

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

CONNECTICUT

A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

Executive Summary - Hebron, Connecticut

Conducted by the visit team from Durham, Connecticut

July 17, 2018

Introduction

The First Impressions community exchange program was designed to help communities learn about their strengths and shortcomings through the eyes of first-time visitors. Volunteer teams undertake unannounced visits, record observations, and give constructive feedback to the exchange community. These reports are often used as part of broader community assessment or planning processes to inform community policy and action. The following is an overview of the highlights and re-occurring themes of the visit on July 17, 2018 and a debrief luncheon with both teams held on October 4, 2018. Additional detail can be found in the raw data reports available from members of the visit team.

On July 17, 2018, a warm, partly sunny Tuesday, nine volunteers from Durham, Connecticut visited Hebron. The team was generally expecting *"...a town very similar to ours. I know that both towns were incorporated in the same year and have agricultural fairs."* and *"a community that has planned for the future and understands the value of preserving their past."* Members of the team knew about Hebron primarily through their online research but some also had previous contact with town staff. Prior to the visit the team conducted some online research of the websites www.hebronct.com, the Hebron Historical Society, and Hebron Public Schools as well as social media searches, online data and tourism sites. The team found the **town website to be easy to use, useful and up to date** noting *"fabulous"* *"well organized"* with *"...tons of information and very user friendly."*

Facebook pages were useful but did not include as much timely information. The team's overall impression based on online research was that Hebron is a lively close knit community that is *"more than just a farming/bedroom community"* and is *"focused on community and future growth."* In the online research, and in the report and throughout the discussions the Durham team noted Hebron's **significant commitment to planning** evidenced by a *"great POCD [Plan of Conservation and Development] that is very clear and easy to read and the best land use map I have ever seen."*





First Impressions Visit

For the first ten minutes of the visit, the team was asked to drive around town from various entrances. The team entered via Route 66 from the east and west as well as via Route 85 from the Amston area. Their first impressions were of a lively, well maintained “cute main street,” accessed along “beautiful country roads.” One member noted “There were a lot of commerce options along Main Street for dining, retail and other services.” “I had the impression that Main Street Commerce must be supported by other communities because it looks like more than a town this size could support.” The team found simple signage, beautiful in scale and appearance but found **signage to be limited or lacking at some entrances.** “The blue Hebron flags combined with the numerous United State flags displayed all over town evokes a feeling of community continuity and pride.” Overall the team felt **adding flowers or welcome banners** could make the downtown area feel more welcoming.



The team encountered a diverse mix of newer and older buildings with most housing outside of the Main Street area. **A diverse range of well-maintained housing options** was observed and the Durham team was particularly interested in learning more about the beautiful new senior housing complex. They noted that many of the newer buildings had maintained a historic style

to align with the historic character of older buildings. Overall the team was surprised by the **significant variety of restaurant, retail, and service businesses** for a town of Hebron’s size available in the Village Shoppes and Main Street. While there were few stores noted as destinations or that would draw tourism, one team member noted “I felt that you could find most things that you would need on a daily basis.” The stores the team members visited had good merchandise selection, tidy window displays and good customer service.

It was clear based on the number of farms and farm stands that **agriculture still plays a significant role in Hebron** Both communities felt an increasing tension between “What we want to preserve and the need to grow the grand list to serve the needs and wants to residents.” Given the presence of the Airline Trail and Gay City State park, the Hebron Fair, existing farms and the Country Store **promoting parks, agriculture and outdoor recreational could be an opportunity** although the team noted accommodations were not easily found close by.





In the debrief meeting with team members from both communities, the need for as well as community opposition to, sewer infrastructure came up as a significant point of discussion. Some team members noted that residents fear infrastructure improvements could result in being “paved from end to

end” and compromise the historic and agricultural character of the community. Both communities shared their experiences including residential and commercial rates. For Hebron this is significant with regard to **potential for additional light industrial development**. The visit team did not observe much industrial development and wondered if there would be significant traffic or highway access to warrant this.

Overall the team was *“pleasantly surprised by all that Hebron has to offer.”* When asked about the most outstanding feature team members responded *“the foresight this town has taken in preparing for the future. Loved that they have goals and objectives laid out for each portion of the town. Planning ahead for the multi-use area downtown is a great accomplishment”* *“You appear to take time and energy to create a vision for what your community will be in the future. From what I can tell this is from the community involvement in your planning processes and good leadership from your government and commission leaders. Keep up the good work and be proud of what you have done. Great things are still ahead for Hebron!”*

“Hebron seems like it was a farming community that no one knew about then suddenly the population shifted and this change was managed well.”

Wrap up

In the final section of the report the team was asked to sum it all up with the following questions:

List the positive things you observed about this community (no particular order):

1. Coordinated planning and growth management
2. Enthusiastic and friendly residents - community pride, faith and civic organizations
3. Wide variety of businesses and services offered
4. Coordinated community promotion

What are the potential opportunities available to this community? (no particular order):

1. Attracting new residents- housing expansion
2. Capitalize on agricultural areas for economic development
3. Improve facades and signage in some areas

What are the biggest obstacles or challenges facing the community? (no particular order):

1. Lack of nightlife
2. Physical and economic isolation- slow growth
3. Provision of public utilities and infrastructure

The teams from Durham and Hebron met on October 4, 2018 to informally share the results of their visits. They both felt this program was a great learning opportunity and discussed several important topics including the need for funding of, and community resistance to sewer infrastructure as a pre-requisite for development, organizational support for town center development (including Hebron's "Town Center Project"), attracting light industrial development, the benefits of challenges of having full or part-time planning staff as well as style of town governance (Durham has a First Selectperson and Hebron a Town Manager). They also learned something about their own community by participating in this program. The teams enjoyed meeting each other at the wrap up luncheon and learning more about their first impressions. They hope to maintain this connection and to continue to learn from each other in the future. Team members representing Durham: Tina Gossner, Janet Morganti, Linda Torres, Laura Francis, Frank DeFelice, Cheryl Salva, Nancy Cuomo, Geoff Colgrove, and Joseph Pasquale. Team members representing Hebron: John Guskowski, Jim Celio, Gerry Garfield, Troy Kelsey, John Collins, and Michael D'Amato.

This report was prepared October 2018 by Laura Brown, UConn Extension based on raw data from team visits and notes from the community debrief session held on October 4, 2017. For more information visit <http://communities.extension.uconn.edu/connecticut-first-impressions-program/>