First Impressions

Team Report

Community Visited: Colby, KS Date Visited: July 23, 2015

**Pre-visit web search: How easy was it to get information on the community you were visiting? Did it accurately reflect what you saw? Did you have difficulties obtaining information on the community through a web search?**

*We found it very simple to quickly get information about Colby online. A google search turned up the official city page in the first spot, followed by a visit Colby travel site and the official site for Thomas County.*

1. **The “Five-Minute” Impression: After taking a five-minute drive through the community without stopping, the following reactions were noted.**

*We intentionally approached town from the north, via SH 25, since we were all familiar with the other routes through Colby and we wanted to get a true “first” impression. It was a scenic route lined with well-groomed farms and homes. Besides the Thomas County line sign, we didn’t notice any signs alerting us to which town we were entering. We turned left at the Hwy 24 (4th St) intersection and started our five minute drive, observing banks, churches and businesses in that area. We knew it was the downtown business district but didn’t see any particular signage to alert us to the fact. We turned right on Country Club Dr. and observed some light industrial businesses, funeral home, and cemetery. Streets were fairly well-kept but some bumps and potholes in places. We noted that there were no sidewalks and saw a few people trying to navigate on foot at the edge of the roadway. The loop continued at the frontage road heading west toward Walmart. We noticed the expanded retail, restaurant and hotel businesses on that side of town and back north on Range Rd to where we had started. We jotted down the following:*

* *would like to move here*
* *more retail opportunities*
* *more choices for churches*
* *attractive housing*
* *cultural opportunities (museum)*
* *easy to navigate*
* *good Interstate access*

**The following observations were noted when entering the community from major entrances (signs, streetscapes, buildings, etc.)**

*Tree City, USA*

*Eagle Pride*

*“Oasis on the Plains”*

2. **Downtown Business Area: Describe the buildings, signs, infrastructure, etc.**

*Old, somewhat run-down*

*Lacking signage to direct visitors*

*Downtown was fairly neat and tidy but no standout streetscapes or signage to be inviting*

*Some attractive storefront windows*

**Explain what type of businesses you observed and give a description of the variety and quality of merchandise displayed.**

*Olympic Health Club*

*Furniture*

*Bridal/Floral*

*Tea/bakery*

*Financial Services*

*Car Wash*

*Laundry*

*Convenience stores and gas stations*

**Describe the customer service received when you entered those retail businesses. (Were you greeted? Did you have to ask for assistance?)**

*The team split up and all reported friendly greetings upon entering both professional services and retail establishments.*

**What public amenities were available (drinking fountains, benches, public restrooms)**

*There were an ample number of benches at various locations we observed. Public restrooms were also readily available.*

**Comment on appealing landscaping and streetscaping.**

*The Oasis on the Plains is the most notably intentional example of eye-catching streetscaping. Palm trees in Kansas are an ingenious idea. The whole team reported knowledge of Colby Kansas from out-of-state friends & acquaintances purely because of the fake palm trees and welcoming services (Starbucks!) at this service area.*

**Did you have difficulty finding parking? Could you access multiple services from where you parked?**

*Parking was not a problem. Ample parking in all areas visited.*

1. **Other Retail Shopping Areas: Describe other retail shopping areas. Were the areas attractive and easy to access?**

*The team was familiar with most of the Range Ave and Interstate shopping options in Colby, so we sought out the less-familiar. The former outlet mall on the southwest edge of town proved to hold many hidden gems! A store featuring Made In Kansas products! A Famous Footwear! A sewing and vacuum store! Dodge/Jeep/Ram dealership! Had we not intentionally explored, we’d have never known they were there. Welcoming staff were on hand at all locations.*

1. **Industrial Parks/Commercial Areas**

**Is there a defined area where manufacturing industries could easily locate/expand? If so, describe.**

*It doesn’t seem defined by signage, but there did seem to be room for expansion on the east edge of town along Hwy 24 and along Country Club Dr. where we observed Coors, Pepsi, electrical, Goodyear, farm implements and other businesses of that nature.*

5. **Health Care Services**

**Comment on the availability and apparent quality of hospitals and emergency medical services.**

*Casual driving revealed signage for vision, medical, chiropractic, dental and mental health clinics. There seemed to be available commercial office space for rent – especially along Range.*

**Comment on the availability and condition of facilities for physicians, dentists, optometrists, public health and other healthcare providers.**

*Chamber of Commerce provided info about these services. Our team member that had lived in Colby for several years – a young mother – thinks Thomas County Health should do a better job of promoting their Breast Feeding Boutique. She has referred many friends to it, but there is nothing to indicate it’s in the County building from the outside and there was no observable advertising.*

**What long-term care services, assisted living or nursing facilities exist in the community?**

*All of these options are available in Colby. The Chamber of Commerce personnel provided ample information.*

6. **Housing**

**Give a brief description of the existing mix of housing stock. Does the local market have housing that would appeal to all income wages? What challenges do you see in regards to finding acceptable housing? (Neighborhoods, size, properties for sale, etc.)**

*We saw an impressive number of apartment buildings along green belts for a town of this size. There were housing lists available at the Chamber office – both for rent and for purchase.*

**What kind of rental properties did you observe for persons interested in building or simply living in the community prior to buying housing?**

*There were at least two apartment buildings we saw plus a list of landlords at the Chamber of Commerce. The city website has a link to the Colby Housing Authority site. It gives extensive information on rental prices, income qualifications, etc.*

7. **Schools**

**Do the following schools appear to be adequate in size or do you see the use of temporary classrooms? Are the buildings and grounds well-maintained?**

**Pre-school/kindergarten/Head Start facilities**

*There were no center-based childcare facilities observed. A web search shows that kindergarten is included in Colby grade school. Early childhood care is primarily provided through home-based centers of 10-12 children. There was not enough time during the team visit to explore this thoroughly.*

**Elementary/secondary schools**

*The Colby High School is an impressive-looking facility on well-maintained grounds. Eagle pride is evident all over town. The middle and elementary schools are adjacent to each other and not as noticeable for visitors as the high school. The websites did not display many pictures of the facilities themselves. We ran out of time to look at the school grounds extensively.*

**Were you able to find print information in the community that helped asses the quality of the educational system?**

*How the school district performs in standardized testing, etc. was not available online or in person from what we can tell.*

1. **Childcare**

**Were you able to determine if childcare was affordable and available?**

*Childcare is available through various home-based programs and a few larger centers. Not much information was collected by our team through the sources we studied.*

1. **Faith/Religion**

**Comment on the number of denominations and the physical appearances of the churches represented in the community. Did you observe any evidence of church-sponsored community services?**

*Many denominations of worship facilities were observed. They were well-kept and had good signage. Beyond advertised worship times, no community services observed.*

1. **Civic**

**Tell about the variety of nonprofit organizations and clubs within the community.**

*There was evidence of a 4-H program, Thomas County Community Foundation and Kiwanis. There is obviously much local passion for historical preservation (museum) and evident community pride shown at the Visitor Center. Our observation and website browsing did not find a comprehensive listing of non-profits.*

**Did you observe any evidence of civic organization activity?**

*Ads for Thomas County Fair and Carnival*

*Kiwanis Disc Golf Course*

1. **Public Infrastructure**

**Comment in general on the streets, street signage, sidewalks, parking, lighting, restrooms, landscaping, and streetscapes in areas other than downtown.**

* *Street signs were standard but easy to read*
* *Lighting was not noticeable during daytime visit*
* *Sidewalks were missing along Country Club Dr. which seemed problematic for park and high school access.*
* *Streetscapes were the best near the I-70 at Oasis on the Plains and the Colby Visitor center*
* *Landscaping around Colby Community College could be much more inviting*
* *A wealth of helpful info was found at the office complex that houses the Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development, Kansas Workforce Center and the Thomas County Health Department, but the signage on the Range Ave could be more obvious.*

**Did you observe land-use planning?**

*We’re not sure if we know how to recognize that if we did!*

**Comment on city/town hall (How were you received? Was there information about the town available?)**

*Both the Colby Visitors Center and the Thomas County office complex provided a wealth of information. Our team did not visit city hall, primarily because the information obtainable from the City of Colby website is so extensive! It’s such a time-saver, and a more likely resource to be used by newcomers.*

**Police/fire protection:**

*No information collected in person, but there is plenty of information available at cityofcolby.com*

**Library:**

*The Pioneer Memorial Library has a great website accessible under the community tab at cityofcolby.com.*

**City parks (walking tracks, ballparks, playgrounds, sportsplex)**

*There are many parks and much information about them on cityofcolby.com. There is a big community walking trail project outlined at colbywalkingtrail.com. It was not observed by our team while in the community, but is an ongoing effort that should be highlighted.*

1. **Recreation/Tourism**

**Is the community well-known for any particular attraction or event? Do they have a community slogan that capitalizes on that asset?**

*The city of Colby is known by I-70 travelers as the Oasis on the Plains and by area residents for Colby Community College. The city seems to do a good job of attracting those travelers with good signage along that route from both east and west.*

**Did you see any indication of significant events taking place in the community that would be of interest to both visitors and residents?**

*The Thomas County Fair was being promoted when our team was there. Dillons had an awesome hand-painted window promotion.*

**Elaborate on any significant natural or manmade features that have the potential of drawing people to the community.**

* *Villa High Lake – difficult to get to - not good signage- but fishing right in town! And it’s very scenic too. The Disc Golf should be quite a draw also.*
* *The Prairie Museum – what a gorgeous campus – a huge asset for the area!*
* *Kansas products store*
* *Colby Community College*

**Is there an obvious visitor’s center, chamber of commerce office, main street office, or other facility that serves the needs of visitors? Comment on the staff, facilities, signage, visibility, etc.**

*The city of Colby has a very impressive visitor center. It’s so attractive, iconic, and suited to the area with its architecture built around a grain bin concept. The interior coziness and displays are top-notch. We were greeted by a volunteer who was friendly and knowledgeable without being too pushy. There were nice clean restroom facilities and more tourism brochures than we’ve seen anywhere that were displayed in an attractive manner. On the volunteer’s advice, lunch was enjoyed at J&B Meats, right there on Range. It was also this source that helped us know where to find the Chamber of Commerce and a few other places visited.*

**Are there any restaurants, specialty shops or attractions that would bring you back to this community in the near future?**

*We all agreed that J&B had high quality menu items and friendly service that would probably help us choose them over nearby chains. We’d like to do more exploring at the Museum and park facilities. The retail options are great for a town of this size. The Famous Footwear, Maurices, Walmart, Dillons and Kansas products store would all be places we’d return to soon.*

1. **Wrap-up**

**What are the most positive things you observed about the community?**

* *Easy to navigate*
* *Many retail options for a town of its size*
* *Strong visitor center/tourism focus*
* *Strong Chamber of Commerce & Economic Development*
* *Post-secondary education options*
* *Strong school system – both private and public options*
* *Capitalizing on interstate accessibility*
* *Evidence of cooperation between chain stores and small businesses*
* *Strong online presence*
* *Community pride evident*
* *Well-kept residential areas*
* *Variety of housing options*

**What are the biggest obstacles/challenges facing this community?**

*This seems like a community on the “grow”. Sometimes that growth comes with challenges like having a nature trail and nice park without adequate restroom facilities. (Knowledge the member of our team who had lived there shared.) It’s hard to assess a community’s challenges during a visit of a few hours. The people we talked to were enthusiastic about their town. Our team noticed a shortage of fine dining establishments. We were told several times about the great burgers at J&B’s and that the Village Inn serves the best food in town. According to those we asked, there are no restaurants with a lunch-time salad bar, for example. It would seem that a town with cultural interests like the college and the museum would be able to support another non-chain restaurant or two.*

**What will you remember most about this community six month from now (positive or negative)?**

*The new aquatic center, walking trail and retail stores are memorable. We also learned about an awesome Santa setup at Christmas that we’d like to visit.*

First Impressions was developed by the University of Wisconsin-Extension and adapted for use by K-State Research and Extension. Funds for this program have been made possible by a partnership with the Dane G. Hansen Foundation, Logan, KS.

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Stations and Cooperative Extension Service

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Works, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914 as amended. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and the United State Department of Agriculture Cooperating, John D. Floros, Director.