



## First Impressions Revisited\*

A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

The Center For Community Economic Development

**Community Visited:** Rhinelander, Wisconsin  
**Visit Completed by:** New London, Wisconsin  
**Date of visit and time spent:** September 15, 2006 from 9:00am – 2:30pm  
**Weather on date of visit:** 65 degrees and sunny, beautiful early autumn day



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

## 1. Prior to Your Visit

How easy was it to get information on the community that you are visiting?

A yahoo search came up with the Chamber website, [www.rhinelandChamber.com](http://www.rhinelandChamber.com), the Rhinelander City Hall website [www.rhinelandercityhall.org](http://www.rhinelandercityhall.org), Rhinelander daily news [www.rhinelanderdailynews.com](http://www.rhinelanderdailynews.com), the Rhinelander School District [www.rhineland.k12.wi.us](http://www.rhineland.k12.wi.us), a guide to Rhinelander resorts at [www.rhinelanders-morningside.com](http://www.rhinelanders-morningside.com), [www.fishingrhinelander.com](http://www.fishingrhinelander.com) and the Rhinelander Police Department <http://www.rhinelandcrpd.com>

All websites were very helpful and well done. We very impressed with the Chamber and City Hall websites, especially the fact that applications for permits are available for download.

In addition to the web investigation, the Chamber was contacted on two separate occasions. During the first contact, one of our visitors played the role of a young mother who was considering moving to the area. She inquired about schools, churches, and recreational activities. The Chamber representative was not very helpful and unwilling to talk. Despite repeated attempts to hold a conversation, the New London caller relented and agreed to have material "sent" to her. The material sent was indeed very helpful; however, we'd recommend that when a potential visitor or new resident wants to hold a conversation that one is in fact held. Replying to the inquiry by stating – "I'll just send you something" makes a poor first impression.

During the second contact, one of our visitors played the role of an entrepreneur that wanted to open a restaurant in Rhinelander. The Chamber representative was extremely helpful, and not only held a conversation but provided critical leads and contact information.

Did it accurately reflect what you saw?

The information we received via the internet and mailings did accurately reflect what we saw.

Did the information arrive in a timely fashion?

Yes

Did you have difficulties obtaining information on the community through a web search?

No

What was the quality of information obtained from regional/state agencies and organizations?

We didn't receive any information from these entities.

## 2. Past Perceptions

What was your perception of the community before this visit? What did you expect to see?  
Please comment on your knowledge of this community:

Perceptions amongst our visitors varied. Some felt Rhinelander was a beautiful resort area with many lakes and rivers. One participant grew up only an hour from Rhinelander and remembers it as a “rough” paper town. Most participants associated the community with the Hodag, including the music festival. Several felt Rhinelander would prove to be a classic small town with a little downtown and larger commercial strip areas. Several viewed Rhinelander as a tourist destination.

### **3. The “Five Minute” Impression**

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

Given the variation in past perceptions and the mixture of positive and negative pre-visit contacts, we were hopeful that the “five minute impression” would help add some clarity to our thoughts on Rhinelander. It did, but it didn’t. We found an exceptional park along the lake (Hodag Park), an extremely clean downtown with apparently few or no vacant shops, a pleasing mixed use environment, a variety of shopping opportunities, and evidence of a healthy economy. On the other hand, it was difficult to “find” most of these things. In fact, the most memorable first impression was the feeling of “where are we?”. Our team had maps and directions, but we still couldn’t find where we were going – especially downtown. We also noted the disjointed nature of the “other commercial areas” and how everything is so sprawled out. We were struck by the moderate nature of the housing and never did find much for middle or high income areas in which to live.

We recorded our five minute impressions while eating breakfast at Burger King. We posed as tourists and were extremely impressed with the assistance provided by the staff. We noted the access to local event and recreation brochures and were pleased with the existence of a daily newspaper.

### **4. Community Entrances**

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

Rhinelander is blessed and cursed with many community entrances. This is a blessing because of the opportunity for access and commercial areas but a curse because clear directions and entrance maintenance must be a focus. We initially entered Rhinelander from Boyce Street and were impressed with the rustic entrance sign and the existence of what appears to be a well kept health care facility. We expected to see these types of signs near every community entrance, but unfortunately we did not. Relying on green WisDOT signs is too institutional and too impersonal. We encourage you to consider adding large signs near every community entrance and add “welcome” in the sign. Signage at entrances and overall proved to be too little, too small, and often fairly aged and tired. When were at Burger King, a staff member had to point out the directional signs. These are logical, and we especially liked the color coding, but again these are aging and too small (see below). Replacing these with new, larger, color coded, rustic signs would be helpful.



### 5. Downtown Business Area

Observations about the general appearance of the downtown area, general appearance of buildings, displays, signage, the variety of shopping, variety and quality of the merchandise, customer service, governmental or nonprofit organizational activities, public amenities, and parking.

Downtown turned out to be a very impressive place once we found it. We hate to harp on this, but it was impossible to find. Even the Chamber brochure fails to identify downtown, and because a major highway travels one block to the east the map leads you to believe you are on the main street when you are not. We recommend “shading’ the map to show downtown. In our search for downtown, we were perplexed by many road name changes even though you are on the same street. Furthermore, corner street signage placement and height was poor and inconsistent. This is extremely confusing for a visitor.

Aside from finding downtown, we found a very positive atmosphere. Shopping variety and quality was great and much better than expected. Clothing, candy, etc. stores made us feel like we stepped back 30 years into a traditional, thriving downtown. We were impressed with the street lights and how they were donated (as evidenced by the bronze plaques – see below) and were used to connect major sites (e.g., courthouse to downtown). We purchased candy at the Fun Factory and were very pleased with the customer service. A young clerk overheard us talking about one of our birthdays, and when we checked out she wished us a happy birthday. As with many downtowns, some buildings exhibit a well maintained and designed architecture while some do not (see contrast below)





We couldn't believe the vast number of public services in the downtown area. You could easily walk to many, city, state, and federal services. This certainly helps promote commerce and is a huge advantage for Rhinelander that many communities do not enjoy. A few sidewalks did need some work, and installation of a sidewalk that better connects downtown to the River Centre complex would be nice.



We were very impressed with the outdoor seating below, but little of this existed. We found very few sitting areas downtown. Some downtown benches would be great. Downtown could also be improved by using tree grates, instead of just dirt and gravel (see below). Furthermore, most trees were white or green ash. Having a monoculture is problematic if disease hits, thus wiping out all of your downtown trees. This is especially worrisome for Rhinelander given the emergence of the emerald ash borer. Another landscaping improvement would be the installation of planters that separate traffic from pedestrians, not only beautifying downtown but also making shoppers feel safer.





Another improvement would be to remove the garbage cans from the main street (see below). We assume it was garbage day. If indeed this is a one day occurrence and an alternative collection site is not possible, we recommend pick up day is not a Friday (we visited on a Friday). In most (but not all) other areas, dumpsters were screened very well (see contrast below). Try to use this screening everywhere, even in the backs of buildings.





We felt parking was ample downtown and vehicle access to postal services (see below) was impressive. Angle parking worked well, except that it proved to be too close to some intersections. We recommend eliminating several parking spaces near the side of the intersection that requires a vehicle to back into the intersection. We also recommend more signage for off street parking. We did see a number of signs for free parking, but felt more were necessary.



Finally, we were impressed with the planned building and landscape architecture of the River Centre. There was obviously a planned design, and we suggest all new developments go through a similar design review process.



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

What types of businesses did you notice that would fit the general category of “Big Box Retailer; General Appearance of buildings, displays signage; The variety of shopping; How would you rate the variety and quality of the merchandise?; What kind of customer service did you receive when you entered the retail businesses?; Did you have any difficulty finding parking? Could you access multiple services from where you parked?

We were impressed with the sheer amount of strip type development and the variety that was offered, from national chains to local owners. The dispersion of development, disjointed nature, and overall sprawling characteristics of these areas, were, however disenchanting. Again, it was difficult to find exactly what you were looking for. It appeared these areas were not well planned years ago. Short of reconstructing the whole system, which will never happen, Rhinelander would be well served to deal with this challenge by installing more and much better signage directing people to certain stores, as well as, certain types of shopping areas. The most apparent signage need is Business Highway 8/Lincoln. Getting to it and knowing you’re on it was difficult. Bottom line, you have to be a local resident and know your way around to get everything you need in an efficient manner.

Finally, we were impressed with the access to hotels and hotel variety.

## 7. Industrial Parks/Commercial Areas

Is there a defined area where manufacturing industries could easily locate/expand?; What did you find attractive about the potential locations for manufacturing/commercial businesses?; How would you evaluate the general health of manufacturing businesses that are currently located in the community?; Could you find print information and information and informed persons that could provide you with data that would help you make an informed business location decision?

We couldn’t find a defined area for industry and were struck by the mix of commercial, industrial, and residential. In fact, we wondered where many of the people worked (other than retail and service). It was apparent that a vast amount of land was available for development and Rhinelander boasts a competitive advantage of great highway, rail, and air access. For the industries that we did find, e.g., Wausau Paper and Printpack, they were very well kept. Nothing appeared run down.



Also, we noted that the Chamber provided a helpful profile on the city <http://www.rhinelandChamber.com/profile.html> and a link to the Oneida County Economic Development Corporation <http://www.ocedc.org>.

## 8. Health Care Services

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

The community appeared very well served with health care facilities, including acute, ambulatory, and long term. This assessment is based on the assumption that there are an ample number of primary care physicians. Facilities appeared modern and were well kept. The facelift of the old hospital and renovation into a clinic was impressive. The long term care facilities were well advertised and the community appears well covered.

It was easy to find information about number of doctors and facilities (e.g., 12 chiropractors, 15 dentists, 2 orthodontists, 365 nursing home beds, 75 assisted living beds). They were much more in number than we expected. It appears Rhinelander is a commercial, retail, and health care hub.

## 9. Housing

How would you evaluate the existing mix of housing stock?; Were there any indications that the housing market was depressed?; Were there any signs that it would be difficult to find acceptable housing?; Does the local housing market have housing that would appeal to all income ranges? Are there sufficient rental properties for persons interested in building or simply living in the community prior to buying housing?

We were not impressed with the housing in Rhinelander. Housing appeared modest at best. Little middle and high income housing appeared available. The abundance of for sale signs seemed to indicate people wanted to get out of Rhinelander to find a nicer home than was available in the city. There appeared very little rental housing and what did exist was old and not well kept. Many homes appeared in disrepair with lack of landscaping and even lack of simple mowing. We did find two nice areas for housing, including the new condominiums under construction. We were impressed with the city's financial commitment to foster this new development. Ultimately we all agreed Rhinelander would be a nice place to live, but we weren't sure of the housing opportunities we'd take advantage of.



## 10. Schools

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

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

We noticed one facility downtown. It appeared of high quality and was well maintained. We were impressed with its location in the downtown area.

Elementary School:

The elementary schools we viewed appeared very dated. This is not necessarily an indication of education quality, but we all agreed exterior maintenance and landscaping quality could be much enhanced. We noticed a number of private schools and were impressed with this asset Rhinelander has to offer.

Middle School/Junior High/High School:

These facilities appeared exceptional. They were very modern and entrances were extremely impressive.

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

We didn't actually view the Nicolet Area Technical College. Information on the institution is easily available on the web ([www.nicolet.tec.wi.us](http://www.nicolet.tec.wi.us)), and we all thought the directional signage to the facility was adequate.

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

We were able to access information to accomplish this assessment on the educational system via the web and also through publications provided by the Chamber.

## 11. Faith/Religion

Comment on the number of denominations represented in the community; Comment on the physical appearance of the churches in the community; Are there any signs of church-sponsored community services? Are there any facilities or statements that some would view as intrusive or that would make someone feel uncomfortable if they were not of a particular faith?

There were plenty of churches and denominations offered in Rhinelander. For example:

Calvary Baptist  
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints  
Cornerstone Assembly of God

Episcopal Church of St. Augustine  
First Baptist  
First Church of Christ Scientist  
First Congregational UCC  
First United Methodist  
Grace Foursquare Church  
Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran  
Kingdom of Jehovah's Witness  
Northern Lights Church of God  
Northwoods Baptist Church  
Pine Grove Community Church  
Seventh Day Adventist  
St. Joseph's Catholic Church  
St. Mark's Lutheran  
St. Mary's Catholic  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran  
Zion Lutheran

Churches appeared well kept and manicured nicely. As noted earlier, we were impressed with the number of parochial schools we encountered.



## 12. Civic

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

It does appear that there are a variety of nonprofits and clubs to get involved in and that they do get involved in the Rhinelander community. We noted current events involving 4-H, Lions, and the Masonic Temple, and we weren't looking that hard for these offerings. We were extremely impressed with the street lights downtown and how many of them were paid for by generous clubs and organizations. We were also impressed with the sheer existence of the museum (shown below).



### 13. Residents

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

With the exception of the one pre-visit experience, EVERYONE we encountered in Rhinelander was helpful, friendly, and welcoming. We were treated like long last pals by most folks that we ran into. Several examples include: the gal that gave us directions at Burger King, the clerk at the candy store who wished a participant happy birthday, and the Mayor at City Hall.

In fact, the Mayor was so extraordinary that it requires us to expand on our visit. Three of us wandered into City Hall to examine the facility's physical appearance, ability to be used by the public, etc. and did not expect to be given the red carpet treatment by the Mayor. He told us where to go, what to do, and even gave directions based on what side of the road our car was parked on. He told us the story of the Hodag, and it was obvious he loves this town. Any community would sacrifice mightily to have a mayor as articulate and with as much enthusiasm as Rhinelander's.

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

It's apparent based on the people that we encountered that they love their community. People were passionate and excited when they talked about Rhinelander. From Kayleen at the Chamber, to the mayor, to the store clerks everyone appeared to be in love with this Hodag community. In fact, we all agreed that Kayleen deserves some type of award for her assistance provided to the group. She bent over backwards to help us out.

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

Yes. When one of us posed as a potential future business owner (we were posing to consider opening a restaurant), we were referred to Jeff Hall and Jim Kimber, both appropriate people to contact given our mock interests.

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

We were up north and didn't expect to see much diversity. It was easy to find the actual racial/ethnic make up:

- White Non-Hispanic (96.5%)
- American Indian (1.6%)
- Two or more races (1.2%)
- Hispanic (0.7%)

#### **14. Public Infrastructure**

Streets, street signing and lighting:

As with most communities some streets were great and others needed work. If one doesn't already exist, developing a five year street improvement plan that strategically prioritizes road enhancement could be developed.

The challenges with street signing (i.e., inconsistent height and placement) were already mentioned and could easily be addressed.

We were extremely impressed with the use of street lighting, especially downtown. It was easily apparent that a concerted effort has been made to use street lighting to increase safety and commerce.

Land Use Planning:

Although we don't know if one exists, it was apparent that Rhinelander should have had one years ago when the "other" shopping areas were developed. The original layout in the heart of a river town is always a challenge to address, but the sprawling and disjointed nature of the newer developments could have been avoided if a well thought out plan was developed and implemented. If you don't have a high quality plan that both tries to fix the aforementioned difficulties and provides for a less sprawling and disjointed landscape we suggest developing one.

Sidewalks:

We noted some, but not many sidewalks that were in disrepair and were impressed with the walkability of Rhinelander. We do suggest that a better sidewalk connection between downtown proper and River Centre could be accomplished.

Public Restrooms:

We didn't notice any except in public buildings (e.g., courthouse, City Hall)

City/Village/Town Hall:

In one word – AWESOME. We were very impressed with this quality renovation effort.

Police/Fire Protection/Emergency Medical Services Facilities:

Facilities appeared modern and we were impressed with the location of the facilities relative to downtown.

Public Parking:

As aforementioned, we felt parking was adequate, but the free parking could be signed better and several angle spots could be eliminated near intersections in order to increase safety.

Library:

We did not enter the library, but the building appeared in fine shape and was well kept.

Landscaping/street trees:

As aforementioned, using more planters and providing more sitting areas downtown is advisable. Additionally, installing tree grates and alternating tree species is recommended.

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

More sitting areas, especially downtown, would be nice. Also, there appeared to be a number of trails in the country, but we didn't notice the use of a trail system in the city proper. We felt the river frontage was underutilized as an amenity and could be used for a trail system. Lack of use for recreation, aesthetics, etc. is, however, understandable given its historic use and the number of lakes in the area.

**15. Recreation/Tourism**

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

Undoubtedly!!! The community uses its mascot better than any community we've encountered, and we loved it. Even the police cruisers use the Hodag.



Comment on the availability and selection of overnight accommodations:

We were impressed with the variety and apparent quality.

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

Everywhere! Rhinelander does a good job of having and marketing many events in the area. Furthermore, we visited on a Harley weekend.

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

Yes, Rhinelander is up north and boasts easy access to water, woods, and wildlife. As noted earlier, we thought use of the river as an amenity could expand these opportunities even more.

Are there any significant man-made attractions?

Yes, Hodag Park is a man-made attraction that serves as a magnet.

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

Yes, Rhinelander has a Chamber of Commerce. As noted earlier, a vast majority of our experience (with the one exception) with the Chamber was top notch.

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

Yes, the candy store. Additionally, Rhinelander has all of the stores of an Appleton or a Green Bay and clearly serves as a shopping destination. If you're in the Northwoods and want to do a comprehensive shopping trip then Rhinelander is the spot to go.

## **16. Using your Senses**

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

Yes, the candy store.

What did the community smell like?

The community exhibited no overly positive or negative smell.

What sounds did you hear?

The community exhibited no overly positive or negative sounds.

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

The initial feeling of where we were was not a positive one, but once you get beyond that the community appears to be an extremely desirable one. We were especially impressed with the kindness and pride exhibited by the residents.

## **16. Wrap-up**

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

- Old fashioned, working downtown and overall variety and amount of “other” commercial areas
- Hodag Park
- Appearance of a regional magnet for shopping and services
- Passion, pride, and kindness
- Amount of public services available in city proper

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

- Fostering people finding places instead of creating a “where are we?” feeling
- Lack of middle to high income housing
- Sprawling, disjointed commercial areas
- Some downtown beautification (planters, trees, tree grates, and select building facades)
- Signage

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

On the positive side, we will remember the kindness and passion as exhibited by the mayor.

On the negative side, we will remember being lost.

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!

As a group we agreed that Rhinelander's use of a theme, i.e., the Hodag, helped brand the community in a very positive way that we would like to emulate.