

# **First Impressions**

of

**RIO, WI**

By Brooklyn, WI  
Visit Conducted 6/98



**A program for community improvement**



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# FIRST IMPRESSIONS

## BROOKLYN'S VISIT TO RIO

### COMPOSITE REPORT

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The Brooklyn "First Impressions" team consisted of four members: two business persons, one homemaker, and the Green County community resource development educator. Two members of the team were female; two male.

Because of schedules, the team visited on two different days: a Saturday and a Tuesday. The weekend and weekday visitations made for a more comprehensive "snapshot" of Rio.

#### Summary of the Report:

The team didn't know much about Rio prior to our visit. You were a very pleasant surprise. We believe Rio has a lot going for it and you are obviously making strides. When it came to listing the "five most positive things" about Rio we had nearly a score of (different) responses, which means we all noticed a lot of positives.

#### In brief:

- o There are a large number of community entrances to Rio which present some challenges and opportunities.
- o The team used words like "clean," "well-kept," and "pride" to describe your community. We liked Rio!
- o "Potential" is another key word. We saw all kinds of possibilities: retail, industrial, and recreation/tourism.
- o Developing a "community of signs" -- linked by theme, color, and design -- might be something to explore. Your variety of entrances means steering and directing people is a key focus.
- o The industrial park needs to be better signed and marketed.
- o You have a great park, but it appears to be under-utilized. Firemen's Park is a wonderful asset and people should be invited, welcomed, and encouraged to use it (internal marketing?)
- o You've made a lot of infrastructure improvements which looked to us to be part of a comprehensive plan.
- o Rio seemed "bigger" and to have more going for it than other communities of your size.
- o Nice, friendly people! And one of our team had some delightful encounters with some very courteous, friendly Rio youth who gave excellent directions. Very impressive.
- o Rio has so much potential that we thought maybe some internal and external marketing "tools" would be helpful: brochures, customer service training, signage, etc. to fully capitalize.

- Three of the team who visited on a Saturday expressed their surprise that Rio wasn't busier. All three used the term "deserted." Our team visitor on a Tuesday noticed a much busier, more vibrant, heavier trafficked community. In some small communities, it's just the opposite, busier on a Saturday. It wasn't a "problem," but we thought we'd call your attention to it(?)
- We had a friendly divergence of opinion on our team. Some saw Rio as "having it all together," expanding, a nice mix of several important community elements. Another believed Rio is a "tale of two cities." Those comments are on the next-to-last page.

Overall, we were extremely impressed with Rio. **You** have a very nice community and we **learned** a lot from you. Thank you for being our partner in this "First Impressions" program. And good luck in all your future community development efforts!

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

- \*Rio seems “bigger“ than their actual population
- \*Recreation and camping area
- \*Good location because of highways: proximity to Columbus and Madison
- \*Perhaps in a bit of a slump, as communities go through sometimes
- \*Wondered how “Ree-oh” became “Ri-oh” and what influence the river had on the community
  
- \*Brown fields
- \*Empty buildings
- \*Has airport
- \*People are friendly
- \*Problems with business growth
  
- \*I’ve never been to Rio before. Expected it to be similar to Brooklyn due to population.
  
- \*Small, friendly community, slightly run down, friendly, some tourism, because of proximity to Portage, etc.

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

### Positive:

Community seemed well kept

- \*Homes, businesses, streets in nice repair
- \*Pride in appearance

\*A lot of entrances to the community -- which is a challenge in terms of steering and directing people; placing entrance signs to the community, etc. However, all those entrances are also an opportunity because you can welcome people in many ways, get them into other parts of town, etc.

Clean appearance

Quiet

- \*Great library
- \*Industrial park available

\*Intersection B and 16 from West. Messy intersection but nice and clean looking businesses with cars. Rio population sign let us know we were here.

\*Coming on 16 from South. Nice Rio sign. confusing road leading to school.

\*Coming in on 16 from North. Good Business District sign.

\*16 seems to whiz by with traffic. There are **45** mph on Hwy. 2 gas stations and a few

abandoned buildings, but they are not junky.

**Negative:**

\*NO ENTRANCE WELCOME SIGNS on many of the community entrances, just on the "main" ones

\*Even off the main entrances, I'm not sure people would know where to go to find the elementary school, downtown, etc. (I did see the one downtown business district sign)

\*Empty building at entrance to community

\*A lot of weeds grown up. Just some simple clean-up and mowing would make for a more pleasant, welcoming appearance.

\*The business district sign can only be seen from the direction coming from Columbus

\*Very few residents visible (on a Saturday)

\*Not enough signage

\*Suggestion: Think about a "community of signs" -- all of one theme, color scheme, etc. for each entrance, plus coordinated directional signs to get people to police, village hall, schools, libraries, etc. Think about where a visitor needs to get to.

**3. As you drive around town, your comments on:**

**A. Appearance**

**1. Downtown:**

\*Clean

\*Storefronts clean and neat

\*Streets, curb, gutter clean, in good repair

\*Very clean, updated good condition sidewalks

\*Looks like a recent facelift

\*Many pretty good condition buildings

\*Nice municipal parking lot

\*Back of buildings neat

\*Minimum overhead wires

\*Good cross-section business district

\*Great potential for historic buildings, but poor preservation techniques and materials

\*Suggested project: Have an educational program on historic preservation, then encourage and support businesses which strip off the fiberglass and wood false fronts of buildings and restore them to their natural beauty. You have a gem of a downtown, but one wearing cheap makeup and jewelry when the original beauty is there. No need for a cover-up!

.You have a riot of signage on the buildings. There's no uniform look, color, style, size and while it may work for each individual business owner, it works against your downtown as a whole and reduces everyone's potential overall. Just step out into the street and look up one side and down the other (at the signs). Some are wood, some are plastic, some are neon, some are big, some are small. There's no coherent look

which says this is a unified downtown, a whole.

## 2. Residential

- Pride in ownership
- Houses well kept
- Lawns mowed
- Houses freshly painted
- Landscaping
  
- Beautiful homes
- Some residential sidewalks are in really bad, crumbly shape (including the one that leads to the downtown)
- A new subdivision, but lots of great places that could be rehabbed and not lead to sprawl
- What potential for some homes to be upscale bed and breakfast inns!
- It looks like Columbus has a rich history (great old homes, some wonderful historic buildings, etc.), but nobody I talked with seemed to know that history. I'm still curious and would like to know more.
- The old stone mill could be a restaurant, antique mall, etc.
- \*A lot of houses for sale. 12-15, maybe. What's up?

-Expanding

- Looks like all well maintained
- \*About same age older homes
- Older subdivision across 16 nice; **some** new residential development north edge of town
- I was surprised to see trailer homes

## 3. Industrial park

-Yes

- Undeveloped
- Sign posted for 13 acres

- Well marked sign on 16 but needs paint job.
- Where exactly is the industrial park?

-Was it that area where there are storage facilities and a gravel cul-de-sac turn-around? If that's it, I was thinking about myself playing the role of a potential business developer and the competition. This park wasn't well signed; it wasn't mowed/trimmed; I didn't know who to call or how to find out about purchasing; etc. You've done the hard work; now you need to do the little stuff to make it easy for people to start a business in Rio. Marketing, basically, and not expensive to do. But look at your competitor's parks some time: kept up, easy-to-read sign with a number, name, address, and so forth.

#### **4. Parks**

\*Firemen's Park is really nice, but there wasn't ONE SOUL in it. I truly didn't get it. School was out. It was a nice day. No pick-up games, no organized sports, nothing. Do you need to structure some activities? Do you need to have summer recreation programs there? Do you need to invite kids and welcome them to ride their bikes, Big Wheels, play with toys, etc.? Unrealized potential.

\*The volleyball pits need to have the weeds pulled. Tennis courts, too. Both look like no one ever plays. Sorry. I just don't get it. You have a very nice facility -- unused.

\*Two shelters for rent, one an old one-room school.

\*Playground equipment, bail diamonds, horse shoes.

\*Two shelters, one enclosed building

\*Fireman's Park. No one was there the day we visited. A variety of activities available. Elementary School had large playground. Children were there.

#### **\*Schools**

\*Elementary and high school. Look new.

\*Great looking schools

•High school/middle

\*Elementary

\*Good looking schools

\*Elementary by the park was a good idea; however, no kids in the park proper, but at the school

#### **6. Infrastructure**

\*Look new/redone

\*Benches and flowers

\*No overhead wires

\*Shows improvement

\*A mixed bag. Some new (like new sidewalks by school, downtown, etc.); however, a lot of curb and sidewalks were in pretty bad shape. Assume this is a phased plan to redo in sections?

\*New street signs (green); a few are still the old white ones

\*Some streets are showing some age.

\*Streets in good shape except for back road streets and sidewalks. We were there during the day, so don't know about lighting.

#### **Other:**

\*What would attract people to camp here? Went out to one campground: small, marshy

pond,. People were fishing. It looked full. Long term camping was the majority.

## **B. Signing**

### **1. Community entrance/exit signs**

\*Rio has an incredibly large amount of community entrances. Many are not signed to welcome guests. This is a challenge, I know, because of so many entrances, but for visitors coming to the community, you have to think about their first impression of Rio, and then how to steer them -- from a variety of locations -- to the key places they might want to go (and where you'd like them to go).

\*No sign on County Hwy. B.

\*No sign B and 22 showing Rio

\*Need larger sign

\*There is a sign placed *off* 16 as you head north with community logo. Not easily seen from road should be a direction sign there to downtown.

\*The camping sign, while helpful, needs some thought. Basically, you're directing people out of town. Think about campers' needs. They need food and beverage, gasoline, sometimes medical attention, directions, etc. **Also**, suppose it's raining. Maybe they want to come in to town and shop, poke around, etc. Of course, you need to steer people to your three campgrounds, but maybe invite them and inform them -- in a quick, easy, friendly way -- of what there is in Rio for their next visit.

### **2. Streets**

\*Typical signs

\*Nice, new green signs. A few of the older, white ones still around. Not a problem, just not uniform. No big deal.

\*Shows improvement, on-going basis.

\*Streetsigns are okay.

### **3. Directions to hospital, parks, etc.**

\*None that I observed.

\*Not noticeable.

\*None seen except in park front

\*I missed them, if there were any. Once again, think about what a visitor needs: how to get emergency medical care, where to eat, how to get to your attractions, how to get to the schools, where is police protection, etc. You know these things as residents, but

\*Minimum. Very few.

\*Only on highways coming/going.

\*Not many, which is great. Now -- BEFORE there's a proliferation of "evil" billboards -- would be the time to work with your community, business community, and neighboring towns to coordinate a minimalist approach to billboards. They're like graffiti. Once they start, they proliferate.

#### **4. Visitor/community information**

##### **A. CityVillage Hall**

###### **1. Is there a street map?**

\*We were there on a Saturday. Office wasn't open. We did check postings on windows. Very informative committees of the village. Even listed names of members. Office hours were listed: good.

\*Not to my knowledge.

\*Didn't visit. Offices closed. Only looked through front window.

\*I got there too early in the morning (before the office was opened) and forgot to go back (sorry). However, I did ask in shops about a map. People didn't seem to think there was one or, at least, didn't have one.

###### **2. Community brochure/directory**

\*Didn't see one.

\*There was a local free shopper paper that published rental available of building and shelter at park. Upcoming events, etc. Looked like publication of record.

\*Village hall closed at time of visit.

\*There didn't seem to be one or perhaps I just hit the shops that didn't carry it. Again, though, if you believe yourselves to be a camping center (recreation/tourism), and you put up a sign, then you need to have some kind of handout or brochure to be informative, helpful, augment your village hall staff, etc. Think about when the bulk of your outside-the-community campers come to the Rio area: AFTER the village hall is closed -- Friday night, Saturday, and Sunday. Are you missing some opportunities here by not having a simple printed piece which is widely available?

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

\*Village hall closed at time of visit.

\*We liked the sign in window of building with collapsed roof regarding referendum.

\*Couldn't find one. I bet one exists someplace though: county office? village hall? planning document? etc. Access is a key.

#### **4. Recommendations on places to stay/eat/visit, etc.**

\*Made me feel like they involve citizens in decisions.

\*People were friendly and helpful on the streets. They directed me to places as I asked about them. Wanted to make a special note of how friendly and courteous your young people are. They were extremely helpful and I was impressed by them. Nice kids!

\*Food for thought: Except for camping, there appears to **be** no place for visitors to stay, which means they go elsewhere and use that community as their "base of operations." You have such wonderful, large, historic homes -- perfect for a bed and breakfast and up-scale, too, with up-scale prices. This could be a real boon to your community.

#### **5. Contact people and addresses listed if I want more info.**

\*Village clerk?

Community club?

\*Some county office?

#### **6. Complimentary items (postcards, book markers, coupons, etc.)**

\*Apparently not.

#### **B. Chamber office/visitor info. center**

\*None

\*N/A

\*We realize you're pretty small to have a visitor center, etc.; however, no community is too small to have information. Like Brooklyn, you're lacking a delivery "system" and missing some opportunities on the weekends and at night when the village hall isn't **open**. Merchants, convenience stores, police, kiosks, protected brochure racks, etc. are all potential strategies that wouldn't cost too much. But think about the potential business you're missing *out* on, the potential residents who will go somewhere else, the potential business starts that won't -- all because of lack of information and a place to distribute it. That's a simple task in the great scheme of things and Rio certainly can handle that project, I have no doubt. It would be a worthwhile investment.

#### **C. Info. from general community (service station, motels, bars, restaurants, shop employees, etc.)**

##### **1. How knowledgeable about the community were they?**

\*Meat shop -- short history of their business and area.

-Cafe - New owner of business - short history of camping in area and why she moved to Rio.

-New owner of cafe had been here 8 months and didn't know where village office was.

-Owner of Sausage Shop (*two* years) knew area.

-Semi-knowledgeable, I would say. A newcomer is struck by all the wonderful homes, the still-standing old factories, mills, and businesses, but nobody seemed to think that was important to know about.

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

-N/A

-Yes

-Some did; some didn't.

## **3. Attitude, appearance, etc.**

-Friendly

-Talked easily, not rushed.

-Up-beat attitude

-Smiling faces

\*Good appearance.

-Friendly attitude.

-Very chatty, had a country flavor in speech patterns.

-Very nice, very friendly people. Kids on the street were especially helpful in terms of directions, answering questions, etc. Your young people are a real asset!

\*Despite the nice people, I still think a customer service session or *two* would be helpful, e.g. telephone etiquette, making eye contact, having information available, greeting people when they come into a store, etc.

## **4. Other comments**

-We said hi to a couple people we met on the street and they responded.

-We needed to speak with more people and visit more businesses. Saturday all seemed really quiet.

## **5. General**

### **A. Do residents know their community history/events/directions, etc.?**

-We spoke with two people, both women. One knew things; the other didn't.

-I was more excited and curious than the residents. (I realize that's not unusual; it's

familiar to them). I remain curious about Rio: the name, the pronunciation, the obvious industrial and railroading history, the obvious wealth at one time visible in the grand old houses and downtown area, etc. The kids seemed to know about it. Local history in school?

\*We spoke with two people at length. Both owned businesses in Rio and had good information although one had moved to Rio only a few months ago.

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

\*Grocery, laundry, cafe, bars, bank, library, bowling alley, health clinic, credit union, post office, funeral home, hair salon.

\*Good mix of retail. Campgrounds are a short distance outside town. I was surprised to see that Rio had their own library and medical clinic.

\*A thought there was a surprisingly large variety of retail, medical, and service places for this sized community. It appears you're doing something very right in this area.

**C. Are there public restrooms?**

\*I didn't see any.

\*Available at businesses. Looked to be in the park.

\*I think only at the park. What do people do at night? In the winter?

•Yes.

**D. Pay phones...are they working, phone books intact?**

\*One, yes.

\*Yes, on Main Street. Working with phone book.

\*Yes.

\*I saw only one, which is fine. In good shape with book intact.

**E. Industrial park...does it look active and attractive?**

\*NO.

\*Sign posted for development. We didn't locate.

\*Still in development.

\*If it's the area with the storage building and cul-de-sac, some trimming, some signage, some sprucing up, some information is necessary. Not sure that's the industrial park, though -- which, of course, is a symptom that the industrial park needs to be better

signed, marketed, etc.

**F. What does the community taste like (specialty restaurants, bakeries, etc.)?**

.Reasonably priced menu at restaurant. Food was good as well as service. The meat shop was well stocked and fresh. The grocery store was very cramped and claustrophobic. Looked well stocked.

Cafe served good food. Variety on menu.

.New cafe. New smell.

**G. What does the community smell like?**

I came after a rain. The town smelled fresh and clean. No unpleasant industrial or sewer plant odors. Only smelled food from the cafe.

Clean. No unpleasant odors noticed.

.Wonderful aroma from the meat shop.

.Butcher shop, smoked meats.

**H. What sounds did you hear?**

.Very quiet. Train went through twice in an hour.

-Very quiet.

Quiet.

.I was in town on a Tuesday. There was a flurry of foot traffic between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. (?). Otherwise, a lot of truck traffic as I checked various community entrances. The park was eerily quiet, almost like people weren't supposed to be there. I actually felt like an intruder driving through. (Not good for a park). But the only loud, unpleasant noises I heard were trucks shifting gears and revving engines.

**I. What did the community feel like?**

.Somewhat deserted, but very inviting.

.Deserted mostly. Weekend visit seemed to affect activity. People we did meet were friendly.

.Warm, a little deserted.

\*Rio is a community with tons of potential -- one I could live in or retire to. It seems to be rich in history and rich in potential both. The young people I met briefly all impressed me. Made me feel welcome and invited. If those are your future adult citizens, you're in

good shape, Rio!

**Describe the people you met (friendly, helpful, etc.)**

Chatty, friendly.

\*Johnson's Meat Market - Very friendly.

\*Cindy's Dream Cafe - Friendly and talkative.

\*Grocery store

\*Friendly and very helpful.

\*Nice people. That's something I'll remember about Rio.

**Additional comments/observations:**

\*It was a surprise to me not to see any children in town. (There were two teenage girls on roller blades by the grocery store and a few children on playground equipment by elementary school). But no one on bicycles or playing in their yards or park. Made me think most residents must be older. Also, size of town was larger than I guessed from 768 population sign.

\*Active rail service.

\*Large commercial businesses.

\*Picked up local "Rio Shopper" A lot of information available.

\*Something to be aware of: It's hard to tell where "Rio proper" (the incorporated area) begins and ends at some of the community entrances and on one side of town particularly (by the Seventh Day Adventist Church). That's not a problem as long as things are going well, but what about when an unsightly building or sign or incompatible use goes in? Also, it would be a good idea, I think, to plan to keep your community discrete from the towns with some kind of farm buffer or green space buffer, etc. So people clearly know where Rio is and where the towns begin. It also helps with signage. For instance, in some communities you feel like you've been in the community for quite a while, but there's no community sign for a long time (until you hit the actual incorporated area). Well, that makes legal sense, but makes no practical sense to the visiting dignitary, guests, tourists, salesperson, etc. Ditto for billboard proliferation.

\*The old mill -- What a great location and potential for a restaurant or antique shop, flower shop, or curiosity shop. Wow!

\*The old railroad depot -- another potential gold mine. Visitor center/museum. Antique shop. Restaurant. Excursion train rides for special occasions. Whistle Stop Cafe. The list goes on...

\*Regarding traffic patterns: Saw a lot of U-turns by the pocket park at the end of the

main street. Almost got hit once. (Despite the no u-turn sign).

\*Have you ever thought about having a community-wide clean-up day? A little brush trimming, slap on some paint, tidy up some dilapidated buildings, get permission and put something in some of the windows of the unused buildings? That would go a long way.

4 mean this in the best possible sense, but you are a community with a wealth of unrealized potential: great buildings, historic downtown, historic architecture, b & b potential. I'd love to come mere and be a part of all the neat things that could happen in Rio. It could be a "Rio Renaissance."

### **What will you remember about this community six months from now?**

.Total community involvement from overall condition of town.

\*A community that looks like it has it all together, with a nice downtown and recreational activities, a complete town with plenty of growth potential and available buildings. I'll also remember the cramped grocery store, which is particular to my line of business.

\*Growth, expanding, library, good looking school building, clinic, nice looking down town.

\*A tale of *two* cities (villages). Wonderful history: how does one find out about it? Historic buildings: Not properly rehabilitated and signed. Great park: nobody in it. Lots of places for sale and a subdivision going in: Lots of available housing and rehab possibilities to avoid sprawl and keep the central core community vibrant. Beautiful old homes: no bed and breakfasts and lodging (other than camping). Lots of camping: But a resistance to put together a total recreation/tourism "package" of brochures, shops, signs, etc. Much infrastructure improvement: Lots to be done (curb, gutter, sidewalks, etc.). People seem to love living in Rio: Unrealized potential. A lot of commercial activity: Many vacant buildings which would be shopper/tourist magnets (with proper marketing).

\*It struck me that Rio is kind of "in transition" -- maybe coming out of a long slump in a very active and involved way -- from a rich and historic past. But not sure about whether it wants to be a recreation hub, a bedroom community, a growing, expanding place or what. Maybe a town meeting or series of them -- just to talk these issues over as neighbors and friends -- and explore where Rio goes from here. What do you want to be? Building *off* the past, where are you going?

## **6. Doing it right!**

**A. List the 5 most positive things you observed about the community.**

1. Growth
2. Rebuilding downtown
3. Rail service
4. Great looking schools
5. Own library

1. Very clean
2. Plenty of parking
3. Complete community, that is: schools, library, retail, park, services
4. Empty buildings, but it looks like progress in redoing
5. Active rail line with siding. Buildings along corridor in pretty good shape

1. Working towards Rio's future
2. Pride in appearance
3. Clean
4. Perceptive/neighborly
5. Growth

1. Friendly, nice people
2. Friendly, nice kids (yes! I know kids are people, but they need to be singled out)
3. POTENTIAL
4. The wealth of historic buildings, both residential and business/Industrial
5. The small town, community "feel" of Rio. Residents evidently taking charge of their own destiny.

**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..**

\*Ideas for Health Clinic.

out-of-towners don't. You need to be consistent and congruent with your message and theme. If you're going to market your camping assets, then you need to sign things to help those folks out.

#### **4. Storefront signs**

\*Some missing

.Some obsolete

\*A riot of signage. There's no consistency which detracts from the overall look and feel of your historic downtown: The net result looks like a hodgepodge with the left hand not knowing what the right is doing. You have a potential treasure and signage, along with historic preservation, two key steps.

.Adequate on those we saw. Although the credit union had none.

#### **5. Industrial park**

.Where exactly? The sign is on **16**, but it wasn't clear where that is.

.Yes

\*Sign posted on Hwy. **16**

\*Make it easy for people. You seem to be a community with a rich history of business and industry and you've gone to the trouble of preparing for industrial/business growth, but lack of signage and making it easy for people could hamper your efforts. The difficult work is done, but the little things left undone could undermine what you want to have happen.

#### **6. City Hall, police, etc.**

.Not seen except on building

.Downtown sign on front of building

\*I didn't see a sign for the police dept. The City Hall was fairly well signed. Fire/EMS okay.

.Too difficult to find. When you need police services, you usually really need them. That signage should be a part of a community of coordinated signs. This needs to be carefully thought out and planned so you don't over sign, too. But right now, you're undersigned.

#### **7. Billboards/advertising, etc.**

.There is only one business sign out at 16 (Johnson Meats), but I don't remember seeing any other. A community business sign would be helpful. The sign by railroad tracks was good for directions to campgrounds.