

*First*  
*Impressions*

*of*

*Sparta, WI*

*by Rhinelander, WI*

*Visit conducted 2/20/92*

*A program for community improvement*

*Developed by:*

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**TO:** Sparta Area Economic Development Authority  
**FROM:** Rhinelander Downtown Improvement Committee  
**DATE:** February 25, 1992

**On** February 20, 1992, five community leaders ~~from~~ Rhinelander visited Sparta. The group consisted of two women (our newspaper's associate editor and a registered nurse) and three men (a bank president, the president of a two-hospital system, and a retired superintendent of schools).

The group arrived in Sparta around 10:45 A.M. and left at 2:30 P.M. Individuals were assigned different responsibilities - to visit the chamber, the library, the hospital, the courthouse, various stores, the downtown area, and the WalMart location. **Our** group traveled independently and ate in different locations. Some shopped and purchased items while visiting with merchants. On the way home from Sparta, our group discussed the community and compared notes. **In** summary, we were impressed with the **quality** of people in Sparta more than anything else. They were friendly, wanted to help, liked living in Sparta, and were positive about the community.

Our Committee hopes this report will be of value to your community.

RDIC/rmt

PURPOSE:

To help a community learn about their existing strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of a first time visitor.

YOUR GROUP:

Ideally 2-4 people should work together on this.

Diversity is best if possible, i.e.; men/women, business/casual dress, different ages, different interests (active business people, government, retired, educators, etc.)

THE VISIT:

Plan to spend several hours minimum in the community. An evening stopover would be best (but may not be practical in most cases). Use the travel time to plan your approach to getting information (i.e. What questions will you ask, Who will visit city hall, stores, etc.)

Each person should have his/her own worksheet for personal comments and observations. Try not to be too obvious as you take notes.

TIPS:

Use all FIVE senses...

What does the community **SMELL** like???

What did it **TASTE** like???

What were the **SOUNDS** you **HEARD**???

What did it **FEEL** like??? (Bumpy railroad crossings, perhaps??) and also, What did you **SEE**??

Look **for** POSITIVE things as well as negatives.

Be **HONEST**...not polite, in your comments\*...but please try to include suggestions for improvements when criticisms are made.

THANK YOU  
for caring enough to help us make an even better  
FIRST IMPRESSION  
in the future

\* All participants will remain anonymous. The final report submitted to the community will be a COMBINATION of all of the comments received.

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

A "Fort McCoy" community geographically nestled among hills and smaller than it actually is. Anticipated a bedroom community of Lacrosse. However, Sparta does have its own identity.

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

**Positive:** Approaching from Highway **27**, the number of signs indicating lots of activity; easy on & off to the highway. Approaching from Highway **21**, the quantity and quality of apartment buildings. Attractive housing.

**Negatives:** Lack of signage welcoming to the community on Highway **21**. There appears to be a good deal of traffic congestion on **27** around St. Mary's Hospital and St. Patrick's Church. There is no municipal parking.

**Suggestions for improvement:**

If Sparta has service clubs, suggest displaying signs along with welcoming signs to the community. Suggest signage to "areas" of downtown.

3. As you drive around town your comments on:

A. Appearance

1. **Downtown** Attractive small town appearance. The flags are very nice and send a message about Sparta - all American appearance. Capitalize more on older buildings.
2. **Residential** Well maintained - reflected very much middle income with a pride of ownership. Very nice older houses. Residential areas kept up better than downtown.
3. **Industrial park** Very well laid out with lots of expansion potential. Signage is inadequate - difficult to find from Highway 21 and didn't know what businesses were located in the Park.
4. **Parks** Excellent! One of the most attractive features of the community. They are spacious and it appears Sparta has a wonderful waterfront recreational park.
5. **Schools** Well maintained - clean, appeared very neat.
6. **Infrastructure (Sidewalks, streets, lighting, etc.)**

Some of the streets (by the Courthouse) are in a bad state of disrepair - bad pot holes. The beautiful cobblestone
7. **Other** ~~patched~~ with blacktop (did not look good). Good snow removal.

Chamber of Commerce sign very nice; however, lays flat on building - hard to see. Beautiful Courthouse - well maintained; attractive from the outside. The library is a very nice facility. There were no public restrooms to be found. Interesting old buildings and houses; the town has a nice appearance.

**B. Signing**

**1. Community entrance/exit signs**

Inadequate directions to downtown or county offices. It appears only the hospital was well signed.

**2. Streets**

Good - very easy to get around. Signs well maintained; easy to read.

**3. Directions, to Hospital/Parks/etc.**

Good to hospital - the parks did not seem to have any. The parks are a strong community point particularly the facilities and the swimming pool.

**4. Storefront signs**

Lacks any consistency in appearance - some easier to identify than others.

**5. Industrial Park**

Consider a large sign for the park. The current one is very small for such a large park.

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

Did not see any.

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

Highway 27 had a lot - possibly too many too close together; couldn't read them all.

**a. To Central Business District**

With the exception of the Hospital, there were none - difficult finding address numbers.

**9. To State Bike Trail**

Very good.

4. Visitor/community information

A. **City/Village Hall**

1. Is there a street map?

Yes, easy to read; complete.

2. Community brochure/directory

Chamber sent packages of information prior to visit. Good information with community history.

3. Community profile (including business and industrial opportunities)

Was provided very complete demographic information and realistic evaluation.

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

Chamber was ~~was~~ helpful giving the locations of the various establishments but cautious not to recommend one over the other - appropriate and informative.

5. Contact people and addresses listed if I want more information

Yes - putting dates of activities in phone book is a good idea; handy reference.

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

No

7. Could individuals supply directions to the State Bike Trails

Yes

B. Chamber office/visitor info center

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

Had to look for it - can miss the sign. People knew where it was located and referred us to it.

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

Good literature - very complete.

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

Very helpful; treated well - inviting Chamber facilities.

4. How prepared/helpful were they.

Very knowledgeable - went right for materials we requested.

5. Convenient hours?

Open when we were there!

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

1. How knowledgeable about the community were they?
  - a. Merchants, Chamber and individual residents very knowledgeable about locations, points of interest, general information regarding the community of Sparta.
  - b.
  - c.
  
2. Did they refer you to someone else who could **help**?
  - a. It was not necessary but did refer to real estate brokers, bank and Chamber.
  - b.
  - c.
  
3. Attitude, appearance, etc.
  - a. Positive about schools and got the impression from people that Sparta is a child oriented community.
  - b. Man at Sparta Co-Op was a strong advocate of downtown shopping.
  - c.
  
4. Other comments .
  - a. Residents and merchants pointed out things they did not like (lack of some shopping, health care; parking; etc).
  - b. Overall though positive and you sensed they really liked living in Sparta. Very positive comments about schools and recreational activities.
  - c.

5. General

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

Yes - very positive about community events.

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

Plenty of fast food and cafes; limited shopping other than shoe stores, mens apparel and WalMart.

- C. Are there public restrooms.

No.

- D. Pay phones...are they working, phone books intact.

Phone books were gone or laying on the ground.

- E. Industrial park...does it look active and attractive

Looks active but not particularly attractive.

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

Golden Griddle - good food; helpful waitresses - very negative about health care. Patrons are supportive of Sparta. English Rose - very good helpful staff.

- G. What does community SMELL like?

Old.

- H. What SOUNDS did you hear?

Trains.

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

Friendly - people on the street helpful, they would say "Hello" to strangers. There does seem to be an inferiority complex, however, as

- J. Did individuals you met make you FEEL welcome in LaCrosse sparta? is so close.

Yes!!

it Right!

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

- 1.) Housing - very well maintained and nice old homes.
- 2.) Parks & river recreation complex.
- 3.) Schools
- 4.) Proximity to Lacrosse and Fort McCoy
- 5.) People liked living in Sparta - truly friendly community.

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!

Telephone booths with schedule of community events. Took one from Chamber to bring home.

Would like to return to Sparta in summer. We read about the lake trout but nobody mentioned it to us. Would like to see what parks, gardens, and homes look like in the summer.

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

The barber who waived to us through the window represents the attitude of the community - really very friendly people.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS/OBSERVATIONS:**

Town is very nice; downtown does need some cosmetic improvements; no book store, sporting goods store and a restaurant more than a cafe or fast food. People told us they go to Lacrosse for many of the basics. Consider adding specialty shops, unique eating facilities, boutiques, etc. would add identify. There were no parking meters downtown (good). The river recreation complex is quite nice.

**WHAT WILL YOU REMEMBER ABOUT TEIS COMMUNITY SIX MONTHS FROM NOW**

Flags downtown, number of nice apartment complexes, parks and recreational facilities and variety, and the old houses and how well they have been maintained.