members had trouble finding information as information kiosks were in some cases, businesses were closed had no hours posted but seemed to be tailored more to weekend tourists than weekday customers.
While the waterfront area was recognized as a key asset, many felt the waterfront park could be improved to encourage more community involvement.

A recurring theme in the raw data report and discussion in the debrief meeting was improving connectivity between New London and Groton as well as key components of the overall innovation district. The security features necessary at many of the largest employers and innovation centers creates a barrier to connectivity. One team member noted “The large size of the district makes it difficult to create an environment with the characteristics I typically associate with innovation such as proximity, connections, energy and community.” At the debrief, there was some discussion about how to get more of these employees out into the community to encourage this interaction. This might include exploring weekday water taxi service and creating a more engaging downtown that attracts weekday customers. A discussion during the debrief focused on how the communities in the district are preparing for the hiring needs of Electric Boat and the challenges and opportunities this presents with regard to housing and transportation.

One of the most significant assets was clearly the density of educational institutions including Connecticut College, Mitchell College, UConn and the Coast Guard Academy, but all of them seemed to be on the outskirts of the district with varying levels of commitment to entrepreneurship and workforce development. “With the exception of Avery Point which is at the edges of the district, there is no research university. None of the higher educational institutions has a presence in downtown New London.” Housing also appeared as a theme in both the report and the debrief as a potential issue and opportunity. While their appeared to be a broad range of housing types throughout the district (and the various communities), UConn Avery Point, Pfizer and General Dynamics are located in primarily residential areas but completely disconnected from surrounding communities.

The teams from New Haven and New London met on August 29, 2018 in Old Saybrook to informally share the results of their visits. The New London/Groton team gained some inspiration for downtown design and activation and felt the visit presented ideas for programming and placemaking that New Haven could borrow. New Haven participating team members (in the visit or debrief): Margaret Lee, Shelly Saczynski, Elinor Slomba, Caroline Smith, Bernard Francois, Merilee Roussat, Michael Harris, Sarah Washburn, David Pearlstone, Laura

**Wrap up**

In the final section of the report the team was asked to sum it all up with the following questions. Also includes notes from the debrief visit and themes from the report:

List the positive things you observed about this community (no particular order):
1. Public art and cultural amenities
2. Friendly welcoming people
3. Significant number of innovation assets and anchors

What are the potential opportunities available to this community? (no particular order):
1. Activate the downtown area during weekdays – encourage more engagement through events and address street level vacancies
2. Improve connectivity between innovation assets by improving signage and transportation
3. Address street level vacancies

What are the biggest obstacles or challenges facing the community? (no particular order):
1. Physical disconnect between New London/Groton
2. Keeping up with the pace of change/opportunities created by increased hiring at Electric Boat, including workforce preparedness
3. Vacancies and foreclosures

This report was prepared September 2018 by Laura Brown, UConn Extension, with Miriah Kelly, Ali Berman, and Patrick McMahon. For more information visit [https://communities.extension.uconn.edu/firstimpressions/](https://communities.extension.uconn.edu/firstimpressions/)