

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

INNOVATE

A Program for Community & Innovation District Assessment & Improvement Executive Summary – Hartford, Connecticut

Conducted by the visit team from Stamford, Connecticut, June 11, 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 Stamford, Connecticut associated with Innovate Stamford visited Hartford on June 11, 2018, a warm, sunny Monday. The following is an overview of the highlights and re-occurring themes of the visit based on the raw data report from team members as well as a debrief meeting of both visit teams held on September 6, 2018. Additional detail can be found in the raw data report available from members of the visit team.

Prior to the visit

The team had mixed perceptions of the city prior to the visit expecting “a lot of state government offices and insurance companies” noting that “I had heard general concerns about safety in Hartford but I assumed the business district would be safe.” Team members were asked to review relevant websites and social media platforms prior to their visit. Online research included visiting www.hartford.gov,

www.innovationhartford.com, www.hartfordinsurtechhub.com, and www.livehartford.org.

The team found these sites to be overall very good in terms of content and accessibility with some technical, readability issues. The Innovation Destination: Hartford



website in particular was “robust and very informative.” They noted that the **economic development content seemed geared for those businesses already located in the city** with little about attraction and little cross

referencing between economic development sites and little information about workforce development. They also noted difficulty locating maps online. The team conducted a very limited review of social media platforms but found social media postings generally somewhat sporadic.



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 entered by car from I-91/I-84 as well as by train, over foot bridges and explored on foot and car. While ridership is growing on the new CT Rail line, most felt this offered tremendous potential for the city but city bus lines were confusing and difficult to navigate. Overall the impression entering the city was of a city “**ready to get going**” and “on the brink of successful growth” with clean, well signed streets with historic and grand architecture but with few people.

In reviewing the overall feel of the downtown area, the signage was highlighted with one team member noting “Hartford has done a tremendous job on signage - it’s one of the best I have seen in this country. The **signage helps significantly with the navigation and way finding in the city**” and was both useful and aesthetically pleasing. Some team members expected more retail shopping and restaurant options and despite the “generously sized” sidewalks which could accommodate tables and chairs, they felt **more restaurants could provide options for outdoor seating**. The number of parking facilities in the



“...the reverberating message from Hartford during our visit was – we’re on the brink of success!” - Stamford Visit Team Member



downtown was substantial but many were full and some found parking to be challenging. Given the high density of historic and cultural amenities in the downtown such as the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Science Museum, Bushnell Park, the new Yard Goats Stadium and historic architecture , the team noted **substantial potential for increasing tourism**. The team found the streets and businesses to be quiet and largely vacant until about 11 am and information requested from residents was mixed and sometimes, not helpful.



Given the wide variety of amenities, assets, organizations and institutions in the city in the debrief discussion as the team discussed what has limited Hartford's growth. In particular teams felt that **coordination and communication between the many institutions and organizations working in economic development** may help to **increase use of and activate existing physical amenities**, such as Bushnell Park. In debrief one team member described how more than 40 organizations are involved in Bushnell Park but there is no organization (like Riverfront Recapture) responsible for activating the space. The Yard Goats Stadium area was also a "wow" for some team members citing the tremendous potential for neighborhood building around the stadium.



The team visited innovation anchors including Upward Hartford, UConn, Goodwin College, Think Synergy, and IQUILT and noted large anchor companies in the district but one wrote "didn't feel their collective presence at the street level - where you would expect there to be activity." Overall this was reflected in the observation that the **"Live-Work-Play environment is lacking but Hartford is poised to capitalize on its location, amenities, and affordability."** Some noted that Upward Hartford felt very corporate and not as geared to support start-ups. Given the wide variations in availability and price of housing in Hartford and Stamford, it was not surprising that housing challenges came up significantly in the debrief discussion. While the team noted apartment housing downtown, the empty storefronts and focus on business activity created **more of a corporate than residential feel in the innovation district.**

While this was not a significant topic of discussion during the debrief, the report indicated that "perception" issues and safety issues may be hindrances to growth and tourism. Several team members also commented about the possible race and class inequity in terms of access to innovation resources as well as segregated neighborhoods in the city. One writes 'Hartford has



changed dramatically in recent times but a reputation still exists - the stories of segregation and inequity in terms of services/resources for blacks continue to influence people who might consider moving there." While the First Impressions program is insufficient to assess these issues, this should be considered as a factor in understanding how innovation resources are or are not accessible to all.

Wrap up

In the final section of the report the team was asked to sum it all up with the following questions. These include data from the raw report as well as the debrief discussion:

List the positive things you observed about this community (no particular order):

1. Streetscape including signage and maps
2. Significant existing cultural and historic amenities and institutions
3. Existing historic buildings

What are the potential opportunities available to this community? (no particular order):

1. Identify, connect & coordinate innovation high points on the ground
2. Activate existing meeting places such as parks and coffee shops
3. Rebrand to address perception issues
4. Improve transportation access by focusing on rail and airport service

What are the biggest obstacles or challenges facing the community? (no particular order):

1. Political, financial and socio economic issues
2. Perception issues/reputation
3. Low occupancy downtown



The teams from Stamford and Hartford met on September 6, 2018 in New Haven at RAWA restaurant to informally share the results of their visits. The Stamford team gained some inspiration for improving partnerships within the arts community, pedestrian and wayfinding signage and improving “signals” to the young

innovators that the community is catering to them. Stamford team members: Lisa Mercurio, Layne Rodney, Elizabeth Joseph, TJ Rutkowski, and Sam Gordon. Hartford team members: Martha Conneely, Philip Shattuck, Martha Kalen, Michelle Cote, and Rebecca Nolan.

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

