

First Impressions

of

***RICHLAND CENTER, WI
BY LANCASTER, WI
VISIT CONDUCTED 5/20/92***

A program for community improvement

Developed by:

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Our Lancaster team visited Richland Center on Wednesday, May 20, 1992. The weather was very nice with clear skies and warm temperatures.

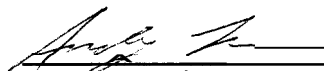
Our team consisted of seven people:

4 male, 3 female
One High School Senior (Graduated)
Two business people
One Chamber of Commerce Executive
One School teacher
A mix of new and old Lancaster residents

We were all for the most part, favorably impressed with the community of Richland Center. Many of us were surprised by the variety of retail services and public services offered by a rural community the size of Richland Center. Richland Center is fortunate to be a major retail center for the Richland County area. On the other hand, we were somewhat alarmed at the lack of planning which appears to have accompanied growth in Richland Center. The high volume of noisy traffic accompanied by "sprawling" retail development along the highways detracts from the pleasant small town feeling.

We were pleased to see that there has been some attempt to take advantage of the tourism industry. Your specialty shops such as "Something Special" and the antique mall are the types of businesses we are lacking here in Lancaster. On the other hand, you have a lot more potential for development and promotion of the Frank Lloyd Wright theme and the Main Street concept. We wish you well with your application to the Main Street program and your efforts at improving the community. Someone has done an excellent job in promoting and explaining this concept to the merchant in the City!

Thank you for doing this exchange - we hope that this program will prove to be an educational one for both communities! Perhaps we can do a "progress report" sometime in the future.



Andy Lewis, Grant County Resource Agent
U.W. Extension

1. *What was my perception before visiting the community: What did I expect, etc.*

The majority of my visits to Richland Center have been "drive through" in nature. Seemed like a growing rural community with a high traffic count. Always wanted to stop at "Something Special".

Typical County Seat

Dairy community

Junior College

Small community - Did not know of any industry or tourism.

Had not been to the area before - expected an environment and town very similar to Lancaster.

2. *Approaching the community, what do **you** notice first? (Evaluate **EACH** entrance)*

Positive:

From the East (Hwy 14) there is a new road (until you get to town). The development from this approach would give one the impression that Richland Center is a larger community.

The approach from the West on County Rd. Q, is probably the nicest approach to the community (Until you get close to town where there are some buildings in poor repair). The community should consider doing a plan for the development of the river corridor. The historic boarding house, rail depot, park and river offer an ideal opportunity for managed development. You would have a hard time discovering these amenities if you came to the community on one of the major routes.

Approaching from the West (Hwy 14), the University, River and Park give the visitor a good 1st Impression.

Nice countryside.

80 - Some neat looking farms.

New school area will look nice, nice city park, coming in from 14 E - looks impressive. Courthouse attractive, nice countryside.

The countryside itself was beautiful - the town is placed beautifully among the hills.

Lovely country approaching city from south. City itself is prettily located in the hills.

Negatives:

Richland Center has a number of approaches which can lead to traffic congestion - Something you wouldn't expect in a small town (Traffic counts could be viewed as positive by many retail businesses).

From the South (Hwy 80), you are greeted with the Richland County Hwy shop (piles of black top and gravel) and some older manufacturing type buildings. The Highway shop is better kept then most, but it isn't in an ideal location (Similar to Lancaster's Highway shop).

Approaching from the East (Hwy 14), I was struck by the apparent "sprawl of retail development" along the Highway corridor. If it hasn't happened already, this will likely lead to traffic congestion and a dying downtown, not to mention a by-pass at some point. Is there any zoning or plan for the Highway corridor?

*No entrance welcoming sign from Hwy 80.
Scattered businesses, ugly power plant coming in.*

80 - Welding shop/industrial.

*County shop looks dumpy - scattered.
No welcome sign.*

As we entered, nothing that was man-made attracted me. Other entrances were better, but coming from Lancaster, it isn't a very attractive welcome ... didn't notice a welcome sign for that matter. Once you get further into the community, it improved, but a general paint it - spruce it up - clean it day seems to be in order for most of the downtown area. (This is the common time of year to do it I realize!)

Coming in from south - county shop & power company & business district is most un-impressing - messy, dirty looking. Downtown area - depressed looking, dingy. A general picking up and wash/fresh paint would help.

3. As you drive around town your comments on:

A. Appearance

1. Downtown

I was struck by the high level of highway traffic and low level of foot traffic. The traffic may actually deter people from stopping. The downtown needs some type of coordinated theme (Driving through the community you wouldn't know that this was the birthplace of Frank Lloyd Wright).

No cohesive theme.

Some interesting restoration - Union Block

Congested, unorganized on Main Street. New business district nice. Heavy traffic.

Need to determine whether the cement planters are for trash, trees, flowers or what. Would be nice to have a consistent theme in planing them. From what I saw, some were done in a variety of ways -- others were full of cigarette butts. (Some flowers throughout would look nice).

As I note this later, I can't remember any trees or plantings on Main Street. Plantings might help to cover dinginess and brighten up areas. Congested, depressed.

2. Residential

The community offers a nice mix of residential housing. I was interested in the older homes on County Q and the "mansion" on First Street.

Typical, except businesses seem indiscriminantly placed among residential areas.

Some nice old homes - N. Central and other areas - interesting restorations, lots of trees, well-kept lawns.

Housing very nice when away from business district.

Overall, thought there was pride in the homes - most were well kept and attractive. Quite a variety - good right next to poor.

Nice housing away from downtown area.

3. Industrial park

The industrial park appeared to be well kept but full. It was signed and appeared to be full of activity. We were told by several people including the parking attendant (McDougal) that the city was building a new one .

Nicely laid out.

Impressive - could use some landscaping.

Looks nice, looks full, heard there was another, but couldn't find it.

Nice - well done - looks like the problem will be space and keeping it in a specific area.

Neat and clean, but small.

4. Parks

Kronshag park was very nice, but was under some type of construction when we were there. The city needs a recreation plan for its river frontage!

Nice. Main park difficult to judge, due to construction & landscaping.

The riverfront park looks especially nice - hard to see some parts because of work being done.

Nice area, like the stream, should be nice when finished.

Looks as though it will be a great asset to the community. Was hard to tell what all was being done.

Lovely location on Pine River. Much under construction. Other nicely kept smaller parks.

5. Schools

The elementary school appears to have been built in the 50's but was in excellent shape. The playground next to the highway however needs some improvement.

The High School in town appeared to be small and in poor repair. Did have a surfaced track! We were told that a new school was being built on the highway.

Appear very nice.

Looked very well kept up.

Schools attractive, well kept. Attractive University.

What we saw seemed well kept - is there a brochure for the school system? Didn't see one.

New school under construction on south side of town. Schools look nice & neat & clean.

6. Infrastructure (Sidewalks, streets, lighting, etc.)

Some of the sidewalks and streets were in poor repair. The flower boxes downtown are in poor repair, and all but one were empty.

Poor signage, roads need work.

Sidewalks need repair.

Needs work.

Utilitarian; lack of handicapped ramps on sidewalks.

Flower tubs need to be kept clean & planted.

Could use repair in most places.

7. Other

City hall was in poor repair and the "Tanning Salon" building is an "eye sore".

Are there any zoning laws? Everything is scattered about.

Courthouse benches - old coffee cans for trash may be frugal, but tacky, nevertheless. Benches are charming, but need painting (a bright color perhaps).

B. Signing

1. Community entrance/exit signs

Didn't notice any signs which welcomed visitors or introduced the community (Should consider a slogan which capitalizes on Frank Lloyd Wright).

Hwy 80 - Population signs only

Hwy 14 - Nice & simple, but hard to read.

Hwy 14 (W) - good, but top part unreadable

Hwy 14 (E) - good, residential needs some stop signs
Some street signs missing.

Hard to read when coming in on Hwy 14 from the west, none found on 80.

The nicest one is by the college - that entrance to town is definitely the most impressive. That sign, however, was very cluttered - you just can't read that much as you drive by. No other entrances had much other than population signs.

Only "population" signs, except for 14 W & E (best looking entrance to city). 14 W & E signs are too busy, hard to read.

2. Streets

Rough, hard to follow.

Wrong way - one way warning.
Some corners missing name signs.

Poor signs, many bad intersections in downtown, streets rough.

Noticed some missing from intersections.

Poor. We noticed 2 street signs were missing in downtown area.

3. Directions to Hospital/Parks/etc.

The hospital was the only facility that had a directional sign. The residents know where they are, does the visitor?

Poor signage, too small.

Hard to find.

Hospital hard to find.

We found small hospital signs, but nothing that really stood out if I had an emergency. The park is easy to locate if you are driving through.

Saw two small white signs - no blue "H's." Hospital and Doctor offices shown on city map.

4. Storefront signs

I liked the "Something Special" sign. Overall, there was a lack of uniform signing.

Average.

Readable - nothing outstanding.

Cluttered, hard to read in downtown.

Average - most were done years ago.

Not crisp. Most windows on downtown stores need washing.

5. Industrial park

The old industrial park did have a sign identifying the location.

Nice & full - accessible. New one accessible too

Attractive, best possible use with area.

Nice.

Clearly marked in front.

6. City Hall, police, etc.

Needs a good sign and some major renovation.

The only good example of signing was at the Symons Recreation Complex. The sign specifically welcomes the

public to use the pool, whirlpool, etc.

Nice county building, not so nice city hall.

Sign out in front of sheriff's office - good, readable phone number.

Like phone number on police station sign.

Sign on police station was easy to read and a good idea of having telephone number on it.

Police sign - nice sign with phone number on outside for off hours.

7. Billboards/advertising, etc.

No uniform signing and a lot of signs which just add clutter. If the community did an inventory of signs, I think they would be amazed at the number and variety. Signing should provide direction not confusion.

Not too bad.

O.K.

Cluttered when in town.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

Signs good when you get there.

4. Visitor/community information (Visited by one team only)

A. City/Village Hall

1. Is there a street map?

The city provided us with a map, but the photocopying and small scale made it difficult to read. The street index and legend was helpful in locating facilities but the street addresses should be added to the listing of facilities.

Yes - several different maps.

Yes - nice historical guide.

Yes - great map except for red numbers on red background. Good self-guided tour map of historical & architectural sites in city.

2. Community brochure/directory

Was not given a brochure or directory.

Nice phone guide.

Liked the "Pride Guide" idea.

Not found, but not looked for either.

3. Community profile (including business and industrial opportunities).

We were referred to the Development Corporation office and Chamber of Commerce.

4. Recommendations on place to stay/eat/visit.....etc.

Recommended several places to eat and stay.

Nice restaurants, plenty of places to eat.

Everyone seemed opinionated, either hated the place or strongly recommended.

Chamber person gave a couple of suggestions.

5. Contact people & addresses listed if I want more info.

Received friendly referrals to the Development Corporation and Chamber of Commerce.

Yes.

6. Complimentary Items (Postcards, bookmarks, coupons, etc.)

None

Didn't see any.

Not found.

B. Chamber office/visitor info center

1. Easy to locate (and did people refer you to it?)

Most of the people in town knew its location.

One tourist information center closed.

Easy to find.

Yes - stopped 4 people on the street and they all knew where it was. Nice green awning was the thing they noted to point it out.

Yes - "look for green canopy"

2. Comments on info available (Street map/brochures/community profile/etc.)

Good.

Liked the "Richland Area Pride Guide"
People seemed well-informed.

Liked the set-up where economic development and chamber are in same area and pamphlets available outside. Also loved the outside board for map and posters. Even though office is "back" of the street, you have made it easily accessible.

We went to Courthouse and library - they were very helpful & friendly. Actually give us more information than asked for. Couldn't find a county map. Oops - on back of city map - needs more road name marking. Excellent town historical tour map found; self-guided walking tour of historical and architectural sites.

3. Recommendations on places to stay/eat/visit etc.

Good.

Suggested 2 places - didn't elaborate on anything in particular.

4. How prepared/helpful were they.

Very friendly.

The chamber lady was very friendly and helpful. Would have loved to stay and visit with her and compare chamber notes!

At courthouse & library, people were very helpful & friendly.

5. Convenient hours?

Chamber office well-staffed, good hours.
One museum/gift shop had none.

Economic development committee offices were there to help when chamber wasn't.

Can't say I remember the hours open - just know with 2 people and 2 offices together, chances are one would be there.

Yes.

C. Info from general community (service station/motel/bars/restaurants/shop employees/etc.)

1. How knowledgeable about the community were they?

McDougal, the parking attendant was very friendly and informed about the community. Parking tickets are only \$2!

Realtor - seemed knowledgeable.

Retail - according to realtor, downtown is dead.

Realtor told us "downtown is dead, going to be bypassed". Good area by Wal-mart, but overpriced. Quote "Walk into any business downtown besides the banks, and they'll probably sell to you."

Medical facilities seemed to be a low priority for people we talked to. However, we found a retirement community brochure that indicated satisfactory doctor and hospital facilities.

Senior Citizens Offices/Library - very helpful, answered all of our questions, gave good directions, gave us a city map.

Library/Historical - very informative on history, etc.

Talked to new people (college?) didn't offer information.

Asked a few about this "Main Street" program and got various responses ... some negative in the downtown shops. But, most seemed fairly well-informed.

Clerks at Something Special, River Coop, Ken's restaurant, Pharmacy, and Hardware store were for the most part informed. Something Special had a nice brochure rack - the clerk used information from this rack. She gave me a sheet titled "Things To Do In Richland County" - Great idea! This could be further developed with more specific information ... i.e. where could I visit a cheese factory?, Where could I visit a dairy farm? Does anyone rent touring or mountain bikes?, When and where is the Farmers Market?

I'm personally impressed that your community is trying to do something to improve.

Person staffing the antique Store was not overly friendly, or knowledgeable about the community.

A woman staffing the historical room in the Keith

Brewery Library was very knowledgeable about the history of the community - What an interesting person! A directional sign is needed for the Library.

2. Did they refer you to someone else who could help?

Most people were aware of the Chamber Of Commerce Office and the Development Corporation office. I was also a bit surprised at how many people were aware of the Main Street Program ... Someone has done their homework on educating the community.

Referred to Chamber.

Yes.

I asked one lady a question and she said "there is our old mayor who quit - he might be able to tell you."

3. Attitude, appearance, etc.

Most people were very friendly.

Realtor very negative about downtown.

Friendly.

Everyone was friendly.

After going in many downtown shops, I can't say I thought they were extremely friendly. They kept to their own business for the most part, unless I asked them something.

4. Other comments

I like the mall concept for small communities like Richland Center, but I observed one problem with it while visiting the antique mall. When utilizing exhibitors to staff a mall, they often are not knowledgeable about 95% of the items exhibited - This was the case at the antique mall.

Said half of downtown was for sale.

Outstanding library facilities.

Quote "Lots of money in town, but no one spends any."

Need to make sure people in "tourist-type" stores are well-informed ... and friendly.

The hostess at the Country Kitchen was unable to seat a group of seven people (Asked us if we wanted to sit together after we gave her the number of people). Waitress was friendly and helpful but didn't recommend special until we asked. Food was good.

It seems that you have a very large retail base compared to our town - although the town seems very spread out. I was somewhat surprised to find the large business are further out ... from those I talked with, there aren't good feelings from the downtown people about the Wal-Mart area - typical I suppose.

We had coffee and muffins at Kenny's restaurant. Food was good and Kenny was extremely helpful. However, the ordering and clean-up procedures are not readily apparent and should be clarified for first time visitors.

5. General

A. Do residents know their community history/events/directions/etc.

I sensed that people were knowledgeable about their community but not enthusiastic. For example they knew there was a Frank Lloyd Wright Festival, but had to refer to the poster to tell you about the events. If you were willing to sell your history, Illinois would gladly move your city to be able to promote the Wright heritage!

Yes.

No one ever mentioned Frank Lloyd Wright to me.

Seem to be pretty informed - people on the street very helpful.

The ones we talked to had a good grasp of where things were and were able to give us directions.

B. Services...variety of retail...lodging facilities...

Clearly, Richland Center is a major retail trade center. There are few communities of this size in S.W. Wisconsin with the variety of retail in Richland Center.

The White House offers nice accommodations.

White House clerk didn't know much about area.

Yes.

Motel didn't offer much information. We asked what there is to do in town. Their answer was "Not much." They were friendly.

Was impressed by the variety and amount of business.

Good variety for size of town.

C. Are there public restrooms?

Did not notice any but they were likely available at city hall.

?

Didn't find any.

Used those in the city hall office - didn't notice others.

D. Payphones...are they working, phone books intact.

Pay phone at the community center (County Rd Q) did not have a book.

Didn't check.

Never saw one.

?

E. Industrial park...does it look active & attractive.

Existing industrial park is attractive and full. The fact that you are building another would indicate that you are not satisfied with your success and is a positive step in the right direction.

Yes.

Could be improved.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

F. What does the community TASTE like? (Specialty restaurants/bakeries/etc.)

I've always said that I would like to stop at the pastry shop and bakery but never have. If the parking was improved here, I would guess that there would be an increase in the number of visitors stopping.

Kenny's - good muffins.

All food we tried was good.

Good muffins!

Good basic restaurants. City water - excellent.

G. What does community SMELL like?

Nothing out of the ordinary until we arrived.

"Something Special" - herbal scents.

No offensive smells.

None noticed.

H. What SOUNDS did you hear?

Traffic noise can be a little overwhelming at times.

Noisy downtown, but given the traffic pattern, understandable.

Noisy, traffic was loud downtown.

Spent much time downtown, so traffic was predominant.

Spent most time in downtown area, so I noticed mostly auto/traffic noise.

I. What did community FEEL like (Emotional response, i.e. cold/warm, crowded/deserted, inviting, etc.)

As mentioned earlier, Richland Center has a strange mix of high automobile traffic but low pedestrian traffic. To a certain extent, it feels like a bigger city due to the high volume of retail activity. I enjoyed stops at "Something Special", the antique store, and Ken's restaurant - I will likely return with my family.

Everyone we talked to was helpful.

Crowded, but inviting.

A typical amount of friendliness.

Typical, wonderful, small-town, mid-America.

DESCRIBE THE PEOPLE YOU MET (Friendly, helpful, etc.)

For the most part people were friendly and helpful but they didn't always communicate the pride they should have felt

in their community.

Friendly, helpful.

Everyone was helpful.

Had no complaints, everyone was friendly.

Store clerks weren't overly friendly - if you approached them, they answered, but a shy person would probably leave with no word spoken. People on the street were friendly if you asked them a question.

Nice smile from lady when she yelled at us to go the right way, as we turned wrong. Friendly, helpful. Possibly we looked lost & she stopped to try to help. Not many people out walking the streets, but it was a Wednesday (work day) and early in the tourist season (before Memorial Day).

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS/OBSERVATIONS:

Pockets of very attractive buildings & land amidst sloppiness.

My first observations and the one I will remember is the general location - the hills and greenery wherever you looked. A friendly town nestled in a beautiful valley - interesting people, interesting things going on (posters in windows, etc.) Lots of churches. I wouldn't mind making my home in this town.

Wouldn't mind living here, but could we find a Job? Economically stagnant? Beautiful country - recreation should be developed so people can enjoy it.

Time was limited - I felt as though we neglected many areas ... most time was spent downtown. College area looked very nice. Overall, it seems like a very nice community - one that would be an enjoyable place to live. Seemed much larger than Lancaster in retail base.

Positive feeling about the friendliness of people - everyone we met was pleasant and helpful.

WHAT WILL YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THIS COMMUNITY SIX MONTHS FROM NOW

The availability and growth of the retail segment of the economy.

"Something Special" Store

The library

The University & the Symons Recreation Complex

The attitude of the realtor who derided downtown business community.

Location - Library - Beautiful Court House

Good shopping if nearby - at the mall, Wal-mart, etc.

Liked the "Pride Guide" - in the process of doing one for Lancaster. How important it is to keep things cleaned up - just neatness and cleanliness means a lot when you drive through a town.

Wonderful library. Friendly, helpful people. Impressive Courthouse.

6. *Doing it Right!*

A. List the 5 MOST positive things you observed about the community.

"Things to do In Richland County" promotional literature

Specialty stores: Antiques, Something Special

Beginning to capitalize on Frank Lloyd Wright heritage

Eagerly pursuing the Main Street Program: I liked the educational displays on the Main Street program that were exhibited in the vacant store fronts.

Building a new industrial park

B. Describe ONE idea that you will steal for use in your own business/community and describe the steps you will take to implement it within the NEXT 72 HOURS!

A detailed listing of "Things to do in Lancaster or Grant County".