



First Impressions Revisited*

A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

The Center For Community Economic Development

Community Visited: **Omro, Wisconsin**

Date of Visit: **April 23 - 24, 2004**

Visit Completed by (community): **Wautoma, Wisconsin**



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Edited: 9-6-2002

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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 Final Report for Omro, Wisconsin

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Date of visit and time spent: Morning and afternoon of Friday, April 23 and afternoon of Saturday, April 24

Weather on date of visit: Overcast/Sunny

1. Prior to the Visit

It was very easy to get information on Omro and it arrived in a timely fashion. You can look Omro up on the internet. There are flyers about Omro in the area and regional travel guides. The quality of the information was good. The web site and brochures are current and showed some photos of the historic buildings.

Although there are a number of web sites that come up about Omro, the “www.omro-wi.com” site is the most comprehensive and useful site. It is always one of the top five sites list when you do a search using the major search engines. The site has a lot of relevant information that is well organized. It would be a good model for our community. The information provided on the web site is equally useful to local residents, tourists, people who are interested in moving to area, and businesses that may be interested in opening up in the community. The only thing that may be missing from the site is what resources or assistance might be available to entrepreneurs that may look at starting up in the community. The web site even has a interesting and attention grabbing jingle and describes the character of the community. However, the jingle keeps repeating, which becomes annoying if you remain on the home page for more than a minute.

The web site not only lists the people to contact for information about Omro, but the web site lists all of the brochures available about Omro. We were able to obtain a copy of all of those brochures and they can be found at many of the businesses in the downtown area. They give an accurate impression of the community. The informational flyers and regional travel guides give the impression that Omro is a suburb of Oshkosh, but the people of Omro seem to have a lot of pride in their community and do not think of it as a suburb of Oshkosh.



2. Past Perceptions

Based on brief drives through the community to and from Oshkosh, past perceptions of Omro before this visit was that Omro is a suburb of Oshkosh with a gas station and grocery store with some historic buildings but not really utilizing the historic buildings anymore. Omro was just a hitch in the road before you get to Oshkosh and not much was expected. Some of us had always heard that Omro was a “speed trap.” During the visit, we didn’t even see a squad car.

3. The “Five Minute” Impression

After taking a five-minute drive through the community, without stopping, the following reactions were noted: large lot sizes on the outskirts of Omro, several farms, and a nature conservancy make the town feel very rural. The people who live in Omro have pride in their community as shown by the street banners throughout main street, well cared for lawns and flowers, and homes that are well kept (nicely painted, mowed lawns, variety of landscapes). The downtown has some nice old buildings that look very nicely kept up, including a few brick buildings that look well maintained. The downtown is uninteresting with a beautiful park on the river. The trees and banners were well liked. The area seems more developed on east side.

4. Community Entrances

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

Approached from south on Highway 116 from Waukau: You get a feeling that you are entering into a small town and there is a sign that says “Welcome to Omro, Bridge to the Future.”

Approached from north on Highway 116 from Winneconne: You get a feeling that you are entering into a suburb. There is no sign of what community you are entering until you are near the bridge.

Approached from west on Highway 21: Two unattractive giant billboards that are not well painted are present on the left and an attractive sign on the right that says you are entering Omro, “City on the Fox.” Other signs are scattered around the river and bridge and are unattractive. As you cross the river and enter from the West the painted murals are beautiful, but the buckets in the river are unsightly.



Approached from east on Highway 21: Approaching from the East from the Oshkosh side there is a mega grocery mart, gas station and bank on Highway 21. You get the feeling that you are entering into a commuter town because there are big stores that are not in the downtown. The approach from the east has new housing, new businesses/buildings, and nicer signage. The industrial park is neat and orderly. The expansion of housing shows a city that is proud to expand.

Approached from the Fox River: Omro is attractive and inviting when approached on the river. There are many places to tie up boats and picnic in park. The buildings on the river are well kept and the backsides of buildings are nicely maintained. Some of the businesses even have signs that are orientated towards the river traffic.



5. Downtown Business Area



The downtown is cute overall with the trees, banners, and steeples. It is a clean and neat area along the river. There are nice historic buildings and many parks. The murals add a lot to the appearance of the downtown area.

The general appearance of the buildings and signs are very good. Most buildings are in great condition. Pride in ownership is apparent. The new fire department building is attractive. The older historic buildings are well maintained. Although the storefronts of some of the buildings have been altered greatly, the community seems to value these historic buildings as indicated by the walking tour brochure that has been developed and the placards that have been put on these buildings. Restoring the appearance of more of Omro's storefronts may enhance the attractiveness, character, and interest in the downtown.



Even the backs of the buildings that face the river are well maintained and attractive. Often in other communities the backside of commercial buildings are neglected and far from attractive, but this not the case in Omro along the river. There is one improvement that could be made, that is to enclose the dumpsters, but in general the backs of the buildings area very nice.

There could be some improvements to the downtown area. The east side of the bridge looks sloppy. The older industrial park and the vacant grocery store are not as appealing or attractive as the rest of the downtown area. Some attention should be given to these areas, like has obviously been done in the newer industrial area.



We love the cheesecake shop, but the old municipal building it is in is ugly. One way to improve the appearance of this building may be to enlarge the windows on the front and fill them with inviting displays of tasty treats. Another way would be to paint an interesting design around the windows,

instead of the dark brown covering that fills in the area where the old garage doors were. Regardless of whether or not the windows are changed, the cheesecake shop should have displays in the front windows. Currently, they do not have a display and their entrance is in the back. It is a wonderful business, very delicious. We almost missed it because from the front it looks like it is vacant or just used for storage. One of our party was reluctant to venture to the back where the retail area is because they thought it was more of a delivery entrance. The patio area is a great solution to the open space between this building and the solid brick wall of the bank. Without the patio, this side of the street would not be very inviting for people to walk down.



The appearance of the displays and signage in the downtown area is a mix. Most are easy to read. You can easily tell what each business is by the sign. The art gallery, tuxedo rental store, jewelry store, realtor, and chamber of commerce have attractive storefronts and displays.

There are some improvements that could be done to enhance the signage and displays in the downtown area. The Hardware Store could have their sign repainted. The Drug Store could more effectively use their front display window to attract people into the store. Currently, half the storefront is covered and remaining display window is complete covered with faded posters and signs. One idea maybe to create a framed area for the posters, like you see at movie theaters, on the right hand side of the storefront where there are no windows and then use the window area to create a display that may attract passers by into see more.

The variety of shopping in the downtown area is very good for a small town, but the selection is limited. We felt there was a nice variety, however, at 9:05 we found most places were still closed for a Friday. There are a couple of restaurants, a gift shop, a drug store, a cheesecake place, gas stations, apartments, a realtor, an art dealer, jewelry shop, and a fast food restaurant. There is a lot of potential because they are on the river and close to Oshkosh and

they have parking downtown. They have a lot of drive through traffic. They have historic buildings.

The variety and quality of the merchandise is good. It is eclectic and average in quality. The people are friendly. There is room for improvement. They need to provide more unique products that you cannot find anywhere else (like the cheesecake shop and the cheese house). The Drug store could expand their product line to have more unique products and they could better promote their video rental business. For a small town, Omro offers a great deal. Add a dime store and you've got it covered.

The customer service was excellent, friendly, and helpful. We were not pressured. The clerk or owner seemed busy. When we asked about the area, they filled us in about Omro with enthusiasm.

The library, park, post office, and city hall are all located around the downtown area. They have the potential to get people into the downtown area, however we did not observe this on Friday and Saturday afternoon. The biggest magnet to the downtown area would be the park, with all the boaters and picnickers that it attracts.



The downtown has some public amenities of varying quality. We found three pay phones, all without phone books. We found no drinking fountains. There were plenty of benches along the river. Public restrooms were available in the park. When we were there, they were not real clean, however they did have paper.

The landscape was awesome. We only wished we were visiting a few weeks later, when the flowers would be blooming and the trees would have more leaves. The trees, banners, and plantings in the downtown area and the park are real attractive. There was a great sufficiency of trash receptacles to keep the area clean.

There was no difficulty in finding parking. The on-street parking is excellent. We could access multiple services from where we parked. We walked everywhere from where we parked on the street.



The one vehicle we did not find any parking for downtown was for bikes. There were a lot of bike racks at the schools. We saw people biking around the community. We could see no place for people to put their bicycles if they wanted to shop around downtown.

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

In the general category of “Big Box Retailer,” we found that Omro has a Piggly Wiggly grocery store on Highway 21 on the eastern edge of the City. The buildings and signage in this area was very nice and neat. The variety of shopping is very limited, just the Piggly Wiggly and a Gas Station. The quality of the merchandise was very good to about average. There could be more variety of businesses near the grocery store, but it may affect the downtown adversely. The customer service was good, but the downtown stores were friendlier. There was no difficulty in finding parking. We were not really able to access multiple services, just the Piggly Wiggly and the gas station. You cannot access the downtown area or the rest of the city from here, except by walking on a busy highway or driving.



7. Industrial Parks/Commercial Areas

There is definitely a defined area where manufacturing industries could easily locate and expand. The industrial park area is not only was easy to find, but it has been kept very clean and low key. It has close access to Highway 21 without the need for trucks to drive through a residential area. Yet, the industrial park is close enough to the residential areas that it would be possible for people to walk to work. The industrial park is new and well kept. There is ample room for expansion and the area has access to sewer and water.



Industries that are currently located in the community seem to be doing well. Their properties are well maintained, clean, and their parking lots are paved. There were lots of cars in the lots. With the number of signs asking, “help wanted,” you would have to believe work is good. The chamber of commerce office was very helpful and knowledgeable about Omro and provided data that would help you make an informed business location decision.

8. Health Care Services

The availability and apparent quality of hospitals and emergency medical services looks pretty good. Omro is only 7 miles away from Oshkosh hospitals. Omro has a new Aurora Health Clinic that is easily accessible and visible from main drag but entrance was confusing. Omro also has a dental clinic located on Highway 21. For long-term care, assisted living, or nursing home facilities Omro has a nice size single story assisted living community on the west end of the community. It appears to have a modern layout.

9. Housing

Omro appears to have an excellent mix of housing, old and new houses, big and small houses, an apartment complex near downtown in a renovated building, and new apartment complexes along the highway on the west end of town. Omro seems to have a well-rounded community, where even the lower income families are proud to live in Omro. There is no indication the housing market is depressed, if anything it is growing. There are lots of new homes going up. There also doesn't seem to be a difficulty in finding acceptable housing. Between apartments and new homes, not to mention existing homes, you would have to believe it would not be difficult to find housing.



10. Schools

The schools are definitely adequately sized and well maintained in a campus setting with lots of room to grow. The campus contains the pre-school, head start, day-care facilities, and kindergarten through twelfth grade. The campus is on the edge of the community but still connected. There seems to be a possibility that some students could walk to school and there are a lot of bike racks. There are no post-secondary schools in Omro. We did not find print information in the community about the quality of the educational system, but the Omro web site had good information.



11. Faith/Religion

All major Christian religious denominations seemed to be represented in Omro. The beautiful historic churches in the community are very well kept. There were signs of church-sponsored community services. One of the churches was advertising a community dinner. All of the churches are listed on a sign in the downtown area near the park. None of the facilities nor the comments from people in the community were such that someone feel uncomfortable if they were not of a particular faith.



12. Civic

There appears to be a variety of nonprofit organizations and clubs within Omro. The Historical Society has a major presence downtown with a museum. The Masons also have a center downtown. There is even a road named after the Kiwanis Club that leads to the public water park.

13. Residents

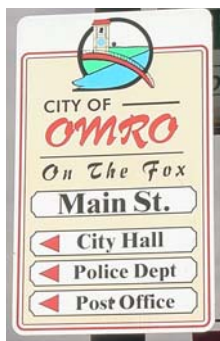
We spoke with several citizens in Omro. All were warm and friendly, very helpful. Residents have a lot of pride in their community. Everyone was very positive about the community. They were very knowledgeable about their community and were able to refer to others in the community who would no even more.

The population is not very diverse. They are predominantly white, but have a growing Hispanic population. Everyone seemed friendly.

14. Public Infrastructure

The streets, street signing, and lighting were good. Main Street is beautiful. The landscaping downtown is great. The downtown area has nice light poles. The banners are in good condition. There is ample street parking and crosswalks.

The streets around Omro were in very good repair. One exception is the drive way to Fox and Hound Park. It has some major potholes. Omro is very inviting from the river. The potholes in Fox and Hound Park, which has the public boat launch, may discourage some people from enjoying the river because they may damage their car or boat.



The public signs in Omro are very nice. The historic signing on the buildings downtown is very interesting. The directional signs are attractive and easy to read. The lettering is just the right size, and they provide direction to key things in the community.

Omro has done a wonderful job with their land use plan. There is a need for planning because the community is growing. The plans were found on the Omro web site.

The sidewalks are in good condition. They are wide and clear. They seem to remain clean. Omro is very friendly to walkers and the pedestrian bridge over the river is very nice. However, Omro is losing some ground in this area. The sidewalks end about a block from the new grocery store, the only grocery store in the area.



City Hall is a nice looking building. The police, fire protection, and emergency medical services facilities look adequate. The new fire station is very attractive. There is some concern about its location. It has to be a pain to pull out and put vehicles away from a main street parking area. The library looked like it was very nice.

15. Recreation/Tourism

Omro seems to be well known for their events held in the downtown riverfront park. They have a Memorial Day Car Show, a Firemen's Street Dance, big Fourth of July Celebration, and an Oktoberfest, German festival. All of them take place at the downtown park on the river. Omro does not really have a community slogan that is directly related to all or any of these events. The slogan that come closest to it is "City on the Fox."



The most significant natural feature that has the potential to draw people to Omro is the Fox River. Related to that the Scott Park in the downtown area which is located on the river is a significant attraction. Other significant man-made attractions are the water park and the well maintained and preserved historic buildings in Omro. Different kind of draw to the area is the industrial park located right off of Highway 21.



Availability and selection of overnight accommodations is rather limited. One of our visitors said they would stay somewhere else. Omro has two small old single-story walkup motels.

There is an obvious information kiosk for visitors. It is a small building located across from the park in the downtown area. It has good maps, brochures, and other tourist information.

Less obvious is the Chamber of Commerce office. It is not as readily visible. There is only a sign on the window. They provide helpful information to tourist, but they are not open in the evenings and on the weekends, when people are around.

There are definitely restaurants, specialty shops, and attractions that would bring us back to this community in the near future. In particular, some of us will be returning to visit the art shop, Carol's Gift Shop, cheese house, cheesecake shop, the park, and the jewelry store. Your specialty shops are great. Now that we've found them, we are sorry to hear that the jewelry store and the Carol's Gift Shop are leaving, because they are going out of business.

16. Using your Senses

Omro tastes really good. The fried cheese curds and Black Bear Soda from the cheese house was very tasty. The homemade soups at the local downtown restaurant were great. We will definitely be returning for some more of that good cheesecake. On a side note, on the west side of town is a cute building that used to be a restaurant and now appears abandoned, sad that it's one of the first things you see in town.

Omro had no particular smell. Spring was in the air though. There was also the occasional smell of exhaust from the cars with people in them that just drive straight through.

There was one location that had some interesting smells. The combined smells of the gasoline, fish bait, and fresh bread was a little odd, but the Subway in the gas station/hardware store/bait shop was fairly busy at the time. The combination smell of fish bait, gasoline, and fresh bread must not have bothered people.

Omro is a quiet community. There were no loud noises, not even by the industrial park. The primary sound was that of traffic on Hwy 21. There was also the sound of song birds, ducks, geese, cranes along the river.

One experience that impacted the way the community felt was our conversation with Carol at Carol's Gift Shop. She was very friendly. She is good ambassador of Omro.

Here are some summary comments about what we found out about Omro. Omro has more than what was anticipated. We were especially surprised about finding the cheesecake shop. That was a good find. Two stores we were in are closing. There is a good industry and business park on East side. There is obvious community pride.

17. Wrap-up

Some of the most positive things that observed about Omro are:

- The Cheesecake factory.
- The Island Park and Riverfront.
- Attractive and well-maintained back ends of buildings that faced the river.
- Kiosk with map and information on main street.
- Well-maintained and preserved historic buildings in the community.
- Rural character (surrounded by large lots and farms and nature preserve).
- Proximity to Oshkosh and Hwy 21 make it a good location for industrial park.
- Growing industrial park.
- Friendly people.
- Attractive new housing.
- New grocery store.
- Pride of ownership.
- Pride in community.
- Beautiful murals.
- Pedestrian friendly.
- Great people.



Some of the biggest obstacles/challenges facing Omro are:

- Underutilization of storefronts.
- Balancing Growth (giving as much attention to the existing community as they are to the new development).
- High volume of traffic on Hwy 21 is a mixed blessing.
- Involving the schools in the community. The school is on the edge of the community on a campus.
- Maintaining community involvement with the increased number of people commuting to Fox Cities for work. Commuter detachment from their community.
- Chains of retail stores on the outskirts that take business out of downtown.
- Commuters deciding to shop in Fox Cities rather than in their hometown.
- Big suburbs on the outskirts of town changing the feel of rural town to an urban one.
- No traffic lights to give drivers a chance to stop and look around.
- Depressed downtown.
- Heading west over bridge stoplight seems like it could cause accidents.

In six months, we will remember there is actually more going on in Omro than realized. We will remember the stores downtown in general and the riverfront. We will remember the pride people have in the community.

Two ideas that we will borrow from Omro for use in Wautoma and possibly Poy Sippi are the design and content of the Omro web site and the beautification techniques used in Omro, particularly how the trees softened the look of the main street and covered any abandoned building.