

# **First Impressions Revisited: A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement**

**Community Visited: Black River Falls**

## **Personal Profiles:**

- |                                    |   |
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**Date of visit and time spent: August 31, 2004 9 AM – 3 PM**

**Weather at time of visit: Partly Cloudy, mid-70's**

# **FIRST IMPRESSIONS PROJECT**

## **1.) PRIOR TO THE VISIT**

### ***How easy was it to get information on the community?***

Phone call to chamber resulted in fast, friendly service. Received information within 3 days. Website visit required more effort & time to surf.

An online Google search of “Black River Falls Wisconsin” brought up blackriverfalls.com with a link to blackrivercountry.com. We called the phone number for the Chamber and received two brochures in the mail.

Searched on internet.

Was not very easy. E-mailed a request for information and received no reply.

Phone call to Chamber yielded a housing packet within three days.

### ***Did the information you received accurately reflect the community?***

Yes, the brochure was colorful and detailed, especially on outdoor activities. I would have liked to see this include more information about the town and community sites, i.e. Lunda Center, Chamber office, Veterans Memorial, Library, Museums, etc. I would have liked to see more meat in the relocation packet; details on schools especially.

The large booklet shows a very nature-based recreational community, which BRF appears to be.

Did not receive information that I requested. Information that I did receive reflected a lot of outdoor activities and vacationing. The information did not help with relocating.

I felt that the information received was a fair representation.

### ***Did the information arrive in a timely manner?***

The information arrived within three days by mail.

Yes, we received the information within 3 days.

Requested from website, no information was received. The website was frustrating, with incomplete general information only.

Information was received within 3 days following our phone call. We also e-mailed a request for information, but never received any via the city’s website.

## **2. PAST PERCEPTIONS:**

*What was your perception of the community before the visit? (Comment on your knowledge of the community)*

Prison and Casino: Gambling/high crime rate...and safety of living there.  
Fishing/Hunting/Recreation area: Clean town and welcome feeling.  
Recreation organized due to County Government. Endowment through Lunda family gave them a lot of amenities (water park, community center).  
I knew BRF was a Main Street community.

I perceived it as a small but growing community.

Many small groups that really cared about the community: Garden club, Arts alliance, Theater Group. Families that care...philanthropy. Black River Foundation Fund, Lunda Aquatic Park are supported, intertwined.

I had read an article about tamarack trees planted in downtown BRF and am interested in seeing how these look. I also thought that BRF had been working on improving its downtown.

A community with both good and poor points. The prison provides jobs but compromises the safety of the surrounding area. The casino also provides jobs but creates gambling issues. I did not perceive the community to offer more than these two aspects.

A large population of Native Americans.

### **3. THE FIVE MINUTE IMPRESSIONS**

*Take one drive through the community without stopping. As you exit the community, pull over and write down what you felt about the town with this quick look. Do this in silence without talking to others in your group.*

Downtown was clean, colorful. Buildings were kept up and occupied. The area had an Historical feel. A number of flags were displayed in front of buildings and homes. There were signs directing you to the main facilities.

The downtown storefronts seem to be full. The red directional signs are eye-catching, but the yellow arrows on the signs are hard to see.

There was a typical “small town” feel, north town, east town, west town & downtown. But downtown was very historic and picturesque.

Downtown area was very “quaint”, looked historical. Could use better signage, i.e. hospital, courthouse, schools etc. Lots of tourism venues, hotels, restaurants with easy access.

Entrance off of interstate was busy. Very scenic entrance to downtown. Need better signage.

The downtown area was very clean. Noted the “We support our troops” signs, nice touch. Street pole informational signs were very helpful. Appreciated historic look and light poles.

#### **4. COMMUNITY ENTRANCES**

*Enter and exit the community through the major entrances. Please comment on your observances for each:*

##### ***Highway 12 West:***

Building for lease, seemed old and not well cared for or welcoming. Nice trucking facility (Willis).

No signs, poor roads, mall rat district.

The Pines Motel site was very unattractive. The welcome sign is too far from the road, needs to be larger.

The Pines up for sale, numerous commercial signs.

The Pines!!! Needs to be cleaned up. Lots of closed car dealerships. The welcome sign could stand out more. So many closed businesses on this entry.

##### ***Highway 54:***

Good signage for downtown. Fairgrounds entrance? Armory, Pineview. Lots of flags in front of the businesses. Nice hanging baskets and trees.

Approaching from I-94, Clean and attractive, commercial yet not overly developed yet. Nicely mowed. First welcome sign gets lost, second sign by the chiropractor could stand out more. Approaching from Melrose, the Highway shop is not the best sight, but it is kept tidy. Welcome signs? Have to get farther into town before you see one.

Approaching from Melrose: County shops, Albion Auto Shops. Veterans Park and the Fairgrounds look like they could use help at first glance. Welcome signs too small.

Uninviting until you get past Woods Sales. The Welcome signs need to be larger to attract attention. Sign listing organizations appears to be old.

Approaching from I-94: Busy, little signage directing where to go. Easy access to food/hotel/gas station. Approaching from Melrose: Nice new road. No signage. Growing community. Schools location is good.

Approaching from I-94: Welcome signs to downtown. Clean & inviting. Plenty of signage. Approaching from Melrose: Nice "welcome to" sign.

##### ***Highway 27:***

Approaching from I-94, Welcome sign, clean entrance.

Least inviting, More business area.

##### ***County Hwy A:***

Attractive housing, nice driving range but hidden. Burnstad's looks great. TNT Welcome sign. Hoffman home office beautiful but poor signage.

Older sign listing organizations, hospital.

Businesses on this side are more attractive than on 54 from Melrose (ex. Harley Davidson & Hoffman). Saw no welcome sign? Nice yards.

## **5. Downtown Business & Retail:**

### *General appearance of buildings, displays and signage.*

Wood Sales & Service well fenced but concerns about barbed wire fencing.

Flower garden by river/downtown entrance is nice.

Attractive murals, well-kept buildings. Only noticed one empty storefront. Side streets are clean and well-kept also. Backs of buildings are well hidden, even the backsides of the downtown blocks (as we walked to the library and city hall) were neat and clean.

Historic old-town feel. Very nice.

### *Comment on variety of shopping. Do you see a good mix of commercial/retail services that match what you would expect for a community of this size? How would you rate the variety and quality of merchandise?*

No bakery, no shoe stores, no men's clothing. Is there a Farmer's Market?

Lots of antique shops, 2 clothing stores, several restaurants and bars, a hardware and sporting goods shop, craft shops. All stores were done in old-time décor. Great for tourism, wonder how many locals shop.

I was surprised to see women's clothing store, nice that a community of this size can support it. Many antiques and craft stores-will appeal to tourists more than residents. Nice shopping opportunities for tourists.

Nice to see no unoccupied buildings. Did not see any major clothing stores i.e. Penney's, other than Walmart, nor major appliance stores i.e. Sears.

Did not see family clothing stores, otherwise typical retail mix.

### *What kind of customer service did you receive when you entered a business?*

Very friendly to obtain (convenience store) on community.

People friendly.

We were always greeted and our questions were answered. One antique storeowner was rather disinterested after the initial greeting.

Everyone was very friendly.

Very good to excellent.

### *Were the public amenities such as pay phones, drinking fountains, benches, and public restrooms marked and available?*

Benches and Taxi service.

Public restrooms in stores, limited benches and garbage cans.

## **5. DOWNTOWN BUSINESS & RETAIL (continued)**

When we asked about restrooms, we were offered the store owners restrooms. Benches available but could use a fresh coat of paint. Did not notice any drinking fountains or phones.

Did not see any benches or public restrooms.

Didn't notice outside downtown fountains, plenty of benches.

### ***Describe parking for retail:***

Municipal lots were signed, no problem finding parking.

Municipal lots were marked and signed behind Main Street.

There was plenty of street parking available at 10:30 am when we got there.

Tuesday AM, parking available on Main Street.

Busy downtown at 11:45 AM.

## **7. INDUSTRIAL PARKS/COMMERCIAL AREAS:**

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

Yes, there was a small sign, water tower, industrial park sign. Land O Lakes signage missing.

There was some signage indicating available land/sites. Area was not clean. What's available for future?

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

Some were signed well, others were not. No junk areas. Well landscaped and cared for.

WWTC area was clean and nicely landscaped, Nelson has a nice facility. Regal-Beloit was also nice.

*How would you evaluate the general health of manufacturing businesses in the community?*

I was impressed with a number of facilities in the park, however I could not determine the number of available new sites or expansion room.

Impressive industrial area, clean, accessible to I-94, couldn't find airport.

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

I was referred to City Hall from the Chamber, referred to Chamber of commerce. Unclear availabilng. Reference Bill Arndt at City Hall. I was impressed with the Hoffman Construction building.

The chamber office referred us to City Hall- Bill Arndt for more information. When we visited City Hall there was no staff available to greet us (this was during lunch hour). A later visit occurred with Bill, we discussed the library.

## **8. HEALTH CARE SERVICE:**

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

There was a hospital and ambulance service.

All medical facilities are located together. The only signage is the hospital sign.

All are located in one comprehensive location. They could have better signage to direct to medical facilities. Take advantage of the convenience of having them all together and promote that.

There was a small hospital with small lobby. The Krone clinic needs updating. It was small and dark in appearance.

It was a rough road to the hospital. Emergency ride would be tough. Nice and convenient location, clinics, dental and hospital located right by each other.

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

Many physicians listed with the hospital. Gundersen clinic has an eye clinic. Community Dental.

The hospital was an old building but in good shape. We could only get so far into the clinic and hospital. The interior appeared old and needs updating.

The facilities could use updating.

Very easy to see but could use better signage.

***What long-term care, assisted living or nursing home facilities exist?***

Pine View has a beautiful layout, but the field needs to be groomed.

There are two long-term care facilities.

I saw three long-term care/assisted living facilities.

I saw the Pine View facility.

I noticed the Ho-Chunk facility.

## **9. HOUSING**

***How would you evaluate the existing mix of housing stock? Did it provide an adequate mix of existing older homes, new construction, available vacant lots for new development, assisted living and rental units?***

There was a nice mix with some older home renovations. Saw some new construction as well.

Equal mix with few vacant lots in town.

Nice reuse of old school for apartments. There seemed to be a mix of new homes, existing homes, and many sizes. The vast majority of homes, no matter the neighborhood, were well kept, tidy and had well-cared for lawns. There weren't a lot of "For Sale" signs. We really noticed that there were a lot of gardens and flowerbeds.

Many smaller older homes in town. When you got outside of the area, the homes were newer and more pride was taken in their property.

Within city limits there were many older homes, saw several for sale signs, Lincolnwood area offered new home sites; available public housing in town.

There appeared to be a good mix. Downtown has more older and outside of city limits there were newer developments.

***Were there any indications that the housing market was depressed (abundance of For Sale signs)? Were there any signs that it would be difficult to find acceptable housing? (i.e. no real estate signs)***

Didn't notice an abundance of for sale signs, but didn't notice any medium to high income housing either.

No.

Did not see a lot of signs. We did stop and look at a real estate office and found a nice selection.

There were some but not a lot of homes for sale.

No abundance but some. Plenty of apartments. No availability signs.

***If you can get easy access to some housing information from a local realtor or publication in the community, comment on range of housing costs...availability.***

Pierce Street – not so great.

Wide range & availability.

We stopped at local realtor's office. Receptionist did not have current ad for current properties for sale. We did receive other ads from this office.

No up to date or current listings.

## **10. SCHOOLS:**

*Try to view all the schools that exist in the community. Comment on the physical appearance of the buildings. (Do they appear to be adequate in size?)*

### ***Elementary:***

Third Street school appeared old and outdated.

Third St. Elementary looks a little rundown without much of a playground. Forest Street Elementary looks nice.

We saw three elementary schools, two appeared older and one newer. Each was fairly far from the other. Third St. school had minimal grassy area.

### ***Middle School:***

Seemed plenty large.

The Middle School/High School complex looks nice.

Looks new.

### ***High School:***

Good location, nice building.

Newer facilities.

Appeared to be new facility.

Is the administrative building the old high school?

Administrative office is a little rundown-Is there enough space for everything in it?

### ***Higher Education (Tech College):***

Didn't see.

Did not find—no signs & not found on Chamber map.

Nice front at WWTC in industrial park.

Good location, nice building.

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

No, received via mail in welcome packet, but no statistics.

One brochure included in relocation packet with general information; specific data was not published. Unsure of availability.

Boys & Girls Club offers a variety of educational and social opportunities.

## **11. FAITH / RELIGION:**

*Comment on the number of denominations represented in the community.*

Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic, Jehovah Witness

Cluster of churches at highest point in city, as is historically seen in many communities.

There appeared to be a good mix, Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Protestant all in one location of downtown.

*Provide commentary on the physical appearance of churches.*

All appeared in good shape, great landscaping. All clustered in location.

Condition and appearance of churches was very good.

Beautiful and all within a few blocks of each other.

*Are there any signs of church-sponsored community services (i.e. educational facilities, meeting facilities, food pantries)?*

The Chamber issued brochure on volunteer opportunities in the Black River Falls community indicated some church-based supported.

The community center at St. Joe's. Interfaith volunteer caregivers (joint church effort?)

## **12. CIVIC:**

*Does it appear as though there are a variety of non-profit organizations and clubs within the community? (comment):*

Noticed entrance to community sign typical small town clubs, Boys & Girls club, memorials well represented in buildings, philanthropy.

The Boys & Girls club is a very educational group, offering diversity and a knowledgeable staff.

The Extension office – 4H was very helpful.

So many attractive gardens in the community—could highlight this in your community advertising. We asked around to find that the Garden Club does it—what an asset to your community! There appears to be a lot of philanthropy in the community: Library dedication, Lunda park dedication, we heard that the hanging baskets downtown were all purchased by community members.

### **13. RESIDENTS:**

*Comment on friendliness and hospitality of community residents.*

Very friendly.

Storekeepers were friendly: especially Falls Florist, Antique shop owner, craft storeowner.

*In what ways did you find (or not find) people helpful? (i.e. community information, suggestions for dining, directions).*

Were able to receive directions to Chamber. Everyone recommended Molly's Grill for lunch. Are there any other good restaurants?

People were very helpful, warm and receptive.

Chamber office people were friendly & knowledgeable.

People were very friendly and helpful.

*How did people talk about their community? Schools, public leaders, community services?*

They seem very proud of their community.

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

Yes

*Did residents reflect the diversity that is represented in the rest of the country? (Age, income, ethnicity?)*

(No responses)

## **14. PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE:**

### ***Streets, street signing, lighting:***

Good directional signs, but colors (red & yellow) tough. Historic lighting downtown.

Yellow street signs are well camouflaged.

### ***Land Use Planning:***

No responses

### ***Sidewalks:***

Appeared to be in good shape, although maybe not as many streets with sidewalks. Streets lacking curbs.

Downtown sidewalks very clean.

### ***Public Restrooms:***

Never saw any downtown, storeowners offered their own bathrooms.

At Chamber Office and at Lunda Community Center

### ***City Hall:***

Newer facility & structure, entryway & large foyer

Not well signed, nice building (newer).

Friendly city clerk.

### ***Police/Emergency medical facilities:***

Fire Dept. was easy to find. Noticed trucks ready to go. Police Dept. was hard to find (in City Hall?)

### ***Library:***

Small but brand new and beautiful

### ***Landscaping:***

Gorgeous!

Impressed with flower beds near bridge.

### ***Other:***

City building behind the fairgrounds is very unattractive, but is hidden from main road. County fairground buildings could use some painting.

City shop is unattractive but well hidden. The animal shelter was unappealing also.

## **15. RECREATION / TOURISM:**

*Is the community well known for any particular attraction or event? Do they have a community slogan?*

“The Deer Capital of Wisconsin” – Mural on Gun Shop, Hardware store “Visit Historic Downtown”

*Comment on availability / selection of overnight accommodations (motels, B & B's, Resorts, Campgrounds).*

Strong emphasis on camping, fishing & outdoor activities – good availability of campgrounds and motels.

Plenty of hotels at I-94 exit and some downtown.

*Any indication of significant events taking place or scheduled? (Festivals, events, tours).*

Civil War Re-enactment Sept 11 & 12 (brochure) Flea Market Sept 4-5-6.

Very nice brochure that is updated on periodic basis.

*Are there any significant natural features that have the potential of drawing people? (Lakes, rivers).*

County & State Parks, the Black River.

River has great potential as an attraction.

Black River, Fishing was good but no referrals to places.

*Is there an obvious visitors center, Chamber of Commerce, Main Street or other facility that serves the needs of visitors? (Comment on staff, facility, signage, visibility)*

Inviting area, could pave the parking lot. Gravel...mud puddles. Well signed. Field of Honor.

Yes.

*Any restaurants, specialty shops or attractions that would bring you back?*

Merchant store.

Lunda Waterpark facility.

Referral to brewery tour and good attractions.

## **16. WRAP UP...USING SENSES**

*What did the community TASTE like?*

Food

Ice Cream

*What did the community SMELL like?*

All shops smelled great – fresh cut grass, food at restaurants.

Restaurants downtown, consignment craft shop smelled good.

Fresh cut grass and flowers at Lunda Park.

Brewery and paint.

Brewery, industrial park (woody), downtown restaurants (food).

*What SOUNDS did you hear?*

Traffic

Moving cars

Very quiet in residential areas

*Did you have experiences that impacted the way the community FEELS?*

Captive history, Restored buildings

Historic

Warm & Fuzzy, everyone was very helpful

Historical, Loyalty to our Troops & Country, Fresh—Gardens and landscaping throughout the community & downtown.

Empty-Where are the people? Historic buildings & signs, Traffic.

*List 5 most positive things you observed about the community:*

1. Landscaping (flowers & bushes) 2. Clean, no garbage or cigarette butts 3. Lack of taverns and bars  
4. Community focused (by comments from people) 5. Philanthropy – (museum, buildings, parks)

1. Support received from the people of BRF for library, rec center, etc. 2. Headquarters of Ho Chunk nation, casino.

1. Helpfulness 2. good parking 3. community focused 4. very scenic 5. Main Street very attractive

1. Landscaping 2. Friendly 3. Lack of bars or taverns – or marketing. Pharmacy – Red Wing pottery. 4. Historic feeling

1. friendly, knowledgeable 2. landscaping 3. clean – all neighborhoods clean. 4. lack of bars 5. River-community pride

1. Buildings downtown are attractive and blend together well. 2. Wonderful flower gardens. 3. Philanthropy 4. Beautiful aquatic center and park 5. County seat helps to keep a busy downtown.

## **16. WRAP UP (continued)**

*List the five biggest obstacles / challenges facing the community:*

1. Closed businesses out by The Pines. 2. Third Street Elem. School and Admin. Center appear to need updating. 3. Red signs with yellow arrows are hard to read until you get up close. 4. Yellow street signs are hard to find.

1. Lack of signage 2. Use of River – No public access 3. Number of entrances to city (6)

1. Accent the River-Utilize the River

1. Lack of signs 2. Downtown becoming less retail and more business.

1. Expanding industry in industrial park. 2. Continue to improve school district infrastructure 3. Continue to foster businesses which can compete alongside the “big box retailer” i.e. Wal-Mart.

1. Signage? Directions from major entrances. 2. Organization set up of city. 3. Use of River (accent it! Sports/Shops/Attractions) 4. Maintenance of public donated facilities 5. Many entrances to community (6)

*What will you remember most about this community six months from now?*

Community center, historic feel, Quaint, more inviting, clean, safe

Lunda Center Complex

The recreation park and aquatic center.

Clean, quiet, inviting.

Philanthropy

*Describe ONE idea that you will borrow.*

Encouraging the development of flowerbeds around the city.

The merchant board.

Community calendar brochure.

Merchant board (few fliers, etc). Renovate The Pines.



# First Impression Photo Journal

**Black River Falls**  
**August 31, 2004**

# Welcome to Black River Falls



Nice touch with  
Salute to troops  
and flag  
billboards!

# Finding Our Way Around Town

- ◆ Appreciated the directional light pole signs.
- ◆ The small print and color made them a little tough to read especially while driving!



# Visit to the Chamber



- ◆ Appreciated the welcome information at the BRF Chamber of Commerce.
- ◆ Thought the building & landscaping was nice, felt that a paved lot would have added to the impression!

# Historic Downtown

- ◆ Impressed with the downtown historic murals.
- ◆ Could they be developed into a downtown walking tour with printed map?



# Downtown Landscaping



◆ Impressed with the Downtown benches and landscaping.

Were told a volunteer group tends to the flowers!

# Cleanliness

◆ Felt the community was clean, despite the full trash container found downtown.



# Light Posts



◆ Liked the touch of nature and history with flowers on lamp posts.

# Downtown Alley

- ◆ For the most part, downtown buildings were in good shape.
- ◆ One alley near the bank took something away from our impression!



# Disappointed Arrival



◆ After seeing billboards for “The Pines” ...we were disappointed with what we found.

# Empty Lot



- ◆ This empty lot took something away from our very first look at the downtown, especially when we knew BRF was a Main Street Community.

# Great Idea

- ◆ Were impressed with the clever way to remind citizens and visitors that BRF is concerned with the environment and importance of a clean river.



# Retail Encouragement



- ◆ Thought it was great that one retailer was promoting Chamber Bucks.
- ◆ Felt the sign could have been more professional?

# BRF Philanthropy



- ◆ We heard a great deal about how donations helped pay for buildings and parks. Thought the library was very nice and a great way to pay tribute to contributors!

# Industrial Park



- ◆ Appreciated well laid out Industrial Park.
- ◆ Most industries were well identified.
- ◆ An advertised plot of land was hard to see since sign was down.

# Thanks



◆ Our Tomah 1<sup>st</sup> impressions Team appreciated the visit to Black River Falls.