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Program Developed by: Professor Andrew B. Lewis, Community Development Specialist, Center for Community Economic Development, University of Wisconsin Extension, Edited: 9-6-2002
*A revised and updated version of the *First Impressions* program developed by Andrew Lewis and James Schneider, 1991

Dates visited: October 26-27, 2007 and November 18-19, 2007

City of La Crosse

For

FIRST IMPRESSIONS REPORT

First Impressions Revisited*	
A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement	
The Center for Community Economic Development	

Purpose

The purpose of the First Impressions Program is to help a community learn about existing strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of the first time visitor

Limitations

The two primary limitations to this exchange were the distance and the size of the City. To offset the distance (approximately 4 hours drive one way) the team worked with the La Crosse Visitor's Bureau to find hotel rooms at government rate. This enabled team members to stay overnight. To accommodate the size of the city and the limited hours available to each team member, we divided the main categories up among the team, assigning categories to members that reflected their strengths and interest. By staying overnight and focusing our visit, we believe we were able to thoroughly cover La Crosse.

Conditions of Visit

Weather conditions in October were pleasant; average fall temperatures, light rain, and some strong wind on the second day. Conditions in November had temperatures in the 30s with variable skies throughout the two days. Conditions were favorable for visiting and exploring the City.

First Impressions Team

- Arlene Schmuhi, Oshkosh Visitors and Convention Bureau, Visiting Team co-leader
- Kea Schmuhi, student at Brandon Middle School
- Catherine Neiswender, UW-Extension Community Development Educator for Winnebago County, visiting team co-leader
- Vicky Redlin, Winnebago County Parks Department, Expo Center manager
- Shirley Mattox, retired teacher, former City Councilor
- Stephen Hintz, Partner, Public Administration Associates, LLC, retired UW Oshkosh political science professor, former mayor of Oshkosh
- Susan Kepplinger, City of Oshkosh Planning Department
- Tracie Schlaak, Oshkosh Visitors and Convention Bureau (visiting UW-La Crosse with daughter)

Process

While there was one team, the group, due to personal schedules, split into two and visited La Crosse on two separate dates. The Team met in advance to review the First Impressions guide and clarify the sections they would focus on. Each section of the report contains a

general summary of the overall comments and then lists the individual comments from team members. Because the team members provided such rich it was decided to keep the detailed comments rather than condense them and lose the richness. Some team members did additional research in advance of the visit, including phone calls to City Departments. In many instances, team members rated the category on a scale of 1 to 10, which are noted in the detailed comments.

THE FIRST IMPRESSIONS RESULTS

PRIOR TO YOUR VISIT

Summary of comments: Team members found information about La Crosse easy to access, and mostly of good quality. In some cases, there was too much information available on the web.

How easy was it to find information about the City of La Crosse? What was the quality of the information?

- Easy. I Googled City of La Crosse and found the City's main page easily. From there, I was able to click on "Moving to our Community" site which included neat, informative video clips and what seemed like endless links to find out all kinds of information about the city and its services. While I didn't follow all of them, the breadth of information seemed appropriate. There was also a link for Visitors, which connected me to the CVB, tourism etc.
- Learned that the city slogan is Grand River-Great City
- Quality of information is very good. Might be a bit much – e.g. lots of sites to visit, some of which redirected me, but generally OK.
- Two best links are broken (from great river city/visitors and tourism); map link is broken. I don't like the restaurants link that gets you to a generic 'yellow pages' type of page. A locally sponsored page would look nicer. Personal preference.
- The city website has almost too much information to digest! In regard to the Visitor Guide, her comment about the photos in the guide was, "It looks like everyone is having fun, I wouldn't mind going there."
- I found the map in the Explore La Crosse magazine to be less than helpful. I think you could provide more detail by having the map take two full pages.
- The three websites I used were:
 - La Crosse Convention & Visitors Bureau - www.exploreLaCrosse.com Rate = 8; I found the information I was looking for after a few clicks. It seemed to cover everything a visitor would be looking for. I would of liked to see more graphics though.
 - La Crosse Tribune - www.LaCrosseTribune.com, Rate = 4; I was continually amazed by the extreme negativity of the comments on the website. After reading it for a few days, I was surprised to see anyone living in the city. The comments gave me the impression that it was a very 'backward' community. When I started

Summary of comments: Everyone on the team noticed the bluffs and found them to be striking. Wayfinding signage was positively recognized, as well as the historic homes and downtown. The presence of billboards detracted from the initial beauty seen by the team.

THE "FIVE MINUTE" IMPRESSION

- I visited La Crosse about 35 years ago and I remember going up to Granddad's Bluff and the magnificent river. Two years ago, when I drove to the Company Store which is in Town of Campbell and not very attractive, I visited Downtown La Crosse and spoke with shopkeepers on 2nd Street and Pearl Street, walked to Hackberry's for supper and decided I would come back for a much longer visit because there was so much to explore. La Crosse appeared to be more than the college party town. I know La Crosse is the setting for the Jazz Festival, October Fest and beer companies, UW-LC and Viterbo College, a movie setting, and that the City has invested millions into a revitalized Downtown & riverfront with a Convention Center.
 - I was aware of the unique location between the Mississippi River and the bluffs, the active convention center, and the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.
 - I know very little about La Crosse. May have been there for a meeting many years ago, but if so, little memory of the place. I know this is a river city and there is a state university there. I am not sure what to expect overall, but I am looking forward to going after reading "Experience Historic Downtown La Crosse". Having lived in Muscatine, IA and worked in the Quad Cities, I have some experience with river cities and know they can be treasures as well as seedy.
 - I'm expecting an active downtown, attractive community, nice views of the river, fall colors. I'm expecting to find a relatively decent meal for dinner.
 - Known for its Oktoberfest, its drownings, the 10-commandments 'issue', and the largest 6-pack natural features
 - Medium sized city, located between the Mississippi River and bluffs; Nice looking, unique small community on the river. Quaint downtown with minimal recreational opportunities.
- What was your perception of the community before this visit? What did you expect to see?**

Summary of comments: Most team members knew La Crosse as a River City with a nice downtown. Most members did not have a lot of prior experience in visiting La Crosse.

PAST PERCEPTIONS

- Grand River Great City - www.grandrivergreatcity.com, Rate = 1; This site looked perfect until I started using it. The photos are beautiful and it seemed from the list of links that it covered everything I may have been looking for. I was disappointed after using it. The links that worked, opened in new windows, took me to sites I had already found or didn't work at all. There really wasn't any original content
- using it several months ago, it appeared to be very cluttered but that has changed recently with their new look.