



First Impressions Revisited*

A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

The Center For Community Economic Development

First Impressions Report For City of Wautoma

Date visited: April 22, 2004

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*A revised and updated version of the *First Impressions* program developed by Andrew Lewis and James Schneider, 1991

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Executive Summary

Like all other communities of its size, Wautoma has some natural assets that they have built upon to make it a good place to live and visit. What the city offers its residents in housing, schools and amenities is as good as any other city of this size.

And like other communities, Wautoma has its obstacles that are preventing them from being even better. By continuing to work at overcoming these obstacles and showcasing its benefits, our team believes Wautoma will grow to deliver a great First Impression to all visitors and residents.

Purpose

The purpose of the First Impressions visit was to discover the strengths and weaknesses that the City had to offer within a short period of time. The team reviewed the City based on the scenario of being tourists, prospective residents and prospective business owners. This report should be received for just what it was, a first impression.

Limitations

The First Impressions visit was limited to 5 ½ hours on a Thursday. Being in April, many of the tourist attractions (seasonal businesses, historic museum) had not opened yet or were not open that day. A longer visit may have uncovered more of Wautoma's strengths and weaknesses.

Conditions of Visit

The First Impressions visit took place on Thursday, April 22nd. Weather was cool but sunny. It was garbage pick-up day.

Reporting Team

Steve Volkert – Economic Development Director, City of Omro
Jamie Kiesling – Chamber Director, Omro Area Chamber of Commerce
Alex Kiesling – High School Junior
Catherine Neiswender – Community Development Educator, Winnebago County UW-Extension
Linda Kutchenriter – City Administrator, City of Omro
Carmen Jaeger – Retired Elementary Teacher, Omro Schools
Jan Schettl – Retired City Administrator, City of Omro

The team was split up into three groups to get a wider range of opinions and observations. This proved to be beneficial, as some aspects to the city were not seen by all, but were caught by some.

Process

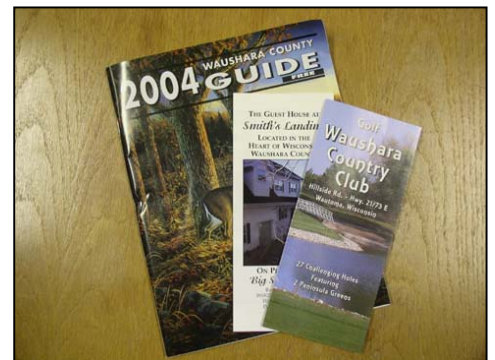
- The team first met in December, 2003 to talk about what the First Impression Trip is all about.

- The team was then sent an itinerary for the trip one-week prior to the April visit. The package did not include the questions, so as not to allow for preconceived ideas to cloud their impressions of their visit.
- The team met at 8:30 AM, the morning of the trip, to review the visitor's guide and information sent to us, along with the City's website.
- The team then took separate vehicles to Wautoma, but joined up for their 5-minute tour and First Impression. After completing the first three questions, they split off into their groups to answer the remainder.
- The team met back at Silvercryst at 3PM for regrouping.
- A debriefing meeting took place on Monday, April 26th. Notes were collected at that time.
- This report was written and copies were sent to team members to proof for completeness.

The First Impressions Results

1. Prior to our visit, we gathered information on the City of Wautoma.

Three calls were made to different Wautoma locations, the City Hall, the County Office and the Chamber of Commerce. I asked for information on the Community. All three knew where to get the information (the Chamber Office) and cheerfully directed me to it. The Chamber representative was very friendly and sent the information out immediately. I received the package the next day. **Very impressive.**



The information was very regional in nature, talking about the entire county vs. just the City of Wautoma. Majority of information is pointing to merchants, not events or attractions. We were impressed with the extensive list of cottages for rent. The Hwy 21 map was a few years old (a newer one is out). Merchant guides were somewhat dated and not eye catching with one color ink.

Went to the website, www.1wautoma.com. Nicely laid out site, but many of the links weren't linked yet. Some of the pages that were linked were not complete yet. Checked five search engines for Wautoma, WI., official site did not appear on first page on any of them, but one. Might want to resubmit your site to all. Also, links page filled with links to 1Wisconsin.com sites, not official sites of Cities. Please switch ours to www.omro-wi.com.

2. Past Perceptions - What did we expect to see?

Our memories of Wautoma were:

- Long Main St., with old buildings with many lots not maintained.
- Beautiful Lakes with cottages. The area between lakes and downtown in need of investment.
- Clean, quiet community with neat downtown.
- Small, clean community.
- Milty Wilty!
- Camp Waushara was great.
- Small vacation community with few businesses.
- Remembered a large diverse population with many migrant workers.
- Community of “Have and Have Nots,” very diverse financially.
- Have heard of Performing Art Center, which was really nice.

There were mixed memories of Wautoma, but overall thought was positive as quaint vacation location.

3. The Five Minute Impression – What did you immediately see?

- Community spruced up since my last trip through.
- Veterans Museum very impressive
- Consistent “Christmas Tree Capital” Theme presented throughout City – Good.
- Entrances were beautiful from north, east & west had natural beauty leading up to welcome sign.
- Lot more stores than I remembered – Over abundance of car and boat dealers
- Farmer’s Market very attractive
- Space between lakes and downtown had greatest need for reinvestment
- Might explore downtown for a short period of time, but nothing to keep you there
- After lights on the east side, entrance not inviting
- Very diverse housing options
- Felt like a vacuum was pulling you through fast (no parking, fast traffic)
- Lots of vacancy in downtown, no foot traffic at all, almost scary.
- Lots of lakefront development
- Odd mix of homes (mobile) and businesses on Hwy 21 prior to downtown area
- Large, high billboard looks strange in commercial area so close to highway
- Liked the directional signage in downtown

Overall, reactions were mixed as to what we saw. Most of the high points and low points are pointed out in the list above. Definitely different impression from original memories.

4. Community Entrances – Observations of each entrance

Entrances needed to be tidied somewhat, (weeds cut down, signs updated). Water makes beautiful entrances, but actual City signs tough to read and too cluttered.

Hwy 21 East by Country Club

- Odd mix of houses and businesses.
- Huge billboards look odd in such populous area.
- Some people saw entrance signs at each entrance but needed to be painted, cleaned-up. Others didn't see because they were hidden.
- Saw lots of extra signs of businesses no longer in business – confusing and distracting.
- Newer Highway 21 was in great condition and easy to drive on – Good traffic flow.

Hwy 73 from North on Mt. Morris

- Not much of an entrance
- Didn't see any signs
- Mix of lower to middle income housing good.
- No curb or gutter to dictate parking areas. People parked anywhere.
- OK looking, nothing special, saw retirement home.

Hwy 73 from South or west of Main St.

- Oakridge Sign – Didn't know what it was pointing to.
- No welcome sign found
- Some office space
- Not outstanding, didn't catch my eye, OK.

Hwy 22 North of City

- Didn't see City limit sign
- Nice looking medical and dental office
- Nice view of water, nice wooded development
- Welcome sign cluttered and buried in trees

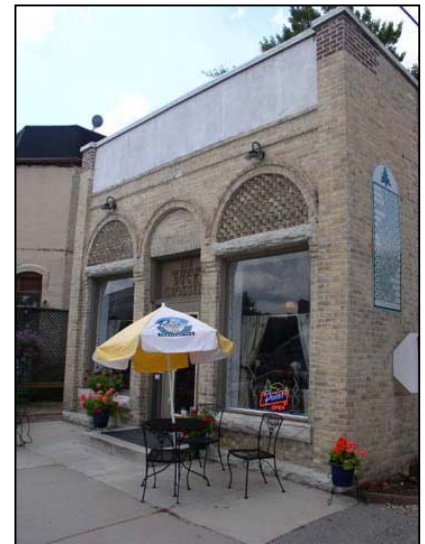


Overall: Didn't seem that entrances were meant to grab your attention. Signs needed updating, wouldn't say that they are overall any worse or better than any other community in area. Could see how community has grown to and beyond city limit signs. Could use attention if you don't want natural lakes to be the only entrances to the City.

5. Downtown Business District

No big surprises here, highway restructuring has greatly changed the downtown compared to 10 years ago. Buildings are in dire need of reinvestment, many addresses are vacant. Besides a few bars and service businesses, not much to make people want to walk the downtown during normal business hours.

- Confusing or total lack of noticeable parking
- Little or no foot traffic
- Nothing inviting until you get to edges (Farm Market)
- No attractive window displays.
- Little variety in retail – however quality was fine
- Liked how Eagan’s remodeled old barn for The Shepherd’s Cottage, more of that needs to be done in downtown
- Streets are clean in appearance
- Shops that were open were laid out well
- Couldn’t tell shop owners from clients in Farm Market. Not good or bad.
- Shop owners very cordial – very willing to talk, and talk and talk.
- Employees were helpful, but found most were not living in City and had little knowledge of community. One said she was getting married and moving to Omro!
- Didn’t notice public amenities, bathrooms, water fountains, benches, streetscaping trees etc...
- Garbage cans were missed first, but found nicely hidden later – good!
- Loved the Book Worm!!!! Can they open one in Omro?
- Duck’s Crossing was a great hidden treasure! Owner is an asset to City.
- Most business owners mentioned how Hwy 21 killed their traffic – Honesty!
- No major stores in downtown, grocery, top line clothing, furniture
- Lots of service businesses and bars.
- Local government offices didn’t seem to create much walking traffic downtown except to bar/restaurants. Library might have been exception.



Overall: The traffic runs through Wautoma at a quick pace and has little reason to stop in your downtown. More businesses could help in creating a greater desire to stop and overcome parking obstacle. Wautoma has a few businesses that are really special. Business owners were honest about their parking problem, but were very optimistic on overall

community. They very much considered their community as being bigger than the City. Customer service was very warm, friendly and laid-back. You just need more of it. Chamber was said to be rebounding in the last few years after some “tough” times. No businesses saw the City as being active in helping them, but instead commented on the “new” chamber as a positive.

6. Other Retail Shopping Areas – Big Box Retailers

One of the definite changes to the Wautoma shopping experience was the flow of necessity shopping from the downtown to the eastern edge with Copps and Pamida and most recently the Dollar Store. While this may have taken away from the downtown quite a bit, it has added needed products to the Wautoma selection for year-round residents and tourists alike.



- Tough to find any help at Pamida. – No signs on sales (Easter Items)
- Pamida pretty crammed with items, didn't get open/airy feeling
- Copps is well laid out
- Clothing stores and selection somewhat limited, looking for upper end

Overall: New businesses have filled the gap left by dime store going out from downtown. The Dollar Store is good option for bargain hunters and lower income. It has to be nice to have all your necessities right in the City. Types of “big box” stores fit community well, you just need more specialty shops to fill out your downtown (clothing, gifts, etc.).

7. Industrial Parks/Commercial Areas

One of the pleasant surprises that we had was the newer buildings along the southern edge of the city for Industrial businesses. While it seems like the City has some really solid employers, the feeling on the street from residents was that they could use more. (Couldn't we all).

- Industry was spread out, not just in one area. Looks like some planning is in works to consolidate Industrial area.
- Nelson Manufacturing looks to be good, clean industry that employ many. One person said they are backlogged with work for two shifts.
- Only saw one area for sale and didn't see one specific area for industrial activity.



- Stopped in at Chamber office to ask for information on businesses, they weren't open at 10 AM but were at 12 noon, and once there, they didn't know a lot about their businesses.
- Former FS Co-Op area behind Capsell Center needed reinvestment or clean-up.
- Seemed to have one or more newer buildings for sale that could entice new businesses – good.

Overall: While there did not seem to be a single, planned area designated for Industrial Businesses, (like an Industrial Park or Business Park) there were areas, (back by Nelson Manufacturing) that were very clean, nice locations that might be inviting to be around. As with every community, we could all use more manufacturing, and residents commented to us on that.

The other commercial sites not in the downtown were nice, but two of our teams said they were directed to enter through back doors, or were given directions to drive there through back ways, which led you past junk laden unkept areas.

8. Health Care Services

Wautoma, as the county seat, hosts several health care providers including eye, chiropractic, dental and medical clinics to serve the entire Waushara County.

Year-round residents have a good selection of quality providers with additional services at larger hospitals just 8 miles away in Wild Rose or 15 miles away in Berlin. There seemed to be adequate assisted living/nursing homes in Wautoma, (4), all looked to be doing ok with decent looking facilities. One team thought that one facility they saw was “at first impression” not as well kept up and would not send their loved ones there.



- Very good variety of services with newer facilities
- Friendly staff at clinic on 22 North, she told us a lot.
- Sign outside of LifeQuest says “Conference Rooms Available” but when asked, they said those are not for rent.
- Plenty of convenient parking at clinics – great for elderly

Overall: When it comes to reasons for people to move to Wautoma, good healthcare facilities should be high on your list of amenities. It is definitely a strength.

9. Housing – Impressions of the mix

One of the first impressions of Wautoma was that it's a resort/vacation area of "haves and have nots." This is evident in the housing area. You have lots of mobile homes scattered throughout city, including the mobile home park near Nelson. Then you have what looked like migrant housing near FS Co-Op. On the other end, you have very beautiful homes along lakes and new subdivision on North side. Very good mix for all financial levels.



- Saw some high-end homes on North side and several lower income homes throughout
- Checked with Eagans, lot of homes and properties for sale in all categories – good.
- Looked like they have ample multi-unit apartments, but needed garages/storage areas.
- Saw some new development for housing (middle to high income)
- Routinely would find one or a small group of homes scattered throughout that were in dire need of clean-up. They hurt the whole area. Simple painting or lawn mowing needed. Possible Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) homes.
- Did not notice a lot of ads for rental properties (apts, homes...etc)
- A few junk dealers in front yards, but not many – good.



Overall: Wautoma had no shortage of variety for housing that would stop someone from wanting to live there. If a little attention were taken on the less desirable lots to clean them up, it would greatly improve the entire neighborhood. New developments will be exciting for Wautoma's future.

10. Schools

Just like all small communities, Wautoma faces challenges to provide the best educational services with declining dollars. The teams went into, toured and drove around the schools within the City.

- Preschool and Head Start programs look good – a lot of students
- Saw several child care places located within homes



- Elementary school is nicely placed in middle of housing. Good for walking.
- 4-8th grade school was great, nice split of older and younger kids, facility very nice/well thought out. Teachers, Principal and Guidance Counselor very friendly, gave us a great tour and were very eager to show-off their school
- High School looks fairly new, very well maintained, great PAC, good sports fields
- FVTC classrooms were being used when we were there – nice location
- Public reaction was mixed; everyone bragged about PAC and music programs at schools, but also talked down basic programs and simple student problems
- They felt their sports programs have turned the corner after long dry spell
- “The quality of the education system meets state standards.”
- “All schools have their problems.” We’re no different.



Overall: After talking with the elementary school principal, it looks as though Wautoma Schools are taking full advantage of higher percentage of lower income students to help all of them. Facilities are very good; programs have very motivated teachers with openness for ideas to be even better in the future. In a SWAT analysis, education would be a definite strength.

11. Faith/Religion

Without going into the churches for a service, it appears that Wautoma has an ample supply of Christian-based organizations.

- Directions to churches were good along Hwy 21
- Good Mix of “Christian Churches” – Employee of Shepherds Cottage
- “We have a lot of churches, but I wouldn’t say we’re very religious”- shop owner
- Everyone asked said there was not a lack of churches
- Churches are very active with community outreach

Overall: The residents that are served by the churches of Wautoma seem to be very satisfied with the offering. Not a problem for any Christian faith.

12. Civic Organizations

In a small city, civic organizations/service clubs can be the lifeblood of that community. They serve as a means of socializing and of serving their residents. Wautoma seems to have no shortage of people willing to lend a hand.

- Information books mention a lot of clubs of various types
- Welcome signs are peppered with logos of active organizations
- Business organization (Chamber) has turned the corner and businesses feel good about it again, CVB is new.

Overall: It's tough to see all that the Civic Organizations do in any community, but based on the pure number of active clubs, Wautoma is in good shape for volunteers that want to help.

13. Residents – What was our First Impression of those we met

For what would be considered a slower traffic time for the City, (April), we found the citizens to be just what you would expect and want from a vacation destination- relaxed, laid back and friendly.

- Culver's Manager was very friendly and eager to talk
- Alderman stopped by our table and talked with us briefly
- We asked a lot of people where to eat, many didn't have an idea other than fast food places, others recommended places outside of City
- "We've got bars and fast food, which do you want?"
- Getting precise directions was difficult
- Very few recommended downtown to eat or Silvercryst (may not be open)
- People didn't speak highly of "Main St. Program" – Not sure if they knew what Main St. Program is.
- General residents were relatively positive about community, thought they needed more industry in Wautoma to "keep kids here."
- Encountered a lot of Senior Citizens in the stores
- One person asked, told us to contact a realtor if we wanted community information
- Those on the street mostly Caucasian and Mexicans of all income levels
- One merchant recommended that we could have lunch at Grimm's, because you could get a beer with your sandwich –can't blame that logic



Overall: It would be unfair to say that the people we met are representative of all Wautoma residents but as for the people we did meet, we found them to be very laid back and friendly. Once again, not all we encountered at businesses were residents. Many business owners were not.

14. Public Infrastructure

One sign of a community's financial stability is their ability to keep up their public infrastructure. Wautoma has several signs that things are going ok at City Hall.

- Downtown lighting & signage was okay – nothing special
- Streets were well kept in main areas, a little rugged in outer lying streets
- Sidewalks, where they were, were in good walkable shape
- For the most part, they seemed to have some good zoned areas (apartments together, businesses in central downtown etc.)
- Public restrooms were clean
- Nice new fire department, Sheriff's building and jail
- Very nice library – loved the kids section, nice mural on the side
- Public parking hard to find
- Landscaping was ok, nothing special
- Would have liked to see benches, water fountains, etc. on Main St., not just hidden behind buildings
- Public Library and Veterans Hall had good parking
- Nice directional signs for local agencies
- Veterans Museum was great – real asset
- Did not notice any landscaping or street trees
- Historic Museum looks nice, wished it was open
- High, large billboard out of place in congested area
- There doesn't seem to be continuity between eastern town and City of Wautoma along Hwy 21. More continuity in buildings, zoning, signage, billboards (or lack of) etc. would make a visually smooth and appealing transition into downtown.



Overall: Just like any community, Wautoma has some great additions (Sheriff's stations, War Museum and Natural wetlands walk) and some areas of possible improvement. We would not say that the public infrastructure is hurting Wautoma from gaining residents, visitors or businesses. As in most communities, these public buildings and properties can be your hidden treasures. Hopefully, future planning will create better mixes along highways than what they have now with low income housing next to businesses.

15. Recreation/Tourism

One of the primary reasons that people come to Wautoma and Waushara Co. is for the natural recreational opportunities. The lakes for fishing and boating along with woods for hunting, make Wautoma a destination for thousands of people each year.

Is Wautoma well known for a particular attraction?

- Golf Courses are well-known and great attraction to Wautoma area
- Silver Lake and surrounding lakes are huge for bringing visitors
- **Christmas Tree Capital of the World** doesn't pull me in...but it is the fact.

Does Wautoma have ample overnight accommodations?

- Wautoma has several places to stay (Hotels, Motels, Cottages, surrounding campgrounds) all promoted well in guides

Did we see any signs of events?

- Guide lists a number of festivals, athletic events
- Resident mentioned Augustfest, Tour of Homes and Cookiewalk
- We noticed the Sports Swap signs and story in the Oshkosh Northwestern
- We have seen signs of shows at the PAC

Are there any significant natural features

- Nice Park by high school, Bird Creek Park
- Many beautiful lakes with nice views
- We liked the wetlands walk

Are there any significant man-made attractions?

- County Fairgrounds is nice man-made amenity
- Man-made attractions include Historic Museum, Veterans Museum, Farm Market and select eateries that would bring us back

Is there an obvious visitor's center, chamber office?

- Yes, but closed at 10 AM, opened later
- Volunteers/Employees were very friendly on the phone
- One group asked questions at their office, but they didn't have many answers

Is there a restaurant or shop that would bring you back?

- Loved the Bookworm!
- Duck's Crossing would bring us back
- Silvercryst isn't in the City, but draws us 2 or 3 times a year
- The Farmer's Market and Culver's would bring me back
- I would like to try out a cottage for rent on the lakes...sounds great!

Overall: Wautoma is known for being a vacation get-away with its natural attractions. The addition of man-made features just add to it. You promote it well.

16. Wrap-Up...Using your Senses -what did you smell, hear, taste?

- Nothing offensive, good smells in the book store, and antique/farm market
- Heard traffic/semis, geese outside, music in the stores
- Smelled flowers and plants in Pioneer Florist, great people
- Tasted Culvers' Custard – Love it
- Tasted unique beers at Duck Crossing
- Good Mushroom Swiss at Grimm's
- Good sandwiches at Lakeshore Family Rest., but desperately need better lettuce.



Did you have any experience that impacted the way you feel?

- Heavy traffic, but many street lights to cross with pedestrian buttons
- Friendly people would want to make me come back
- Empty down town was very disturbing versus my former memories

17. Wrap –Up – Lasting Impressions

What were the 5 most positive things that you observed about Wautoma?

- Peaceful, beautiful lakes
- Very friendly people
- Summer Tourist attraction
- Abundant housing options for all demographics
- Services 90% of needs of residents

What were the 5 biggest challenges facing Wautoma?

- Parking
- Year-round businesses primarily in vacant downtown – reinvestment in downtown buildings
- Signage for businesses in some cases (Lakeshore Restaurant, e.g.)
- Increase Industrial Development, too many eggs in Nelson's basket
- Select residents need to tidy up yards, (storage for apartment, rather than front yard; mowing the lawns that they have)

What will you remember most about this community in 6 months?

- Milty Wiltys and the Bookworm
- Beautiful Lakes and Trees

- The variety of services available for such a small city
- Its improvement over years ago (i.e. update of numerous rundown cottages on Big Silver)
- Vacant downtown

One idea that we will borrow for use in Omro

- Serve Cinnamon Coffee/Soothing music/smells/friendliness (work with downtown businesses on customer service and friendliness)
- Do more to encourage river tourism like they do lake tourism (Cottage rental pamphlet, etc.)

Overall: With just 6 hours exposure, the three teams were able to pull different ideas as to why they liked coming to Wautoma. While there were things that we saw as obstacles, overall everyone enjoyed the visit and have all found reasons to return to Wautoma again.