



## First Impressions Revisited\*

A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

The Center For Community Economic Development

**Community Visited:** Ashland, Wisconsin

**Visit Completed by:** Merrill, Wisconsin

**Date of visit and time spent:** May 5, 2008 from 9:30 am – 4:00 pm

**Weather on date of visit:** 58 degrees and mostly sunny, beautiful spring day



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## The Merrill First Impressions Team

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## Summary of Conclusions

Toward the end of their visit, First Impression team members summarized primary conclusions about the city using the questions and the space provided in their program manuals. Part of their overall evaluation included analyzing a series of ratings they made related to some community aspects. Ratings were made on a scale of 1 to 10, with one being the lowest. In some cases, there was a high degree of consensus about whether a particular community aspect was strong or weak. In other cases, consensus did not exist. Ratings are shown beginning on page 11 in some of the more detailed sections of this report.

What follows directly below is a summary of team members' overall city assessment, their general impressions about the friendliness of residents, their surprises and disappointments, and the most important positive and negative aspects according to them about the community.

For the most part, team members were at least somewhat familiar with Ashland. Prior to the First Impressions assessment, most had either visited or at least passed through the city. Pages 8 and 9 of this report include a brief outline of team members' impressions of Ashland prior to their visit.

Besides the comments summarized in this section, general discussion on the way back from the trip did not reveal that team members had any "aha moments." However, most team members, as is also revealed in comments listed under several sections in this report, were somewhat surprised at the lack of comprehensive tourist type development along the Lake Superior shoreline. Many comments were made about the positive effects of the striking murals found on downtown buildings.



*Was your perception prior to the visit accurate? In what ways was the community different from what you expected?*

- Yes. The college and the hospital seem to be their own islands. Didn't see or sense much influence [in the city] from either.
- I thought Ashland would be a friendly and a very pretty community and it is.
- Did not differ much. More neat old buildings than I thought. Murals are a huge plus.
- My perception prior to the visit was fairly accurate. I was very surprised by the wonderful architecture.
- No. They have updated many buildings and streets.
- Bigger with more schools and hospitals [than I thought]. Airport can take in jets [surprised].

*What is the most outstanding feature of this community?*

- Northland College.
- Murals. Awesome!
- The lake opportunity.
- The lake, the architecture and beautiful murals throughout the downtown area.
- The unique buildings, murals, and Deepwater food and brewery.
- Proximity to Lake Superior.

*List the five most positive things you observed about this community.*  
(Responses are listed in rank order for each team member).

As can be discerned from the table on the next page, team members had somewhat different opinions about what are Ashland's most positive community aspects. However, it is worth noting that even though comments about the murals were mentioned in specific sections of the manuals, murals are not

mentioned below as one of the most positive things team members observed in Ashland. Rather, team members emphasized various downtown aspects (7 comments), Lake Superior (5 comments), education facilities (4 comments), health care services (3 comments), and friendly residents (3 comments).

1. Hospital/Health Care facility/campus	1. Friendly folks.	1.Preservation of old buildings	1. Beautiful lake front and view	1.Water front	1. People
2. Golf Course and Subdivision	2. Wide downtown sidewalks	2. Colleges	2. Appreciation and preservation of architecture	2. Walk paths	2. Medical Facilities
3. Northland College	3. Variety of goods in retail sector	3. Lake Superior	3. Nice downtown shopping district	3. Good downtown parking	3. Lake Superior
4. Airport	4. Awesome murals	4. Walking path	4. Good healthcare facilities	4. Plenty of places to stay	4. Schools
5. Monumental Building (in downtown)	5. Great opportunities because of location on Lake Superior	5. Hotels	5. Nice and friendly people	5. Great downtown	5. Downtown atmosphere
	6. Have a tech school and college				

*What are three potential opportunities available to the community?*  
 (Responses are listed in order for each team member).

Several comments made by team members as summarized in the table at the top of page 5 emphasize Lake Superior shoreline development (5 comments). The need for signage improvements in and around downtown was also emphasized (3 comments). Other comments relate to everything from improving the appearance of housing stock to creating additional amenities for a presumed aging population.

1. Improve appearance of some housing stock	1. A better detailed community profile about Ashland and make available through chamber. Detailed information is helpful to folks thinking about relocation (business or home)	1. Lake Superior	1. More development along the lake front	1. [Current] work on Highway 2 will improve perception of the city once completed	1. More signs for business district and to get to downtown
2. Improve businesses on Highway 2 that are in modest to mostly disrepair	2. Northland College: an area that potential new businesses could draw from as employee pool	2. Bike paths	2. Better road signage coming into and around town	2. Lake front could be better utilized for tourism and business	2. Develop old railroad pier
3. Exploit waterfront with more engaging assets	3. What is the average age of the population? What services are needed if aging population is significant and growing? Is this an opportunity?	3. Old depot building		3. Better signage could improve awareness about what to do and see	3. Repair road by industrial park in back. Gravel and widen. Fix pot holes (inside streets)

*What are the five biggest obstacles/challenges facing this community?*  
(Responses are listed in order for each team member).

A majority of the obstacles/challenges mentioned by team members in the table below refer in some aspect to the local economy as it relates to job/business development (12 of the 22 comments). Some comments, like the ones about the perceived aging infrastructure and housing stock, are also related at least peripherally to economic aspects.

1. Employment to maintain growth	1. Money for improvements	1. Big box stores	1. Dependence on tourism (especially with price of gas)	1. Aging housing stock	1. Fuel prices
2. Drawing new businesses to fill vacancies	2. Possibly the job economy	2. Aging infrastructure	2. Could use more manufacturing and industry	2. Determining appropriate balance of water front development	2. Loss of paper mill

3. Continued improvement of infrastructure		3. Economy	3. Current road construction is a short-term problem. Good for the long-term	3. Some tired looking commercial buildings adjacent to Highway 2	3. Keeping downtown businesses full an with uniform hours
4. Development of Lake front for business			4. Does Ashland have a brain drain of talent?		4. Getting through road construction on major highway
5. Identify bike paths better			5. Possible aging community like Merrill		

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

Many of these comments relate to the personal interests of each team member. As such, no overarching themes or patterns exist.

- Murals are great. Impatient grumpy drivers.
- The view of the lake. The downtown district. The beautiful buildings.
- Good dining.
- Friendly folks. Outstanding pride in downtown landscape (examples; murals, hanging flow baskets – saw photos).
- Deepwater Grill
- Old buildings.

*What have you learned here that has changed your impression of your own community?*

Most of the very general comments in the next three sections refer to some aspect of downtown Merrill that team members feel could be improved based on what they learned in Ashland.



- Our downtown seems smaller and we have not embraced the potential beauty of old downtown buildings.
- Appreciate our parks/conditions.
- Ideas to improve downtown. A beautiful downtown speaks volumes about a community.
- All buildings/properties matter in terms of image.
- Our downtown is a lot more spread out and we need to do more with the river.

*Has this experience given you any new ideas about what is needed in your own community?*

- Yes. We need to promote our quality of life more.
- Use of murals on blank brick walls would be definite improvement.
- No.
- Merrill could be more biker friendly. Bike racks added. We need attractive benches and garbage containers. Are murals on downtown buildings possible?
- Yes. Methodical effort to enhance building/properties throughout community. The streetscapes included something different and crisp.
- Yes. The murals are great to attract people downtown. They also help [improve] outsides of buildings.

*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.*

Most team members did not have specific thoughts about what they would like to see done immediately.

- Continue to improve Merrill's downtown hanging flower baskets.
- Finding out about murals and local painters to see how to get this started.



One of several attractive downtown murals.

## Prior to the Visit

Three days before they headed to Ashland, Merrill team members received training on how to conduct their First Impressions study. Andy Lewis, Community Development Specialist, University of Wisconsin – Extension, UW Madison, and Art Lersch, University of Wisconsin – Extension, Lincoln County conducted the training.

In addition to the First Impressions assessment tool, team members were provided with general information about Ashland from the city's official website. They also received a more detailed overview about the city provided by the City Data. com website. Chamber websites can often be somewhat biased in their attempts to "sell" all aspects of a given city. For this reason, no information was downloaded from the Ashland Chamber of Commerce website, although team members were encouraged to skim through it.

When answering the *questions "What is your impression of the community before your upcoming visit?" and "What are you expecting to see?"* First Impressions team members made the following observations, many of which at least referred to the city being located on the Lake Superior shore.

- Use of the lake (Superior). Tourism, lodging. Some old power manufacturing. Murals on buildings. Some interesting architecture.
- My first impression is that Ashland is a small town with a beautiful view of the lake. My impression is also that Ashland was once a booming

shipping town of ore, but the economy is now rather weak with few jobs available. It has a good reputation [and a] good college (Northland).

- Sits along the lake/pretty view. Some building and businesses look like they could use some new paint. Drove through on a delivery about 7-8 years ago.
- Know very little. But have heard and seen pictures of their lamppost hanging flower baskets – gorgeous! Have also heard about very pretty painted murals on buildings in their business district.
- Typical, generic small Wisconsin community. Worn out look from shrinking iron ore industry. Tired. Salvation (previous asset) is its location right on the shores of Lake Superior.
- Nice drive along the lake. Looked like old iron ore pier was abandoned. Flat and lots of construction. Older housing. Town has a hospital. Lots of hotels. Wildlife on lake.

## **Five Minute Impression**

The team traveled from one end of town to the other using Route 2 and going east to west. At the time of the team's visit, much of the central and western portions of the state route were under reconstruction. It is worth noting that the bustling downtown atmosphere witnessed by team members during their visit could largely be attributed to the rerouting of traffic off of Route 2. Normal Monday mornings and afternoons are not, at least according to several business owners, nearly that busy. It appeared that most of the traffic was just passing through, not interested in stopping at any of the downtown shops.

When asked the question in their First Impressions manuals *"After taking a five-minute drive through the community without stopping, what was your first impression?"* team members listed both "big ticket" and smaller items.

As noted in the "Prior to the Visit" section comments, the city's many murals and the lake front were immediately noticed by team members. Highway 2 construction was also noted by the members. Many of them saw the construction as a necessary and temporary evil that could lead to many downtown improvements that may, if done right, make the city even more attractive.

- Mass of billboard signs (both sides of Highway 2 and gaudy). Wal-Mart's front yard not crisp, a little tired looking in general. Signs identifying

- entrance on Highway 2 from west are nice. Rough housing stock exists on north side of Highway 2 coming from the east. The mural downtown facing Highway 2 to the south is a nice touch, but doesn't seem to be connected to anything else. The railroad trestle should be painted. Many un-garaged vehicles in older part of town.
- Many commercial signs – unsightly (Highway 2). Lots of fun, unusual stops. Road construction shows future improvements – was handled well as two lanes are open. Many beautiful viewpoints upon entering. Great bike shop? Any trails? Love the murals on buildings. Some vacant lots very unsightly and messy. Lake Superior views are gorgeous. Great variety of businesses along the main road.
  - Road construction like all other cities. Did nice job keeping streets open. Properties could use some new paint and or siding [especially on old houses]. I like the murals that lead you to the downtown. Long town like Merrill. Business variety exists. Lake Superior views are awesome. (Why is it red along the shore?)
  - Very beautiful view of the lake. Nice business area with newer businesses (Wal-Mart, Pamida, Do –it – Best, Ace). No clear cut signs to denote “downtown” business district coming in on Highway 2.
  - Looks very clean, a few rough spots (i.e. garbage in run off ditch by 9<sup>th</sup> street). Park on lake is well done with new growth trees. Yellow house by McDonald’s needs to be a different color! Pizza Hut not appealing to the eye. Lamp post/street lights on Highway 2 [are] very nice]. I would expect that the housing on the lake is a diamond in the rough (note: we did not travel downtown yet).
  - 8,620 people. Billboards and manufacturing. Curbs need work. Nice murals. One collapsed billboard. Beautiful lake front. Old piers along lake front. Power plant sticks out and mars the scenery – could be better adapted to the environment. Had to look for bike trail along the waterfront (could use better signage).

## **Community Entrances**

The team began its assessment of community entrances by critiquing the *Highway 2 entryway into the city from the east*. They each evaluated the overall appearance of the entryway by using a rating scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “poor” and “10” being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in

parentheses after each one's comments. An average team rating is also included below.

Most comments make note of the numerous billboards lining this particular entryway. The overall team impression of those billboards was negative, although members understand why they exist coming in from the east side of town (Michigan travelers could find them useful, etc.). Although several team members mentioned the billboards, only one seemed to find them overly offensive.

- Lots of billboards. Mix of industry and housing. AmericInn is very nice. Wal-Mart design is very appealing. Construction by lake. (7)
- Mass of billboards is overwhelming and gaudy. Rough looking housing stock. Major retailers' buildings okay. Properties not particularly neat or well kept. (3)
- Right on highway. (7)
- Billboards hide sites, could be better kept up. AmericInn [is a] nice building on the water front; lots of old metal and concrete along shore, could be cleaned up; liked the murals on buildings leading toward downtown (7)
- Very inviting (bank??) on left with artesian well. Construction on Highway 2 which was completed – is very nice with turning lane. This will look nice with completion of [rest of] Highway 2 construction. Good signs showing "access to local business" coming in on Highway 2 east. (7)
- Curbs need work – are in disrepair; Wal – Mart looks new; old pier still there (6)

Average rating = **6.17**



### *Highway 2 from the West:*

For the most part, team members on average felt that this was the most attractive entrance leading into town.

Although all team members thought this entrance was much better than acceptable, most took note of one collapsed billboard which seemed to drive their rating scores a bit lower than they

could have been. Thus, one seemingly small weakness can lessen the overall impression of a particular area.

- Very nice John Deere dealership and looks progressive. Lots of billboards on north side all in one location – far too many to read, takes away from beauty. Nice park on the north side. (6)
- Nice looking Ashland entrance sign. Park on lakefront is well maintained. Lamp posts very nice looking. Should fix tipped over billboard. (8)
- Right on highway. (8)
- Ashland granite sign and entrance is nice. Hedges okay. Broken down billboard on south side of Highway 2. (7)
- Appears more tourist like. Skyline is basically smokestacks. Tipped billboard. (8)
- Collapsed billboard. Directional signage is fair. No promotion of Ashland. (6)

Average rating = **7.17**

### *Highway 112 from the South:*

Nearly all team members instantly noticed the cemetery on both sides of the road. Lake Superior in the distance was also noticed and a majority of team members seemed to feel that it could easily help to make people curious about the town that was ahead. However, most members thought that of all the

entryways this one could need the most improvement. Overall, there was a wide range of opinions about this entryway, with most members evaluating it in the fair to poor range. This entrance received the lowest average rating.

- Not as scenic. More accumulation of junk in yards. Cemetery is well kept. Can see the lake [traveling north] – would be nice to expand view. Trucking lot at 112 and 137 [corner] should be shielded. (4)
- Framed nicely with lake ahead. Cemetery on both sides creates a consistent look. Nice potential if well kept. Some rough looking housing stock. No identification of Ashland coming in. (5)
- Have a Hugos Pizza and Yummy. Has bike trail. Nice wooded lots. New development/housing. Pretty view of Lake Superior. Cemetery areas are pretty. (8)
- Cemetery fence needs repair. Beautiful view of lake ahead. Place on left (small engine shop) could use a fence or clean up. Lennox Building needs new paint to freshen it up. Nice bike trail. (6)
- Nice bike trail off of railway [line]. Gorgeous view of lake coming in on 112. (6)
- Huge cemetery on both sides of the road is well maintained. Sand pit nicely wooded [and] is large. Rude driver in oil burning truck [excessive exhaust]. Mixed business and residential. (4)

Average rating = **5.5**

*Highway 137 from the West First and Then from the East:*

Most team members took note of the new housing development surrounding the golf course and thought that this was an attractive area. Several saw an attractive DNR (Department of Natural Resources) building along the route. Although it is not illustrated that much within the comments, several team members thought that the trucking business along the road was quite unsightly and could stand some improvement. An unattractive business near an entryway, they commented during discussion, could detract from overall impressions of the city.

- Nice homes and golf course. Nice DNR facility. Road very rough entering town. Bike path along old rail line is poorly marked. (6)

- Very good impressions near golf course. Nice newer subdivisions. Nice DNR building. X-Treme sign and graphics was a bit of an eye sore. A good coat of paint and clean up would help. Nice bike trail on old railway line coming in on 112. (6)
- Housing very clean. Trucking place on left [coming into town] could use fence. Graphics place needs building fixed (hole). Golf course has nice signage and houses/some need paint. Alternate Route 2 signs for food and lodging are good. Rough road in spots. Old homes similar to Merrill – many are very well kept, some need improvements. Are there community block grant possibilities? Historic school – CESA 9. Street cleaners out – shows great street maintenance. Beautiful community park. (7)
- Nice DNR building. Pretty golf course (is it for sale?). Pleasant homes and new construction very nice. (8)
- DNR building/new and nice looking. Golf course and new housing adds to pleasant approach. (7)
- Golf course and housing are well kept. Housing changes drastically after crossing 112. Lumber piles and junk vehicles. After 17<sup>th</sup> [street'] older homes in nice shape. No sidewalks on 6<sup>th</sup> and many side roads at 1<sup>st</sup>. (5)

Average rating = **6.5**

*Highway 13 from the South:*

Since the First Impressions manual does not request that a rating be given to this category, one team member failed to provide one. If provided, ratings are in parenthesis after the comments. The average rating for five team members is at the end of the comments.

Based primarily on the comments and the average rating below, overall the team thought that this entrance to the city was nearly as attractive as the Highway 2 West Entrance, although one team member clearly did not agree.

Comments for this entryway were more glowing than those made for the Highway 2 West area, even though the latter's rating was slightly higher. According to the team, the Northland College grounds do much to enhance the appearance of the Highway 13 south entrance. Surprisingly, only one person mentioned the jet service airport, a unique feature for a city this size. This was the case even after the entire team visited the facility and spoke to its manager.

- Nice homes. [Northland] College looks very nice. Good signs for temporary detours. Beautiful street lamps. Fire hydrants need painting. (8)
- Best entrance. Housing stock in better condition – consistent. The Victorian stock helps. Large clear blue sign showing “Shopping Ahead.” Beauty of college adds [to area]. Intersection of 13 and 137 two to three blocks in all directions appears to be the nexus. Some nice newer buildings. Architecture is reasonably well themed. Sufficient open lots for fill in buildings and additional businesses. Light posts style enhances [the entrance].
- Northland College campus is outstanding – same themed brick exterior on old and new buildings. Vacant areas – opportunities for new growth. Like old fashioned lampposts. Probably have banners and flowers [on lampposts] in season. (8)
- Wide streets. Like grass median and lighting. Beautiful Northland College entrance and buildings in Ashland. Middle school well maintained. Great shopping area signs. Would like to see decorative sign for city’s nicest entrance. Small building past NAPA needs work. Beautiful old buildings. (8)
- Very nice small airport – airport personnel very friendly, helpful and knowledgeable. Nice entrance into the community. Nice view of Northland College and the lake. Beautiful grass center median with old fashioned light posts. Good signage to business areas. (7)
- Could use a “Welcome to Ashland” sign. College campus is beautiful and noticeable. Lack of directional signs. Hard to determine civic locations or attractions. (4)

Average rating = 7

## **Housing and Residential Areas**

The First Impressions study group chose to focus their efforts on a few well stocked residential areas. The comments and ratings below reflect their overall views of housing stock and residential areas based on the few neighborhoods that were assessed.

*How would you rate the overall quality, affordability and availability of housing in the community?*

Raw Ratings = 7, 8, 4, 8 (two members failed to provide individual ratings).

Average Rating = **6.75**

Team members used the same rating scale to evaluate the overall quality of various housing types. The results are in the table below.

Category	Existing Older Homes	New Homes	Housing for Seniors	Apartments/ Rental	Vacant lots for New Homes
Raw Ratings	7, 3, 8, 8, 7, 6	8, 9, 7, 10, 7, 8	8, ?, ??, 9, 8, 7	9, 5, 9, 7, 7, 6	6, 4, 8, 9, 7, 3
Average Rating	<b>6.5</b>	<b>8.17</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>7.17</b>	<b>6.16</b>

Observations –

- Wide range of style and quality.
- Great mix – noticed elder homes into apartments. Older homes well kept. Per Buyers Guide – mix of prices low to very high.
- Like any town some older homes need tender loving care. New homes good area by golf course and lake view.
- Appears to be adequate housing for seniors.
- Older housing shows signs of needing minor maintenance – paint, shingles, garages, windows, etc.

*Is there an adequate mix of housing to suit a variety of income levels?*

- Seems to be upscale or below average – not a lot of middle market stock.
- Seems to be per real estate publications.



Type of home most typically found in the older residential areas of the city.

- Seems to be quite a price selection and availability.
- Yes. Many older houses have been converted to multi – tenant. Small to large housing is available.

*Availability:*

In the table below, there was a wide discrepancy in ratings provided in the “new home category” with regard to availability. There seemed to be consensus that Ashland’s existing older home stock was quite strong, although one person mentioned that he thought it looked cramped. There was also some difference of opinion about the availability of vacant lots for new homes. At least a couple team members thought that the city lacked good buildable vacant lots. Several people took note of the unusual backyard alleys in the older residential areas.

Category	Existing Older Homes	New Homes	Housing for Seniors	Apartments/ Rental	Vacant lots for New Homes
Raw Ratings	7, 7, 7, 7, 9, 8	4, 9, 9, 7, 2, 8	6, 7, 8, 5, ?, 8	5, ?, 7, 7, 4, 9	4, 7, 8, 7, 2, 7
Average Rating	7.5	6.5	6.8	6.4	5.8

Observations –

- Room to grow in outlying areas. Inner city seems full. Lots of realtor signs.
- Appears to be lots of housing.
- Golden Center is in great location. No [identifying] sign by [senior housing] closest to Highway 2 and Highway 137 (one by high school is well maintained and signed). Most older homes are well maintained. New homes by golf course and in town are well done. Most lots are outside of city by golf course. Homes for sale could have information [posted].
- Assisted living homes – some not clearly marked as such. Done fairly close to downtown – a plus if you don’t need [to provide] a lot of care.
- Not much variety of lots for new construction. Multiunit rentals appear 30 – 40 years old. Guessing that a lot of the rentals are up/down duplexes.

- Did not see a lot of new homes for sale.

*What are the most appealing and least appealing features of the housing in this community? Why?*

- Many of the older housing looks small and cramped. Newer housing is impressive. Senior housing looks good except for warehousing.
- I liked the alleys. They seemed to help house fronts look neater and cleaner. Also, power lines in alleys make neighborhoods cleaner. Some streets have sidewalks, some don't – does not appear to be a clean plan. I witnessed a lot of renovations on some older homes – nice to see. Some very beautiful older homes.
- Has good housing for elderly. Good mix between old and new homes for family housing. Has good apartment rentals downtown and duplex rentals. Some need to clean up their yards and to apply a coat of fresh paint. Alleys are nice to keep garbage off main streets and [out of] garages in back of downtown homes.
- Well kept older homes. Always neat and electric poles are on the ally side. Garbage well stored/kept off street pickup in ally (cool!)
- Very interesting homes – some may need a bit of a facelift.
- Most: new homes appear to be unique, custom and well built. Heavy stock of older homes generally below average in appearance and appeal.
- Alleys not paved in older section. No sense of a sidewalk plan. Some beautiful well restored old homes – those that are duplex rental/multifamily does not stick out.



A backyard alley typically found in older residential sections.

*Please comment on the quality and availability of residential infrastructure (e.g. roads, sidewalks, lighting, public transportation, bike trails/lanes, green space, street trees, and yards).*

- Side roads need attention. Few street lights in neighborhoods. Lack of sidewalks. Interesting mix of fire hydrants.
- Except for golf course and south new hospital area, which is newer upscale housing – rest is very mixed with some run down, others modest. No real crisp looking older and upscale [housing].
- Noticed bike trail near downtown. Some streets [lack] sidewalks. Did not see bike trail signage (How long?; Where to begin and end? etc.) Nice parks.
- Some roads are rough – after winter need pothole repair. Fire hydrants should be painted all one color. And walking paths great for downtown. Great little town with lots to offer residents and [people passing through].
- Many residential roads were rough. Tough winter I am sure. Saw some nice walking trails in downtown residential area.
- No rhyme or reason to sidewalks. Yards and alleys appear well maintained. Bike/walk path not clearly marked. Why is every fire hydrant in a different color?

*Appeal:*

Team participants provided consistent ratings in the “young families” and “middle income categories” indicating that consensus of opinion was reached. Based on the ratings, consensus of opinion was not reached related to the other categories. Most team members believe that housing geared toward attracting “single/young adults” should be increased.

Category	Single/Young Adults	Senior Citizen	Young Families	Upscale/ Professional	Middle Income
Raw Ratings	7, 1, 5, NR, 5, 4	8, 3, 5, 9, 7, 6	7, 6, 5, NR, 7, 6	6, 3, 8, NR, 9, 7	8, 8, 7, NR, 7, 7
Average Rating	4.4	6.3	6.2	7	7.4

## Observations -

- Golf course development area very nice. I would think middle income would be interested in the nice [fixer-upper] homes for restoration.
- Oldest stock appears run down. Middle stock is mixed between family (well kept and unkept).
- Newer stock appears fairly custom – not much new available.
- Available lots near golf course and available duplexes.
- Near downtown if you enjoy older homes there are many excellent, well kept ones. Or, you can choose newly built in out lying areas. Seems to be many choices for all types of tastes. Inviting! Per Buyers Guide there is a big price and quality difference. Downtown looks like mixed used with apartments above stores. Wide sidewalks. Only some streets have sidewalks. Most neighborhoods were very neat which implies to me that there is pride in neighborhoods. Looks to be a safe community.
- New subdivisions near golf course very nice and upscale. Planning of subdivision streets prevents through traffic which is nice for homes.
- Some nice large tract homes. Apartments are good.

## Education

(Note: Most members did not see the city's elementary or middle schools).

Most members were impressed with the proximity of the high school near the technical college. They felt that this facilitates learning in technology and other "hands on" related fields.

### *High School*

- Excellent location next to technical college.
- New building is well maintained. There is room for expansion. Location next to the technical college is a good fit.
- Newer, clean and very nice looking. School is conveniently located across road from technical school (fosters learning opportunities for high school).

- Located close to technical college and medical center. Travel obviously not a barrier to cross/use training.
- Very nice.

*College/University*

- Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College (WITC). Northland College – great campus.
- Northland College – very beautiful.
- Northland College is a beautiful setting and has a wonderful entrance. Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College by hospital and high school is a good location. Fire training offered at technical college.
- Northland College and WITC. Great post secondary educational opportunities in your own town!
- Very attractive Northland College campus.
- WITC – Northland College.

*Overall, how would you rate the adequacy of schools for a community of this size?*

Each team member evaluated the overall adequacy of schools by using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “poor” and “10” being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one’s comments. Two team members chose not to comment but provided ratings of 6 and 8. The average team rating is also included below. One team member did not fill in the rating or make comments.

- Community appears to invest in education. (6)
- Size appeared to be relevant. (7)
- Has WITC and Northland College. Talked with soon to be graduate of Northland College. She really appreciated having the college available in town. This was the reason she could afford a college education. (9)

Average Rating = **7.2**

## **Health Care Services**

*Comment on the availability and apparent quality of healthcare facilities.*

All team members were impressed with Ashland's health care campus. Generally, they commented that it is very convenient for residents to access ("one stop" health care), were impressed with the range of services offered there, and liked its location near the technical college and the high school. Those who spoke to staff were impressed with their knowledge of the facilities and their cordial attitude toward potential customers. Team members also thought that the facility is user friendly.

- Memorial Medical Center Facility is excellent and well staffed. Good peripheral medical services. Staff were very cordial and helpful.
- Excellent, up to date health care at Memorial Medical Center. Very nice that medical offices and hospital were all connected. Lots of cars in parking lot, but didn't appear to be overcrowded inside. Lots of good jobs within the medical field I would presume.
- Very nice building has out buildings with other services. All on same grounds. Inside there is a nice reception/waiting area. Very clean.
- New – parking lot full. [Hospital] is right by clinic and cancer care facility. Friendly staff. One stop health care – well thought out planning.
- Very nice – very convenient with specialty clinics attached adjacent to the hospital itself. Very good availability of specialties including ENT, ortho., vision and cancer.
- Very nice facility/clean and modern; WI/FI set up; staff helpful and friendly.



*Physician, dentist, optometrist and other medical offices and clinics:*

- Good location – together in one complex area.
- Supporting and specialist clinics; adjacent and physically connected to hospital – convenience.
- Medical clinic by hospital complex, also urology, physical therapy and behavior medicine; all located in same medical area.
- Six dental facilities; eight general and specialized medical facilities; three eye care clinics; two orthopedic clinics.

*Overall, how would you rate the adequacy of health care services for a community of this size?*

Team members evaluated the overall adequacy of health care services by using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “poor” and “10” being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one’s comments. Some members chose not to comment. Their ratings are listed below the comments section. An average team rating is also included below.

- Citizens spoke with pride about their health care system. Specialty doctors fly [directly into] airport (9)
- The hospital is impressive. (7)

Ratings provided without additional comments (7, 8, 7, 7; one person did not provide a rating).

Average Score = **7.5**

## **Local Economy**

*What is your impression of the local economy?*

- Seems to be holding its own. A lot of the small shops were not open.
- My impression is that the economy is okay. But, [likely] does not offer higher paying jobs.
- Well laid out. Nice, wide sidewalks.
- Moderate to good.
- Modest. Only construction in progress was on streets and one tear down that appeared staged for rebuild.
- Seems to be doing average – to better.

### ***Downtown***

For the most part, the average downtown category ratings were higher than most other evaluated categories. In general, team members were impressed with the downtown. Comments about signage found in the downtown were mostly negative and the ratings for that category were below that of most other categories in this section.

*Could you locate the downtown easily? If not, why did you have difficulty finding it?*

- Yes.

- Even though some entrances were not well marked, it seemed that all roads led to the downtown area.
- Visited Deep Water Café, Ashland Jewelry, and a factory outlet furniture [complex]. Found [the downtown] by looking off of Highway 2. Could have better signs on the entrances to point to downtown.
- Highway goes right through the downtown. Variety of local shops. Long downtown that is mostly occupied and well taken care of.
- Yes.
- No problems.

*Rate and comment on the overall appearance of the downtown (buildings, displays, signage, streetscape).*

Team members evaluated the overall appearance of the downtown by using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being "poor" and "10" being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one's comments. One team member chose not to comment. That person rated the overall appearance of the downtown a "7." An average team rating is also included below.

- The murals are a very nice addition [that are] funded through donations. (7)
- I was impressed with the overall appearance of the downtown area. I enjoyed looking at the old architecture and felt many businesses embraced the [older style] and made it fit. The old street lamps and stamped brick in the sidewalks helped enhance the old time look. (8.5)
- Every store [personnel] was helpful and friendly. Great outside building appearance. (8)
- Wide sidewalks. Plenty of store – side parking. (Excellent) → lots of benches and garbage cans. Effective mix of exterior shops. Unique look – mix of historic older buildings and new buildings. (8)
- Did not care for mix of street lights or plywood windows in office bar. (8)
- The downtown appears to have many 'monumented' [historical] buildings still in place. Most of the facades are near original detail of varying levels

of condition, but generally well preserved. As most are part of the downtown retail/office sector, they are reasonably well maintained.

Average Rating = **7.75**



*Rate and comment on the customer service you received in the downtown.*

Team members evaluated the customer service they received in the downtown by using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being "poor" and "10" being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one's comments. One team member chose not to comment or provide a rating. An average team rating is also included below.

- Excellent. Everyone was open and helpful. People in the shops took the time to listen and then respond. (8)
- I was greeted by most businesses with a warm hello and perceived wonderful customer service. I visited one power tool store Axel's. I entered and said "Hello." Three gentlemen looked, never said a word and laughed as I walked out. Service at the Deep Water Grille for lunch was excellent! Great brewing tour. (8)

- Everyone asked if they could help. Some didn't bother to actually get up to help or make small talk to make you feel welcome. Some really gave honest, friendly hellos that made you feel like you wanted to make a purchase. (6)
- All contacts I had were pleasant to ordinary. (8)
- Store employees were all very helpful and friendly. (10)

Average Rating = **8**

*Rate and comment on the signage in the downtown.*

Team members evaluated downtown signage by using a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being "poor" and "10" being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one's comments. One team member chose not to comment or provide a rating. One chose not to provide a comment but gave a score of "7." An average team rating is also included below.

- Poor directional signs (i.e. airport, schools, etc.). Too many billboards, especially at ground level. (4)
- Noticed some. Because of detours, however, appeared to lack permanent signage to places of interest/needs. (5)
- Hard to see signage and which stores existed when looking down Main St. (5)
- Hard to see a lot of the signs as they are flat on [front of store walls]. (4)



Average Rating = **5**

*Rate and comment on the window displays in the downtown.*

Team members evaluated the downtown window displays by using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being "poor" and "10" being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one's comments. One team member

chose not to comment or provide a rating. An average team rating is also included below.

- Good, although many stores are closed for some reason. (7)
- Good variety. Pleasant electric [eclectic?] mix of tastes – neat! (7)
- Bob's Outlet Furniture had Plexiglas windows [that were] hard to see in. Other stores had very nice displays and stuff on sidewalks from business (the New England Store). (8)
- Displays were okay. Nothing spectacular. (6)
- Well thought out and makes a good window shopping stroll. (7)

Average Rating = **7**

*Rate and comment on the variety and quality of merchandise in the downtown.*

Team members evaluated the quality of merchandise found in the downtown by using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being "poor" and "10" being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one's comments. One team member chose not to comment or provide a rating. An average team rating is also included below.

- Great variety [and] neat specialty shops. (8)
- Seemed to be great variety of downtown shops. All services seemed to be provided. For example shoes, clothes for all, gifts, taverns, food, jewelry, furniture, etc. Could make a day of shopping? (8)
- Theatre. Awesome mural on side and great front entry. Old signs cool for small towns. (8)
- A very long downtown area with many choices of businesses. (8)
- Broad spectrum of goods and services. No computer store. (6)

Average Rating = **7.6**

*Comment on the mix of facilities and services in the downtown (housing, professional services, retail, recreation, accommodation, and food, industry, parks, etc.)*

- Seemed a good mix of specialty stores, banks, other professional services. Not much choice in restaurants. Yet, Deepwater Grill exceeded expectations.
- Good mix. Some facades/fronts need to match old beautiful brick fronts.
- Deep Water Grill is where we ate – these folks know how to treat customers! Excellent service [included the ability to joke around and knowledge of beer brewing]. Seemed like great mix downtown of retail and professional and financial services. Trouble finding industrial park. Did not see signs to it.
- Lots of great sitting and writing areas along with murals. Lighting was very nice. City Hall very neat outside and inside to match historic downtown.
- A mix of rental housing and professional offices.

*Rate and comment on the quality and availability of parking in the downtown.*

Team members evaluated downtown parking by using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “poor” and “10” being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one’s comments. An average team rating is also included below.

- Street parking is adequate. (5)
- Even with detours parking was good. (8)
- Store front parking lots – looked like enough. (8)
- Great street parking and lots on side of Main Street. (8)
- There was ample parking on main street and the side streets. I did not notice much in public parking. (8)
- Good, easy parking. (7)

Average Rating = **7.3**

*Rate and comment on the quality (appearance, adequacy, etc.) of lighting in the downtown.*

Team members evaluated downtown lighting by using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being "poor" and "10" being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one's comments. One team member chose not to comment or provide a rating. Another two chose not to provide ratings. An average team score is also included below.

- Daytime visit. (No rating provided)
- See streetlight comments. (6)
- Trip during the day so didn't see lighting. Mix of old fashion and up to date light posts – probably for lightness intensity. Looked like poles can accommodate flowers and banners; must be very attractive when up. (8)
- I like the old fashioned light posts downtown. But, they didn't match real well with the newer modern lighting on Main Street downtown. (9)
- Only saw in daylight.

Average Rating = **7.7**

*Would you find the downtown to be a desirable place to live?*

- Could be if any of the historic buildings had large apartments.
- I would find it desirable to live in [the downtown] with the potential/great views of the downtown and the lake.
- I would. Lots to see and do. Variety of shopping.
- Not unless they were developed further (condos, etc.).
- Probably not.

*Were there any government or nonprofit organization activities that are serving as traffic generators for the downtown (city hall, post office, YMCA)?*

- Yes. City Hall. Post office and other government offices.

- Yes. Post office. City Hall and historical museum.
- Saw historic museum downtown. Neat public library is downtown. City hall and post office are located downtown.
- Post office and city hall located downtown.
- None observed.

*Describe the mix of retail shopping available (malls, specialty shops, strip malls, big boxes).*

- Mostly downtown stores with only one mall area which contained national brands.
- Adequate.
- Saw a Wal-Mart "mall" area which looked new and appealing. Didn't appear to be very busy.
- Mostly downtown shopping with a couple of big box stores – Wal-Mart and Pamida.
- Big box on the edge of town. New strip mall.

*What stores or services were missing that you would expect to find?*

- Men's clothing
- Didn't see many grocery stores convenient to downtown and main drag.
- More supermarkets.

*What retail stores or services did you find that were unusual or unexpected for a town this size?*

- Deepwater Grill, college and airport.
- Loved the micro – brewery. The downtown library is a neat feature.

- I was surprised that for the small population of Ashland that it had a great mix of goods. Tells me locals support local businesses.
- Excellent micro – brewery/restaurant and excellent bakery with fresh bread.
- Used furniture store on Main Street.

*What store (s) in this community would you travel a distance of more than 30 miles to patronize?*

- Clock repair shop, but it was closed.
- Would travel to visit Deep Water Grill. Had some great little gift stores.
- Microbrewery and downtown movie theater. Maybe even the Ashland Bakery.
- Shoe store. Wal-Mart (none closer). South shore brewery.

*Rate and comment on the overall condition of the retail sector.*

Team members evaluated the condition of the retail sector using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “poor” and “10” being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one’s comments. Two team members chose not to comment or provide ratings. One chose to provide only a rating. That rating was “8.” An average team score is also included below.

- Liked the mix. Very few empty shops. Would be excellent if non – conforming store fronts would remove steel siding. (8)
- Murals really make it outstanding. (8)
- Too many closed or empty shops. (5)

Average Rating = **7.25**

***Other Retail Shopping Areas (e.g. Malls, Big Box Stores, etc.)***

*If applicable, explore other retail shopping areas outside of the downtown business district and visit as many businesses as possible.*

*Retail Area #1:*

Team members evaluated the overall appearance of the mall (Wal – Mart) area using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “poor” and “10” being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one’s comments. Two team members chose not to comment or provide ratings. One chose to provide a rating only. That rating was “5.” An average team score is also included below.

- Nice decision [to construct] a new Wal-Mart. (6)
- I’m not a fan of Wal-Mart but the local superstore had a very nice and unique appearance. (10)
- Good design but still a Wal-Mart. (8)

Average Rating = **7.25**

*Rate and comment on the customer service of businesses you visited.*

Team members evaluated customer service (mostly in the downtown area) using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “poor” and “10” being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one’s comments. One team member chose not to comment or provide a rating. An average team rating is also included below.

- Jewelry store. Real estate office. Deepwater Grill. All very helpful and engaged. (8)
- Everyone was helpful and very friendly. Even got a brewery tour. (10)
- The Wal-Mart area looked neat and inviting. (7)
- Customer service was friendly. (9)
- Very friendly and helpful. (7)

Average Rating = **8.2**

*Rate and comment on the variety and quality of merchandise.*

Team members evaluated the variety and quality of merchandise using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being "poor" and "10" being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one's comments. Two team members chose not to comment or provide ratings. An average team score is also included below.

- Did not see junky merchandise. (9)
- Same as downtown questions. (8)
- Good selection and inventory. (9)
- There was a variety of goods but nothing really extraordinary. (6)

Average Rating = **8**

### ***Local Industries***

Team members thought that the location of the industrial park was adequate but thought it needed to be better marked. There were no signs to indicate where the park is. Many felt that this was not conducive to growth in the park, something which seemed to be possible considering the amount of seemingly vacant land in the area.

*What are the major industrial sectors in the community (e.g. manufacturing, construction, transportation)?*

- Manufacturing: Bretting; Pifer Conversion Equipment; Larson Juhl – Picture frames and components; Ashland Industry – road construction equipment
- Bretting and industrial park.
- One large manufacturer that makes paper mill parts. Must be largest employer?
- Northland College, hospital, and Bretting Inc.

*Who do you think are the major employers in the community?*

- Bretting Manufacturing, hospital/health care and Northland College
- Northland College, hospital, and Bretting Inc.
- Bretting
- The paper mill equipment manufacturer plus the medical community must be a major player in employment.
- Bretting, Delta, city/county. Also the power plant.



*What are the major types of primary industry in the community (e.g. agriculture, mining, forestry or fishing)?*

- Manufacturing seems to be it.
- Manufacturing and forestry.
- Agriculture and mining (past) are evident. Looks like lots of forest area. Many fishing opportunities on Lake Superior. Tourism industry is a draw.
- Forestry, fishing, agriculture.

*Is there a well defined industrial park or improved land where industries could locate or expand?*

- Yes.

- Not well defined. No signage and poor access.
- Industrial park was hard to find. Vacant land could be industrial.
- Not signed well. Back road need to be worked on. Plenty of room for expansion.
- Yes, but the industrial park was hard to locate.

*Are the industrial facilities well maintained?*

- Okay to very nice.
- Seemed to be.
- Yes. But, Delta Plastic could use some clean up.
- Some of the roads were not asphalt. Some of the surrounding area was not well kept.

*Would this community be an attractive location for industrial development? Why or why not?*

- Relatively inexpensive land would probably be the main draw. Geographic location would probably be a drawback for a company [looking to relocate].
- Close to major highway but did not have curb appeal.
- I would think so – available property. Is the workforce for businesses steady? Available?
- Yes. Waterway for transportation. Rail and major highways [also accessible]. Depending on what it is and where it is going, could cost too much if it used to be trucked.

*What commercial services appear to be missing in the community?*

- None I can think of.
- Computer services.

- Auto dealerships – only saw one of any size.

### ***Professional Services***

- Yes.
- Plenty to choose from. Good hours!
- Noticed ATMs. Convenient locations.

*How would you rate the adequacy of financial services for a community this size?*

Team members evaluated the adequacy of financial services using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “poor” and “10” being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one’s comments. One team member chose not to comment or provide a rating. One team member provided a rating without comments. That rating was “8.” An average team rating is also included below.

- Beautiful architecture in downtown banks. (9)
- Good looking buildings. Plenty to choose from. Helpful [people]. (9)
- Saw two or three close to downtown. (7)
- Seemed above average. (7)

Average Rating = **8**

*What other professional services are available (accounting, insurance, legal, etc.)? Are there any apparent gaps?*

- Title companies – insurance – banks legal are downtown.
- A number of title, appraisal and realtor offices.

## ***Tourism***

*Does the community have a strong tourism sector? Please comment.*

- Yes.
- Lake Superior fishing, recreation and shops.
- Because of our time of visit, tourism was not strong. However, appears come Memorial Day it will take off full speed.
- Yes. From local shopping stores to antiques, Wal-Mart, Pamida, fishing shops, bike rentals, multiple gift shops.
- Not sure. Some local businesses didn't feel they had big tourism.

*Does the community have a slogan/brand?*

"Lake Superior's Home Town" is the slogan listed on the chamber's web site. However, team members clearly felt that it was not displayed in town prominently enough. None saw the slogan displayed anywhere, indicating that the city could do a much better job of promoting this attractive tagline.

- Didn't see one.
- Not that I could tell.
- Didn't see any.
- Did not see one.

*What have you seen that could be developed into a tourist attraction (natural or man – made)?*

The first comment ignores the existence of the Hotel Chequamegon.

- The bay could be exploited more with recreational hotel or housing. Maybe more extensively appropriate parks (things for kids, etc.).
- Bike paths/trails. Use lake frontage for restaurant, deck and/or marina.
- Opportunities along shoreline.

- The pier could be a tourist attraction.

*Rate and comment on the quality and appearance of existing tourist attractions.*

Team members evaluated the quality and appearance of existing tourist attractions using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being "poor" and "10" being excellent. Ratings for team members are included in parentheses after each one's comments. Two team members chose not to comment or provide ratings. One team member provided a rating without comment. That rating was "8." An average team rating is also included below.

- Downtown [is an] excellent draw. (5)
- Band shell and parks. (8)
- Most of buildings that appeared to be tourist driver seemed a little tired. (4)

Average Rating = **6.25**

*Do you consider any of the attractions to be underdeveloped? Please comment.*

- Store front/building being saved for more new development.
- Lakefront.
- Lakefront.
- Waterfront.

## **Information from Community Residents**

*Were community residents knowledgeable about their community?*

Team members who spoke to residents thoroughly enjoyed those conversations. Overall, they found residents to be kind and helpful.

- Yes.
- Yes. Especially [exhibited] pride in the city's heritage and its murals.

- Yes.
- Yes. People were very outgoing and talkative.

*Did they refer you to someone else who would help?*

- Yes.
- Most could help me themselves.
- They did.
- No.

*In general, did residents you spoke with have a positive or negative attitude toward their community? Why? Did you sense community pride?*

- Attitude seemed neutral. "Pride" did not jump out in my conversations.
- Most were positive! Special pride in Ashland murals.
- Positive. Said residents supported [Ashland] businesses.
- They like the community and where they live. Everyone I talked to was positive and Ashland Jewelry said they have a great Main Street community.
- Positive attitude.

*Overall, how would you rate the quality of information from community residents and business employees?*

Ratings were: 7, 8, 8, 7, 7

Average Rating = **7.4**

*Did you experience anything that had a strongly negative or positive impact on the way the community felt to you?*

- Yes. Rude pickup driver was angry because we were going slower then she [deemed necessary].
- We were driving slow looking at the hospital. The driver behind us got angry, honked and sped away.
- Mostly friendly people.
- Impatient drivers.
- Positive. Lots of hellos and friendly conversations! We met two vehicles that thought we were going too slowly.
- Honking drivers – people not strongly engaged.