



First Impressions Revisited*

A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

The Center For Community Economic Development

Community Visited:

Date of Visit:

Visit Completed by (community):



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Edited: 9-6-2002

*A revised and updated version of the *First Impressions* program developed by Andrew Lewis and James Schneider, 1991

First Impressions Revisited: A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement Final Report for Monroe, Wisconsin

Visitation Team Profile:

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Date of visit and time spent: October 31, 2006

Weather on date of visit: Sunny and cool (40°F)

1. Prior to Your Visit

I requested information on the city of Monroe through the Monroe Chamber of Commerce website on Tuesday, October 2006, as of November 10, 2006, I have not received any information. I found Monroe Chamber website was easy to find and navigate.

2. Past Perceptions

What was your perception of the community before this visit? What did you expect to see?

Please comment on your knowledge of this community:

- Cheese and beer businesses in a Swiss community
- Quaint Midwest town with a population around 10,000

3. The “Five Minute” Impression

After taking a five-minute drive through the community, without stopping, the following reactions were noted:

As we entered from Highway 69 from the north, we noticed a welcome sign and many good directional signs through town. We drove through mixed-use neighborhoods with beautiful historic homes and plenty of sidewalks and street trees. We also noted a billboard in the residential area. As we followed the signs to the downtown, the gorgeous courthouse and the big library “wowed” us. We felt the community was very warm, clean and inviting. However, the parking around the courthouse gave the downtown a cluttered feel. Perhaps more parking should be located off the square. There appeared to be a thriving downtown with a wide variety of businesses and a beautiful middle school, however the Huber building and Ghel shed near the entrance to the community appeared run down.

4. Community Entrances

The following observations were noted when entering the community from major entrances:

Approached from Hwy. 69 from north:

- Good/excellent signage (3)
- Nice motto and welcome sign (2)
- Easy to see the community clubs (Knights of Columbus, Kiwanis, etc.) – very nicely displayed
- Agriculture oriented - could use sprucing (2)
- Minimal businesses
- Nice residential area
- Good streets
- Nothing outstanding at entrance
- Seemed windy to get to the square



Approached from Hwy. 69 from south:

- Nice entrance sign
- Good motto – representative of the feel of the community “We bring you back”
- Noticed that Monroe service groups recognized
- Easy to read street signs (2)
- New residential area with lots of houses
- Very nice looking drive-in theatre (2)
- Drive-in sounds fun
- Nice wide street
- Swiss Colony and MTX had an ugly shed
- Clean and Industrial
- The high school was a newer looking (nice) building
- There area a few billboards – lose them
- Shopping area near Piggly Wiggly looks cluttered



Approached from Hwy. 59 from east:

- Nice tank! (2)
- Nice residential (2)
- Clinic – seems a little run-down (2)
- Good welcome sign
- Odd place for Sheriff
- Confusing layout, but good signage
- Courthouse central feature!
- Impressive-sized library

Approached from 8th Avenue:

- Not cozy, commercial shopping & industrial like all other towns

5. Downtown Business Area

Observations about the general appearance of the downtown area:

- Nice posted calendar of events
- Parking junks up the place
- Nice looking Chamber
- Nice street flags
- Cute downtown
- Looks full, bustling (2)
- Lose the meters
- Lots of parking
- Nice sized library
- Very helpful at Chamber
- Very vibrant



General Appearance of buildings, displays, signage:

- Parts of Huber Brewery could be improved

The variety of shopping:

- Drive through pet food was a surprise
- Rathskaller – good food, great waitress
- Outdoor theatre
- Navigating downtown is confusing because both the streets and avenues are numbered.
- Confusing town to drive in
- E85 gasoline was selling for \$1.85 - What a deal!



How would you rate the variety and quality of the merchandise?

- Good mix – we noticed professional services as well as retail

What kind of customer service did you receive when you entered the retail businesses?

- Everyone greeted us
- Very friendly
- Good recommendations from people in community

Were there any governmental or nonprofit organizational activities that might serve as a magnet for the shopping district?

- Post Office
- Red Cross
- YMCA
- City Hall



Were there the following public amenities?

We noticed one pay phone and a few benches downtown.

Did you have any difficulty finding parking? Could you access multiple services from where you parked?

- Excellent downtown parking
- Didn't like the meters

6. Other Retail Shopping Areas (Big Box Retailers/Shopping Malls)

What types of businesses did you notice that would fit the general category of "Big Box Retailer":

- Typical Wal-Mart, Shopko, Aldi's, Piggly Wiggly, Pick-n-Save and Farm & Fleet

General Appearance of buildings, displays signage:

- Lots of signs – "sign clutter"
- Good general layout
- Looks the same as everywhere else
- Everything looked new except Wal-Mart
- Not unattractive
- Typical mix

The variety of shopping:

- All so close together
- Surprised that you don't have a Super Wal-Mart
- Good mix – had a lot for this community
- Had a lot more than Reedsburg
- One insurance place, a bank – not much for professional services

How would you rate the variety and quality of the merchandise?

- We did not have the opportunity to shop in this area. We assumed that all the chain stores are all about the same. Shopping downtown was much more of a draw for us.

What kind of customer service did you receive when you entered the retail businesses?

- N/A

Did you have any difficulty finding parking? Could you access multiple services from where you parked?

- Not hard to find parking
- The usual
- You would have to drive to visit multiple stores

7. Industrial Parks/Commercial Areas

Is there a defined area where manufacturing industries could easily locate/expand?

- Lots of room to build and expand
- Difficult to distinguish industrial area – business area.

What did you find attractive about the potential locations for manufacturing/commercial businesses?

- Easy access to highway and railroad
- Convenient for industrial workers to shop and eat on their way home.



How would you evaluate the general health of manufacturing businesses that are currently located in the community?

- Buildings looked attractive
- Didn't notice any vacant buildings
- Well-kept industrial area

Could you find print information and informed persons that could provide you with data that would help you make an informed business location decision?

- Inside of City Hall had a weird layout. No one there greeted us or offered any help. It felt unfriendly.
- We did not find anything available from Chamber.
- Chamber printed more tourism-oriented materials.
- Chamber and city need to be more in tune with business opportunities.

8. Health Care Services

Comment on the availability and apparent quality of hospitals and emergency medical services:

- Looked good
- We noticed a hospital, clinic, and hospice.
- The Recreation Director's comments on local health care were very favorable.

Comment on the availability and condition of facilities for physician, dental, optometrist, and other medical care:

- Dentist, Chiropractor, Orthodontic located throughout community.
- It appeared that you could find what you need.

What long-term care, assisted living, or nursing home facilities exist in the community?

- We noticed an assisted living facility downtown.
- The Recreation Direction commented on a Senior Center.
- This community looked like it would attract retirees.
- We noticed a fitness center for over 55's.
- Hospital appealing, but because of space constraints it may be hard to expand.

9. Housing

How would you evaluate the existing mix of housing stock?

- Very good mix
- Well-kept older/Victorian homes
- Not many vacant lots
- Apartments over stores
- New subdivision
- No rundown neighborhoods – just a few houses
- Victorians really add class and good feel
- The B & B near the downtown was “to die for.”
- Middle class neighborhoods mixed with higher end historical homes closer to the downtown

Were there any indications that the housing market was depressed?

- Lots of “for sale” signs much like everywhere in Wisconsin
- Didn't notice as many for sale signs in the older section of town.
- Looked healthy.
- Lots of “for sale by owner” homes.

Were there any signs that it would be difficult to find acceptable housing?

- No

Does the local housing market have housing that would appeal to all income ranges? Are there sufficient rental properties for persons interested in building or simply living in the community prior to buying housing?

- It appeared that the housing market has sufficient houses in all markets. We noticed apartments downtown. There did not seem to be many lots available in the older sections of town.

10. Schools

Do the schools appear to be adequate in size or do you see the use of “temporary class rooms”? Are they well maintained? Please comment on the following:

Pre-School/Kindergarten/Head Start/Day Care facilities:

- We did not notice any.

Elementary School:

- Well-kept elementary school behind Burger King.



Middle School/Junior High:

- Beautiful school downtown
- Middle school is very close to downtown.
- Where is the parking?
- It would make more sense to locate the middle school closer to the high school.

High School:

- Looked really good
- Looks new and in great shape
- Very sterile environment
- Impressive
- Large, modern, attractive
- Very nice building
- Large & close to high school

Higher Education (Community College, Technical College, University):

- Blackhawk Tech – good shape
- Recreation Director spoke of many credit and non-credit courses for retirees
- Good locations – off highway for out of town students
- Easy access from the highway. Close to fast food
- Looks like there is plenty of room to expand
- Nice campus

Were you able to find print information in the community that helped assess the quality of the educational system?

- No

11. Faith/Religion

Comment on the number of denominations represented in the community:

- Nothing jumped out at us.
- Not a lot
- Weird Lutheran church – boxy design
- Didn't dominate community
- We noticed that an old church was converted into an art center
- Knights of Columbus – big presence.

Comment on the physical appearance of the churches in the community:

- Overall they looked very good.

Are there any signs of church-sponsored community services?

- Lutheran Social Services brochure in Chamber and food pantry
- Knights of Columbus – building in park

Are there any facilities or statements that some would view as intrusive or that would make someone feel uncomfortable if they were not of a particular faith? No

12. Civic

Does it appear as though there are a variety of nonprofit organizations and clubs within the community?

- Yes we noticed displays in downtown windows, the Swiss Club, Monroe Theater Guild Center for Arts Foundation, and a number of other art organizations.
- Kiwanis, Masons, Knights of Columbus, Rotary – nice sign highlighting organizations (Hwy. 69 from north)

13. Residents

In what ways did you find (or not find) people helpful?

- Community calendar of events is a great idea and we intend to bring it back to Reedsburg.
- Everyone we spoke to were good promoters except at City Hall.
- We spoke with the Recreation Director, a waitress, and a park employee. All were very friendly, knowledgeable and great promoters of the community.
- The waitress at the Rathskeller was a great ambassador.
- The Chamber was very informative and gave great recommendations for lunch.
- We spoke with a B & B owner at Chamber. She was very helpful.

How did people talk about their community? What were their attitudes about their schools, public leaders, and community services?

- All very positive – great ambassadors.
- New city administrator – very positive.

Were community members knowledgeable about their community or able to refer you to people who were?

- Yes – Good/excellent recommendations

Did residents reflect the diversity that is represented in the rest of the country? Are there some segments of the population that would not feel comfortable in this community?

- Very white
- Typical Midwest rural small town

14. Public Infrastructure

Streets, street signing and lighting:

- Downtown good signage
- Informational signs through downtown were good
- Lots of sidewalks
- Bumpy streets downtown
- Didn't notice street lights
- We noticed decorative flower pots throughout the downtown.
- Could use a few more benches
- No bike racks

Land Use Planning:

- Preserve the courthouse! This is the central feature of the downtown. Very inspiring!
- Downtown and business very separate. That could be a good thing in order to preserve the historic feel of the square.
- The Swiss theme found in the downtown was not carried into the newer business area.
- Monroe had an odd layout overall. The streets did not seem to be on a grid.

Sidewalks:

- Parking around downtown square detracts from a pedestrian feel.
- Not pedestrian friendly in business area.

Public Restrooms:

- Didn't notice any

City/Village/Town Hall:

- In the City Council Chamber the council sits with their backs to the public!
- City Hall was not user friendly. There was no one to greet or direct you.
- Parks & Recreation department was very user friendly.
- There was no receptionist at City Hall.



Police/Fire Protection/Emergency Medical Services Facilities:

- All seemed very good. Convenient that they are all located in the same area.

Public Parking:

- Interesting parking ramp (downtown)
- Lose the meters
- Lots of meters downtown – although there was a free parking ramp

Library:

- Big, but not real pretty
- Good downtown location

Landscaping/street trees:

- Not very green square
- Tree City, USA
- Flower pots, flags and Halloween decorations were nice.

Pay phones, drinking fountains, benches, other misc.:

- Not many benches
- Good bench in the Chamber

15. Recreation/Tourism

Is the community well known for any particular attraction or event? Do they have a community slogan that capitalizes on that asset?

- Cheese Days
- “We take you back”

Comment on the availability and selection of overnight accommodations:

- Good selection of hotels, B & B’s
- No camping

Did you see any indication of significant events taking place in the community that would be of interest to both visitors and residents?

- Cheese Days
- 5K run
- Beer tours
- Concerts in band shell
- City band



Are there any significant natural features that have the potential of drawing people to the community?

- It is a beautiful drive from Sauk City to Monroe.
- Beautiful creek in Twining Park.



Are there any significant man-made attractions?

- Huber Brewery
- Band shell in Twining Park
- Courthouse – awestruck
- YMCA

Is there an obvious visitor’s center, chamber of commerce office, Main Street office, or other facility that serves the needs of visitors? Please comment on the staff, facilities, signage, visibility, etc.

- All good

Are there any restaurants, specialty shops or attractions that would bring you back to this community in the near future?

- Rathskeller Swiss food
- Swiss-themed food places
- Brewery tour here and in New Glarus
- Swiss Colony



16. Using your Senses

What did the community taste like? Was there any specialty food item, bakery, restaurant, or candy store that you will remember?

- We had lunch at the Rathskeller and we will remember the excellent Swiss food: Apple strudel, Home-cooking buffet, and homemade salad dressing.

What did the community smell like?

- Brewery – hops and barley
- Nothing bad
- All stores downtown smelled really warm and inviting.

What sounds did you hear?

- Wind
- Traffic
- Construction

Did you have any experiences that impacted the way the community feels?

- No

17. Wrap-up

What are the 5 most positive things that you observed about the community?

- Good sense of place. Great connected to Swiss heritage.
- Warm and fuzzy feelings associated with the downtown square.
- Preserved historic courthouse
- Beautiful Twining Park
- Good mix of stores



What are the five biggest obstacles/challenges facing this community?

- City Hall redesign – reception area would be helpful.
- Numbered avenues and streets were no good. Very confusing because streets were not on a grid system.
- The newer business area did not have the same feel as the downtown area. There is nothing cozy about Wal-Mart. The newer business area seemed just like every other town. There is no reason to stop.
- Parking meters! Weird parking around the square.
- A few run-down buildings off the square



What will you remember most about this community six months from now (positive or negative)?

- Impressive recreation program
- Poorly planned City Hall
- Huber Brewery. I will watch to see what happens as the new owner takes over.
- Good feel of downtown square and the courthouse.

Describe ONE idea that you will borrow for use in your own business/community and describe how you will start to implement it within the next 72 hours!

- We will look into opportunities to improve on our recreation program.
- The Reedsburg BID plan will review the downtown Monroe brochures for new ideas.
- We plan to investigate possibilities for a calendar of events sign.
- We will consider a business directory/map.



You might want to consider tracking purchases (perhaps even finding a sponsor to provide \$50 to each participant). It would be useful to report where any money was spent within the community. We had lunch at the Rathskeller, purchased boots at the infant and toddler store and a t-shirt at the Huber store.

*Please don't forget to send a copy of your final report to:
ablewis@facstaff.wisc.edu (an electronic version would be appreciated!)*

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