

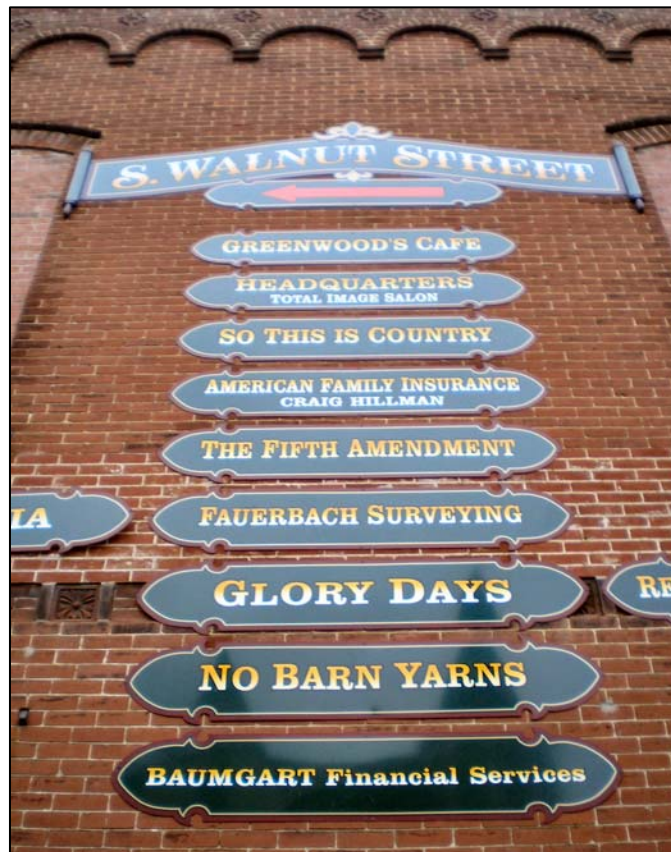


First Impressions Revisited*

A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

The Center For Community Economic Development

Reedsburg, Wisconsin



November 29, 2006

10:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Visit Completed by Monroe, Wisconsin

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



First Impressions Revisited: A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

February 20, 2007

Dear Reedsburg:

We would like to congratulate you on the sense of civic/community pride we experienced in Reedsburg. Whether it was private property donated by a business and opened up for public use (Plenke's Pond Park), a large natural area donated by the City of Reedsburg (Smith Conservancy), colorful cultural murals on private and public buildings, the community support provided for the building of the public library, or the renovation of historic homes and buildings, it was evident to our visit team that the residents of Reedsburg take pride in their community.

It appears Reedsburg is meeting the needs of its residents. The business and industrial mix appears to provide the services and products residents need, and jobs to keep residents working in the community. With several new sub-divisions and what appears to be a number of large companies, the community gave us the impression it is growing. For visitors, Reedsburg offers an extensive system of parks and recreation opportunities (including the "400 Trail"), a variety of highly recommended eateries, and easy highway and interstate access to other communities and attractions in the area. However, our team questioned whether or not this is enough for Reedsburg to attract tourists.

The most positive things the team identified about your community were the community pride, capitalization of historic properties (ex. the "Historic *and* Architectural Walking Tour of Reedsburg"), investment in *newer* public facilities (library, municipal buildings, and high school), infusion of murals and other public art into the visual fabric of the community, and the expanding health care facility. We believe that Reedsburg has a lot to offer for a community of only 8,883 residents.

The biggest challenges you have are connecting the renovation and restoration going on in the downtown to the surrounding areas (ex. the area around the chamber of commerce and municipal buildings appears blighted and disconnected from the rest of downtown), retaining your community identity as you continue to grow, and marketing Reedsburg as a place for visitors to base their regional travels from.

What will remain with our team from this visit is the positive attitude of the community reflected in its civic commitment, focus on retaining and celebrating its history and connections to the natural environment, and the friendly passion of the people we met. We enjoyed our visit to your community. The community and business owners should be commended on what they have accomplished. Thanks for the opportunity to experience your community as a *First Impressions* exchange team.

Sincerely,

The Monroe Exchange Team

Karla Fritsch, Barb Nelson, Tory Tullis-Zettle, Matt Urban, and Sarah Burgert

Note: Team members included the Monroe Chamber of Commerce and Industry Director, Monroe Main Street Coordinator, Monroe City employee, an employee of the largest employer in Monroe, and an educator.



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Specific Observations and Comments

I. Obtaining Information about Reedsburg Prior to Visiting

Information on Reedsburg came up easily on a web search:

- We found four excellent websites that provided us with information about the community: www.reedsburg.com (emphasizing the proximity of Reedsburg to regional attractions), www.reedsburg.org (highlighting the community's attractions and strengths), www.reedsburgwi.gov/ (providing residents and businesses with extensive community information), and www.wiscnews.com/rtp (making local news available on the Internet).
- Explored most thoroughly the city's website which provided a great deal of information relevant for residents, businesses and visitors alike. We were impressed with the amount of information the city has made available on the website (ex. various maps showing sidewalk replacement, trash pick-up and zoning). It was good to see the city website link to the public library website, chamber of commerce website, and Sauk County Development Corporation. We were not able to quickly find a link to the school district from the city website (although we did eventually find it under "helpful links"). We encourage you to consider including the school website link under the "Living in Reedsburg" section of the site. We also thought it was wonderful you had various forms available on the city website.
- On the chamber website we liked the listing of available properties in the "Community Profile" section of the site. And the city map was useful to us on our visit.

Information requested via phone about Reedsburg not received:

- The day of the visit an individual not on the visit team called the Reedsburg Chamber of Commerce and requested information. Unfortunately, the information was never received.

Information about Reedsburg accurately reflects the community:

- The information about Reedsburg reflects a strong sense of community and history, both of which were evident upon visiting the community. For example, the significant investment in new public buildings shows a commitment to the future of Reedsburg. Additionally, throughout the community, the renovation and reuse of historic buildings shows a pride in celebrating what is good about the community's past while focusing on the future of the community (ex. the historic movie theatre converted into a restaurant, the train depot used for the chamber of commerce and "400 Trail" headquarters).

II. Past Perceptions of Reedsburg

Perceptions of Reedsburg were mixed:

- A few members of our visiting team were familiar with Reedsburg, but most of our team members had never visited the community and new very little about Reedsburg.
- We made some assumptions about the community based upon its location in Sauk County – these assumptions included a perception that Reedsburg is benefiting from the



growth pressures of Dane County and the tourism attractions in Sauk County, the perception Reedsburg has the same environmental ethic/connection that other Sauk County communities have, and the observation Reedsburg is lucky to be located at the junction of major transportation corridors. Ultimately, our visit left us wondering if Reedsburg attracts many tourists; however, we were surprised by the amount of businesses and employers in the community.

III. The “Five Minute” Impression

After taking a five-minute drive through the community, the following reactions were noted:

- In general the residential properties are clean and well cared for, although there are a few spots that need attention (ex. overgrown weeds).
- Very old, historic buildings have been attractively renovated or are being renovated.
- Efforts have been made to create consistent signage in the downtown area.
- The newer commercial district (Hwy 33 from the east) does not reflect the community’s unique character as it looks much like any other community.
- The downtown seemed to be alive and active.
- There appears to be a significant commitment to parks and green space.
- One goes from new and renovated buildings to more unsightly properties (ex. old metal industrial buildings) quite quickly upon exploring beyond the central downtown area.
- Thought has gone into providing adequate parking for downtown businesses.

IV. Community Entrances

Observations noted when entering Reedsburg:

- The Highway 33 entrance (coming from the east) is a beautiful four-lane entry into the community. The wide boulevard with a bike lane gives the impression of a community much larger than Reedsburg really is. The welcome sign is very inviting as is the landscaping of the country club. Even though the industrial park is located along this entrance, the community has done a good job of keeping it from being an entry eyesore.
- The other entrances into the community do not seem to have been given the same care and attention as this main entrance on Hwy33.

V. Downtown Business Area

General appearance of the downtown area, including buildings, displays and signage:

- We noted the boulevard narrows and goes away as one enters downtown, however the canopies and decorations reaching across the street, as well as the repeating light fixtures unify and beautify the downtown district.



Photo: Example of visual repetition and appeal.

- We noticed a consistency in the use of colors for benches, tree guards, light poles et cetera. This adds to the visual appeal of the downtown.



Photo: Example of a vacant building that has an attractive window display.

- Noticed many of the older housing stock in the downtown area has been turned into businesses.
- The backside of the business district is amazingly attractive, lacking trash dumpsters and other unsightly items we expected to see. We noticed the backs of a number of buildings are painted and invite people to enter from the back (ex. parking lot behind Associated Bank and Dance Zone).



Photo: Example of buildings that do not have as much curb appeal and are not consistent with the rest of the downtown.

- Most buildings appeared to be filled, and in some instances the ones that are not, had nice displays in them.
- Consistent signage and canopies gives a portion of the downtown a cohesive appearance. However, halfway through the downtown the look of the buildings changes dramatically and disrupts this visual cohesiveness.
- Signage varied in its quality and attractiveness. This is an area where you could continue to create visual unity in the downtown.

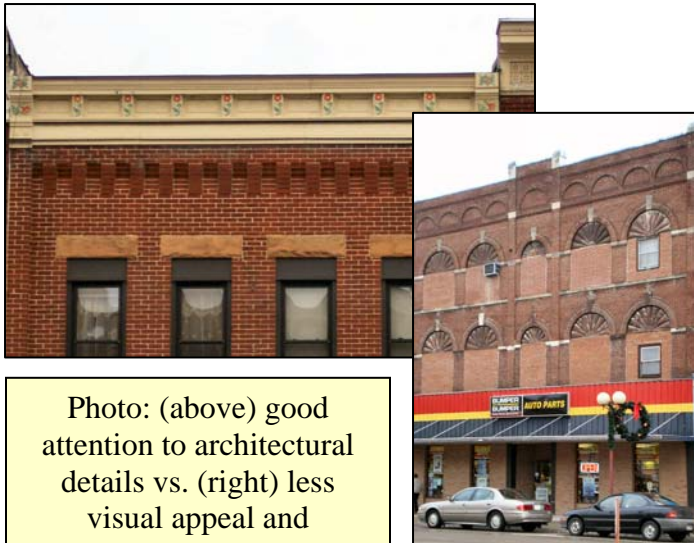


Photo: (above) good attention to architectural details vs. (right) less visual appeal and historical accuracy

- Awnings, while not necessarily historically accurate, do provide shade and rain-free locations for shoppers.
- Most buildings were in good repair and several were restored to their historic charm. We would have liked to see more buildings that paid attention to and emphasized their architectural details.

Variety of shopping/ merchandise:

- Much of the downtown appeared to be unique shops with a gift item focus.

- There appeared to be variety and quality in the merchandise. One team member really liked the bookstore.
- We were impressed by the number of restaurants that came highly recommended by people we asked in the community. For example, at the chamber office we were given the menus of a number of different restaurants.
- Overall, the community seemed to have a nice retail and service business mix. We were surprised by the number of day spas in the community.
- Chamber building is a nice reuse of the old train depot. Because it is just off from the downtown, it is a little difficult to find and there is a lack of signage directing to it once you leave the downtown area. Also the area around the chamber is blighted and requires the attention given the part of downtown along the highway.

Customer service:

- We experienced very helpful and friendly service in stores, restaurants, and public facilities.
- The chamber of commerce director was extremely enthusiastic about the community and told us about a number of community events and activities that were well attended. She portrayed a very positive image of the community.
- At the city hall we were also given a lot of information in a manner that demonstrated pride and enthusiasm in/for the community.
- People were more than happy to answer our questions and make us feel welcome.

Magnets for shopping district:

- We thought the murals on the buildings in the downtown area served as an attraction for the shopping district.
- Likewise the small eateries in the downtown help to generate traffic.
- No particular stores stood out as unique draws or as major magnets.
- While they are a little ways away from the downtown, the library, chamber office and 400 Trail could serve as draws to the downtown shopping district; however, some work needs to be done to create a sense of connection between these locations and the downtown. Currently it feels like there is a division between these parts of the

community and it might be a good strategy to extend the downtown beyond the main traffic thoroughfare by pulling the consistent signage, lighting and other amenities into these areas where the chamber and public buildings are located.



Photo: Example of public amenities in the downtown.

Public amenities:

- No pay phones observed. Most people are using cell phones now, so it may not be necessary to have many pay phones.
- Drinking fountains were not observed.
- Benches were available and in good repair.
- We did not see public restrooms in the

downtown area. Restrooms were available in public buildings but many are off of the main downtown.

Accessibility:

- We did not notice any specific accessibility issues or accommodations in the downtown.
- The wide sidewalks make it easy for people in wheelchairs and with strollers to navigate the downtown area.

Parking:

- The team had no problem finding parking.
- It was nice to see parking was free – this is refreshing compared to costs of parking in some tourist attraction locations like Galena, IL or in larger cities like Madison.
- There was a mix of parking including along the street in front of businesses and in lots just off of the downtown.
- We liked the easy to locate and understand signage that designated where to park and the length of time for parking.



Photo: Example of nice signage denoting parking locations and policies.

VI. Industrial Parks/Commercial Areas

Defined area for manufacturing industries:

- Industrial/business park is in good location with easy access to transportation routes and rail. Extremely lucky to be able to claim that you are the midpoint between Chicago and Minneapolis markets.
- We had some difficulty figuring out how to get into the industrial area of the community (the signage was nice but difficult to spot), but once we found access we were impressed by the extent of the industrial/business park and the number of businesses located there.



Photo: Evidence of larger retailers impacting local businesses.

- Excellent information about the industrial/business park on the www.reedsburg.com website – easy for a prospective business to find. The community appears to be very organized in the way it markets the industrial/business park and gives the impression of being willing to take risks and foster growth of high technology research firms.

General health of manufacturing in Reedsburg:

- At a glance it seems there is a good deal of industry and employment in Reedsburg.
- The Lands End complex was very large and very attractive. It was evident they care about their employees, providing them with a large bricked/landscaped area, seating and outdoor grills.

Non-downtown commercial areas:

- Several “big box” style retailers were noticed in the commercial area east of the downtown – Pamida, True Value, Walgreens. This area of town seemed to be less planned and more haphazard in its growth than other parts of the community. It certainly did not look or feel unique.
- The signage in these areas was not as attractive as in the downtown.

Excellent access for industrial clients:

- With Highways 23 and 33, nearby I-90/94, a municipal airport and rail access, the community seems to offer good access for not only its residents and visitors, but its business and industry as well.

VII. Health Care Services

Availability and apparent quality of health care services:

- At a glance, it seemed like the community has an adequate set of health care services ranging from dentists to optometrists to chiropractors.
- The community has a significant asset in the large medical facility and senior life center (www.ramchealth.com) we were told continues to expand.

Long-term care, assisted living, or nursing home facilities:

- We saw evidence of assisted living and senior housing to meet the needs of an aging population.

VIII. Housing

Existing mix of housing stock:

- We noticed a large number of older homes that were or had been renovated. We were told there have been quite a few people who have bought and renovated older homes.
- We were extremely impressed with the neatness of the mobile home court. It was very well kept and landscaped. Typically these neighborhoods can be a community eyesore but that is not the case in Reedsburg.
- The new sub-division near the high school appears to be very well-planned. With its wide streets, sidewalks and decorative street lights it appears as though the development is intended to be pedestrian friendly. The single-level, 2 car garage homes appear to be providing housing in a reasonable price range.
- The other newer sub-division we found had larger, higher priced homes and the development had the same care as the other newer development. We noticed the lights are the same in both neighborhoods, creating visual connections across the community.
- We saw a third newer sub-division located near the Lands End development.
- Noticed next to the high school a set of newer apartment buildings.

Housing market:

- Did not see a lot of “for sale” signs, but did see a decent amount of new homes being built.
- A recent search of the South Central Wisconsin Multiple Listing Service on the web revealed 86 homes for sale in Reedsburg. The prices ranged from \$39,900 to \$389,900 with most in the mid-\$100,000s.

IX. Schools

School Facilities:

- Appeared to be a good mix of educational facilities.
- We were very impressed with the public high school building and were actually surprised to learn it was built in 1998 as it seemed newer.
- The location of the public middle school next to the large park was very appealing and created a sense of community.
- We were pleased to see the community has a branch of MATC, but were disappointed at how difficult it was to find the facility. Signage leading to the facility was small and difficult to follow.



Photo: Example of a very nice investment in public infrastructure.

Information obtained about quality of educational system:

- We were very impressed with the amount of information we were able to find out about the school district via their website (www.rsd.k12.wi.us), including an excellent welcome/overview document; clear, articulated district mission and goals; and an easy to follow calendar of events.

X. Civic and Faith/Religion

Nonprofit organizations and clubs in Reedsburg:

- We did not see a lot of evidence of civic organizations on signage in the community.
- We did notice the Jaycees/Lions complex near an ice arena.
- Did not find any information about the civic organizations on any community websites or in any community brochures. How do people locate such information in the community?

Comments on organized religion facilities and activities:

- We located a brochure listing the local area churches. This is a great idea because it shows the diversity of denominations in the community and provides people with the times of worship. From a tourist/visitor standpoint it gives individuals and families an opportunity to feel as though they are welcome to attend services in the community.

XI. Residents

Comments on interactions with residents:

- The residents we interacted with were very friendly and open.
- People were very enthusiastic about the community and what it offers residents.
- In general, the residents, business owners, and public employees spoke positively about their community. You certainly got the sense people are proud of Reedsburg and enjoy living in the community.
- Despite being a weekday, there seemed to be activity in the downtown area.

XII. Public Infrastructure

Streets, street signing and lighting:

- In general roads were clean and in good shape however we did note the poor quality of LaValle Road.
- It seemed like in the downtown area the signage was new, attractive and easy to read/follow, but once we left the downtown area, the directional signs were of lower quality and it was easy to get lost.
- Public buildings, such as city hall, were difficult for a visitor to locate due to a lack of signage.



Photos: (left) attractive directional signage vs. (right) unattractive signage

Sidewalks:

- Sidewalks were available in the majority of community. This is important because it offers safety and community connectivity. We noticed all new developments had sidewalks being installed.
- Appeared that most sidewalks were well maintained.
- Sidewalks in the downtown were nice and wide and in very good condition.

City Government and Services:

- The team noticed a number of the municipal buildings are fairly new.
- While we didn't know if it was privately or city run we did observe a Reedsburg Cab Service.
- Difficult to find the city hall because it is not labeled well and there is no good signage to direct you there. Once we got there, we liked the beam that when crossed indicated we were in the building, resulting in prompt service and attention.

- Liked that municipal buildings all located within the same area.
- We were told taxes and utilities were comparable to other municipalities in the area.

Library:

- Beautiful new facility built in 1998.
- Nice public space with study rooms, computers and a large collection.
- Liked that the community room was located “outside” the library collection space which allows for its use when the library is closed.
- We were told there was a great deal of community support for the new building and the funding was raised in six months.

XIII. Recreation/Tourism



Photo: Example of the many parks that add appeal to the community.

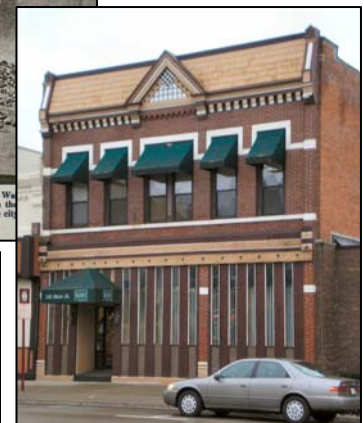
Recreation:

- While the city parks do not currently allow dogs in them, we were told at city hall a dog park is being planned. This is an excellent demonstration of trying to meet the various recreational needs and interests of residents.
- The bicycle trail offers a great recreational opportunity for both residents and visitors. The chamber office serves as a great location for the trailhead because it provides an opportunity to expose visitors to what the community has to offer since the chamber office has such a comprehensive set of community information. It was nice to see free parking at the location for people wanting to spend the day biking the trail.

- We were impressed with the number of parks in the community, and with the variety in the focus of those parks – i.e. Smith Conservancy, Plenke’s Pond Park. It is evident the community values its natural resources and outdoor recreational opportunities.
- We liked the nice use of a triangular corner to create green space and a park with public restrooms.



Photo: Historic information and buildings can serve as a draw for the community.



Tourism:

- It was very evident the community takes pride in and markets its historic charm. We found a number of brochures about the community with this particular focus. We were especially impressed with the “Historic *and* Architectural Walking Tour of Reedsburg” and “Murals, Markers & Monuments of Reedsburg” brochures. This is an excellent strategy to get people to explore the community.
- All of the public murals add cultural interest to the community and help to make it a unique place for people to visit. We suggest marketing this even more.
- Lodging...there appeared to be several motel/hotel and bed and breakfast facilities for overnight accommodations. We noticed one hotel had a conference center which can attract larger groups of people to the community.
- Dining...again we were impressed with the number of highly recommended places to eat lunch and dinner in the community. There seemed to be a good variety of fast food, cafes and sit-down establishments.



Photo: Example of an attractive use of public art to beautify the downtown and make the community have a unique appeal.



Photo: Example of a potential tourist attraction, however the facility is not very inviting.

- Attractions... The Pioneer Log Museum on Hwy 33 is a potential attraction as is the Norman Rockwell Museum, however it looked like it was in disrepair and closed. It seemed other than promoting recreational opportunities and the historical walking tour, the community had little to offer in regards to big attractions. This doesn't necessarily mean there is no reason for people to come to the community and visit, but it does mean you have to work hard to convince people to visit Reedsburg instead of Baraboo, the Wisconsin Dells, or other cities with regional attractions.

Questions or comments about this report can be addressed to Sarah Burgert, Green County UW-Extension, Community Resource Development Educator, (608) 328-9441.

