

# ***First Impressions***

***of***

**Phillips, WI**

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**Visit Conducted by Eagle River, WI  
May 8, 1996**

***A program for  
community improvement***

*Report prepared by:  
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# Introduction

The First Impressions program is designed to help communities learn about their existing strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of the first time visitor. Communities of somewhat similar size cooperate in this exchange program by sending unannounced teams of visitors to tour the area and report on their first impressions.

The team members are asked to consider a wide variety of community components in their several hour visit including initial visual perceptions as they first drove through the community, the entrances, signage and other features. They then spend part of the visit time driving the community to evaluate the downtown business area, any industrial park/area, parks, schools, residential districts, hospitals/clinics and other resources.

Team members also spend time walking through the community to get a feel for downtown appearance, the friendliness of the people, availability of community information from the chamber of commerce and government offices, and a variety of other aspects.

By exchanging teams and receiving their reports, both cooperating communities benefit from the First Impressions program. The First Impressions program was developed by Andy Lewis, Community Resource Development Agent for Grant County UW-Extension, and James Schneider, Grant County Economic Development Director.

The Eagle River/Phillips exchange was initiated by Zelda Anderson from the Phillips Main Street program. Bryan Pierce, Vilas County UWEX Resource Agent coordinated the Eagle River team through the Eagle River Area Chamber of Commerce. The population of the City of Eagle River is 1323, while the population of the City of Phillips is 1592. Both communities are located in northern Wisconsin.

The Eagle River team consisted of representatives from the Eagle River Area Chamber of Commerce and the Downtown Business Association:

Heida Barolak  
Marlene Mathison  
Bob Rosenak  
Michelle Rubo  
Bryan Pierce

Wednesday, May 8th, was the day the Eagle River team chose to make the visit. The weather was overcast and somewhat windy, so it was cool for the walking portion of the survey. The team carpoled in one van and arrived by 10:00 a.m. The drive-through part of the survey was conducted first, then the members split up into two groups to explore the community on foot. They ate lunch at two different restaurants, and visited a number of businesses, the chamber office, and government offices. The team left Phillips for the return trip at 2:30 p.m.

Following are the pooled comments from the team members as they reacted to the survey questions.

# As you approach the community ...

## I. What was my perception before visiting? What did I expect?

Note: Several of the team members had been in Phillips previously, but none had visited for an extended length of time.

*I thought it was going to be a logging town, small and non-tourist. I didn't think there would be much of a downtown.*

*More of an industrial community. My view was of a community with large industrial buildings.*

*I thought it was an out-of-the-way, drive through community.*

*A small business community, with a few shops downtown.*

*I had to look on the map to find out where I was going.*

## II. The "five minute" impression:

The following comments were recorded after driving through the community the first time without stopping.

*It looks coming in from the North that it's a clean town. The storefronts seem a little outdated. No parking meters in town (except courthouse). Good signage on information station. Sidewalks crumbling. Look like industry is its economic base. Stopped at concrete park. I think it's ugly, but I'm sure it's an attention getter.*

*From the north end of Phillips, the town looks clean and somewhat well-marked with signs to high school, information. Phillips Plastics looks like a major industry to the community. Stone park is absolutely beautiful! What an attraction! Very impressed with the figures as well as the soldier memorial flag raising with a wreath along side of it. Storefronts need revitalization, but noticed some empty businesses. The "Minnow Lake Loft" shop adds a unique touch to this small town.*

*Clean, some slight messiness around storage tanks on the river. Main street looks clean. Curbs, sidewalks need some repair. Most stores occupied. Could use some rebuilding on store fronts (Main Street project).*

*View of the riverfront includes some equipment clutter along the railroad tracks. The large manufacturing companies look prosperous - clearly a dominant part of the economy. Very nice view/green space along the river - could take even more advantage of that with a riverfront trail? Downtown stores seem filled and open. Information office was easy to see. Seems to be just one long commercial district - anyone located off the main road could have problems attracting customers. Concrete park is "unique."*

*Coming in I thought it was very clean. The downtown area needs some storefront clean up and new signs. The south end of town could use some clean up also. Liked where the information building was.*

# As you “drive” around town:

## III. Driving... evaluate EACH entrance.

*There were really two major entrances to the community - Hwy. 13 from the North and Hwy. 13 from the South.*

*Didn't particularly like the new entrance sign on the North - it didn't seem to fit the community image. Some sign clutter along the north entrance.*

*Some deterioration of buildings toward the south end. There really was no entrance sign we saw coming from the south. Where do the majority of visitors come from?*

*No signs from the south “Welcome to Phillips”.*

## IV. Driving... evaluate the downtown business area: (signs, appearance, size, etc.)

*Most are open. Those closed (few) look out of business. Only two for sale. Looks slow paced.*

*Store fronts need revitalization - maybe a little paint?*

*Signs were poor or missing - no directions to city hall or other buildings, or to the medical clinic. (Were these removed prior to road construction on Hwy. 13???)*

*Appeared to be a thriving downtown area. Many facades could use some design assistance, although only a few were truly in bad shape - an excellent project for the Main Street group.*

*Signs need upgrade, and so do storefronts.*

## IV. Driving... evaluate other business area.

*There was a business area off Main Street (on Avon St.), but it really looked run down, and the road was terrible.*

*County H - S. Avon St. had more empty businesses. This area didn't seem as prosperous. A couple of the facades were gaudy or really in need of improvement. Avon St. was in bad repair. Other streets were OK.*

## V. Driving... comments on residential:

*Houses look like low to moderate in cost, but maintained very well.*

*Some houses are run down, but seem to have clean yards. There are a number of older houses, but with obvious attempts made to keep them up well.*

*Older houses, but in pretty good condition. Street signs could be larger and easier to read.*

*The purple house detracts from the nearby art business. Most residences were small (old mill-town type) houses, but the vast majority seemed to be kept up well. The nursing home complex was not well marked from the highway.*

*The north side of town was nice with residential areas. The south side still needs a little work.*

## **VI. Driving... comments on:**

### **a. street signs**

*Were most of the street signs removed from Hwy. 13 for road construction along with the parking meters?*

*Not very noticeable.*

*There weren't any along the main street (Hwy. 13).*

*Very poor. No signage to show where basic establishments are located.*

### **b. traffic patterns/street conditions**

*Poor street conditions - repairs are scheduled. Rather heavy traffic on Main St.*

*Due to the layout of the city, some strange intersections.*

*Avon St. was rough.*

*Confusing with the angled streets.*

*Didn't care for the street set up. Most of them were very rough driving.*

### **c. welcome signs (at entrances)**

*See previous comments.*

*Coming in from the south side - not very nice. Didn't see any welcome sign.*

*The newer sign on the north entrance was obviously expensive - would have preferred a more "northwoods" theme. Need a nice community entrance sign with landscaping as a welcome from the south.*

*Did see one sign - was not very attractive to me or "northwoodsy."*

*North side **OK**. Didn't see one on South side.*

*None on the south entrance. Pretty ugly one on the north end.*

### **d. direction signs to parks, schools, hospitals/clinics, attractions, services (i.e. police), etc.**

*No signs.*

*No sign to Marshfield Clinic, police. Just saw one sign to high school and one to a park.*

*Lacking in general - were these also removed for the highway project? Didn't see the police department. The only sign I noticed was to the National Guard **armory**, which apparently is no longer in use in that capacity.*

*Not very good signs to schools. Didn't see any signs to hospital/clinic.*

**VII. Driving... comments on the industrial park/area; Sign well defined... busy... growing... new... etc.**

*The industrial area on the north side of town looked very prosperous and something the community can be very proud of. The sign indicated Industrial Park with an arrow, but was there actually a park beyond the highway tier of industries??*

*The train only runs a couple of times a week - the tracks sort of dominate the riverfront. The railroad bed would be a great opportunity for bike/hike trail if the railway ever fails.*

*Have Georgia Pacific put in a walkway to provide access along the riverfront??*

*Good sign. Busy area, but neat and controlled.*

*One major building from north approach looks old, but on looking back has a brand new addition.*

*Didn't think the signs in town were very noticeable or well done.*

**VIII. Driving... comments on schools.**

*Schools seem nice physically. No basis for quality evaluation.*

*Didn't see any at first. High school looks nice, elementary school looks like in the fifties. The old high school is an abandoned eyesore.*

*Nice high school grounds, lots of recreation facilities by elementary school, Old high school should be removed as an eyesore unless it receives a major redevelopment project. Old Normal Building - it was nice to see this former school building completely renovated and reused.*

*The old high school is an eyesore! Should be torn down and developed into a park. Nice library. New school is nice.*

*Old high school should be taken down. The new high school looks really nice. The grade school could use some fixing up on the outside.*

**IX. Driving... comments on parks, playgrounds, athletic facilities, etc.:**

*Nice parks. Nice playgrounds. I like that all the athletic facilities are near each other.*

*Athletic facilities looked great! Always glad to see a community promote sports at the schools.*

*Lidice park is a nice neighborhood area. Price youth baseball facility - could clean up the parking lot. Park across bridge (east of downtown) - beach was not signed at all, nor was the boat landing.*

*Nice parks and playgrounds. One needs some cleaning up - piles of dirt. No bathrooms or changing facility at the soccer park.*

*Athletic field OK. Nothing striking. School field looked well equipped. Only saw two small parks.*

**X. Driving... comments on other:**

*There seems to be some nice new homes being built.*

### **a. hospitals/clinics**

*Nice looking but needs signs to direct you there.*

*Found Marshfield Clinic by driving around - no sign.*

*Marshfield Clinic - needed signs for out of town visitors.*

*No signs, no hours mentioned. No instructions on where to go for an emergency.*

*Only found clinic after driving a while. No signs.*

### **b. billboards/advertising**

*You couldn't tell what business it was unless you walked out to the street to see the sign. They need better signs.*

*Not too many - some need a painting.*

*Sign clutter on north end of town lessens the aesthetic approach to the community.*

*Not very nice.*

## **Walking Around Town...**

### **XI. Walking around... comments on businesses (physical part): appearance, displays, signs, etc.**

*Opportunity for upgrading the below ground level stairways - these are unique features. Some could add new railings and stairways (perhaps with a brew pub below!).*

*Most businesses were open. Didn't notice vacant stores during initial drive through, although a number were apparent when we walked through.*

*Signage - suggest eliminating projecting signs (ex. beer brand signs), and striving for more uniform (in size and location), high quality signage on the facades.*

*No fast food - great! I would strive to keep "franchise" architecture from coming in. Have them take one of the buildings to renovate instead.*

*Displays in the store buildings were very attractive and gave a flavor of what was in the store. Purchased an item that was in the window. Noticed the chamber signs on members businesses, but they were small and not in a bold color so they could be more noticeable.*

*Store fronts need fixing up. A lot of buildings empty and broken windows. Some stores looked closed because of no OPEN signs in windows.*

*Many empty stores and a lot of new storefronts needed. It looks like an old town. F&AM building could be fixed up to be a real attraction. All basement accesses were eyesores!*

*Front of stores need to reflect business and be updated. And add signs.*

**XII. Walking around... comments on people: Were they friendly, did they know answers to questions, did they try to help, appearance, etc.**

*Everyone was friendly.*

*People were friendly and helpful. Did not know locations of public buildings, but tried to be helpful.*

*Most people were friendly, and greeted us, but not really interested in us.*

*People were friendly - on the street they said hello! We were greeted with a hello at all of the stores.*

*Outstanding service at Bonnie's 'Diner! They were also able to explain the "Dusty Dollars" chamber promotion well. Also helpful service at Ross's Sports, the hardware store and the convenience store, The clerk at the City Hall spent lots of time answering our questions. The County Clerk's office was not open during the noon hour, although there was a sign posting the hours. Neither were the County tourism office or the Zoning office staffed at that time. Did receive some assistance from the Register of Deeds office.*

**XIII. Community information: comments on...**

**a. community brochure (tourist type)**

*Very nicely done publication from the Phillips Area Chamber of Commerce. Also a well done Price County Regional Explorers Guide.*

*Well detailed book, but need signage so when people come to town they can locate the activities, beach, etc.*

*Was told we aren't a tourist town and don't want to be. Information bureau was too far from center of town. Had to ask for brochure on the area. Too much attention to material from other towns. Bathrooms need to be fixed.*

**b. businesses attractions brochures or directory**

*See Phillips book.*

*Nice description of industry in booklet.*

**c. community profile (demographic, industrial type information for prospective business people, etc.)**

*The Phillips Area Chamber of Commerce book gave very good background on the area attractions and businesses.*

*Good help from the Information Bureau lady,*

**d. map**

*Included in the Chamber book. This map could identify specific features such as major buildings and services - i.e. government offices, police stations, library, schools, parks, boat landing, beach, medical clinic, etc. About the only thing identified on it other than the street names was the information office location.*

*The Regional Explorers Guide map was well done and does a good job of identifying trail locations and other attractions in the area. This seems to be a very useful publication. Will this be reprinted after funding runs out from the Governor's Committee on Area Promotion??*

**e. other (i.e. bulletin/notice tourism, kiosks, etc.)**

*Two bulletin boards - both need upgrading and new maps.*

*Bulletin board by City Hall was good. Bulletin board by Information booth was water soaked, needed protection from the elements and upgrading.*

*Noticed the Chamber member stickers in storefronts.*

## **XIV. City Hall... describe your visit:**

**a. appearance of facility, including signing**

*Understand it is being replaced. Need city hall sign on main road.*

*No street directional signs. Kept up nicely on the exterior, but the interior is not at all accessible for the disabled.*

*The building is somewhat drab.*

**b. helpfulness of staff**

*The city clerk? was very helpful and provided a lot of information about the community, future plans for city hall, and what is happening with the road work,*

*Staff very well informed and helpful.*

**c. other**

*When the city hall is moved to the old armory, it will be even more important to provide good directional signage. Hopefully this current building can be renovated and used for a quality business or an office for the Chamber/Main Street program.*

## **XV. Chamber of Commerce... describe your visit**

**a. did people know where it was (or who to refer you to)?**

*Yes - but it wasn't clear if the information booth was the same as the Chamber office until we asked.*

*Yes.*

**b. comment on information available.**

*Lots of information was available, however the most local information was not prominently displayed, versus the other broader, more regional information. We could not even see the Phillips Chamber book until we asked for it as it was on a side wall.*

**c. comment on staff**

*Very outgoing, knowledgeable and helpful staff person. She provided excellent customer service - an asset to the community.*

*Excellent help - willing to share knowledge.*

**d. other (hours, appearance, locations, etc.)**

*Didn't like the large lettering on the roof of the information booth, although it was very visible from the road. The location seems to be good for people coming from the south, is this where the majority of visitor traffic comes from?*

*Perhaps re-use the current city hall as a Chamber office/Main Street omce as a second information area with more space. Maybe the County tourism office would also put an office, or at least their information, in that building too. It's a subtle,thing, but having the County tourism office on the lower level of the courthouse implies that tourism is less important to the County.*

*The information booth needs longer hours. The building itself was too crowded and featured too much out of the area material. It would be tough for staff to do office work in this facility.*

## **XVI. Other Stuff...**

**a. public restrooms (available, condition, etc.)**

*? - none noticed other than the information bureau, and they were broken!*

*They were out of order at the information office. The convenience store wound up being used by default.*

*Didn't see any.*

*Information bureau's was broken. The ones at the quick food mart were clean.*

**b. payphones (working, phonebook intact, etc.)**

*1 pay phone, no book.*

*Available in a couple of places - easy to see and access.*

*Saw several in the area - few books.*

*Saw only two payphones - by the Courthouse and at a gas station.*

*Only saw one.*

**c. parking**

*Downtown parking was nice to be close to the stores - no meters. But from what we were told, the meters will be re-installed after the road construction is complete. Noticed signs on businesses to promote getting rid of the meters.*

*No meters at present. No problem parking.*

*Plenty along the streets. Are parking meters necessary?*

*Plenty - meters taken out for road construction. Several businesses support not putting them back.*

*Only saw parking on Main St. Didn't seem like there was any lot anywhere. It seems like there are a lot of spots downtown.*

**d. water fountains, benches, etc.**

*Didn't see any*

*Didn't see anything.*

*Beautiful view from beach. beach was littered with garbage and not marked at all.*

*None in the downtown area. No garbage cans other than at convenience stores.*

*None noticed - it was early in the year, but could have some by the Information office. Also no trash receptacles.*

**e. Other**

Community needs more restaurants.

## **WRAP UP**

### **A. Using your senses...**

#### **1. What does the community TASTE like?**

*Went to eat at Crystal's Restaurant and it was ok, but very smoky. Could use a little fix up inside, but VERY FRIENDLY!*

*No real specialty shop. Ate at Crystal Restaurant. The food was ok, but the wait staff were great! I would go back because of the staff. The community needs more eating establishments.*

*Good food and excellent service at Bonnie's.*

*Not many restaurants, where we ate (Crystal) was good homemade cooking. One store downtown offered specialty coffee and other items - "very nice".*

*Tastes like Bonnie's soup and pie to me - great!. The waitresses were some of the finest I have seen!*

#### **2. What does the community SMELL like?**

*Like good, homemade food.*

*Smelled like wood from the Georgia-Pacific plant.*

*Has aroma of burning material from industry.*

*It smells like an industrial town. Burnt marshmallows.*

*I could smell something from all the industrial plants along the river - didn't like it.*

### 3. What SOUNDS did you hear?

*Traffic on Main St.*

*Traffic on the Main St. - Nice having a noon siren.*

*Some humming sounds of industry - otherwise only traffic.*

*Traffic.*

*Noon hour horn blast. Lots of people in cafe - positive community sounds.*

### 4. What did the community FEEL like? (emotional response, i.e. cold/warm, crowded/deserted, inviting, etc. or physical responses, i.e. rough streets, etc.)

*The people on the streets, in the stores were very friendly. People on the street said hello.*

*Homey.*

*It felt warm personally. First impression was of clean, busy town.*

*It was small town. Not cold, but content to go at a slow pace.*

*I feel it was a cold/warm response. I don't think they want tourists. It wasn't very inviting, although a couple of stores in town were very warm and nice.*

### B. List the most positive things you observed about the community:

1. *Everyone said Hi to you!*
2. *Nice large sidewalks.*
3. *No parking meters (at the time I was here).*
4. *Very clean town.*
5. *A lot of cars parked on Main St. Looked busy.*

1. *Clean*
2. *Helpful*
3. *Friendly*
4. *People keep to task at hand*

1. *Clean*
2. *Good industry*
3. *Good restaurants*
4. *Pleasant people*
5. *Nice looking entrances*

1. *Friendly people*
2. *Uniqueness of stores*
3. *Stone park was beautiful*
4. *Prosperous industry for such a small town.*

1. *River/flowage views*
2. *Customer service*
3. *Homey atmosphere*
4. *Renovated Normal School building*
5. *Lack of franchise architecture/mall keeping downtown healthier*

**C. Describe ONE idea that you will steal for use in your own business/community and describe how you will start to implement it within the next 72 hours:**

*I will take back the outstanding customer service - especially at Bonnie's and the Information booth. I will use these as an example for the staff at my office and for future customer service training.*

*Community bulletin board, Excellent service at restaurant,*

*We could use a bulletin board with information at our information bureau.*

*Creating an atmosphere. Minnow Lake Loft went to a lot of trouble to take an ordinary store and make you feel like you were in a garden.*

*Change some displays in my store that will work with my merchandise - I saw that in a cozy gift shop.*

**D. What will you remember most about the community six months from now?**

*The Minnow Lake Loft Gift Shop.*

*The feeling of community contentment.*

*The excellent service at lunch and the food.*

*The stone park and the gift store "Minnow Lake Loft".*

*The outstanding customer service. Also the great potential for taking advantage of the waterfront for a truly aesthetic downtown area.*

**E. Other comments that just didn't seem to fit anywhere else:**

*Too bad the community can't capitalize more on the beauty of the river and lakes in the area.*

*The beach and bathhouse were in poor condition. Maybe I missed a better one somewhere else. Need cleaning and new bathhouse badly.*

*It is a pity the town can't use the lakefront for a park for walking trails. No real use of scenic beauty from the higher elevation. Too much industry along the tracks.*

*The public beach is located between two industrial parks. Has hazardous items on the beach and is very small,*

*The convenience store had Main Street sweatshirts prominently displayed - a nice, supportive gesture!*