

## *First Impressions – A Method to Boost Community Vitality*

### **The Situation**

The rural population of Kansas continues to decline. Rural flight in the past few decades have been marked by a migration from the countryside to the cities. For rural counties and communities to survive and thrive, they must present themselves as welcoming and desirable places to live. The look and feel of the community experienced by a visitor will most likely influence how long they stay, if they will return, and whether or not they will speak positively or negatively about a community. First Impressions, a program offered by K-State Research and Extension, allows communities to see the strengths and weaknesses of their community through the eyes of a first time visitor. With the knowledge gained, communities are able to develop an improvement plan to assist in creating a desirable place to live.

### **What We Did**

Between June 2015 to October 2020, 108 communities with populations from 93 to 12,500 have participated in First Impressions. This represents 20% (one in five) of the 527 communities within those populations. Communities of like size are paired together and teams of 3 to 5 volunteers are trained to visit the match community. Volunteers are given a standardized questionnaire to evaluate the appearance, access to services, friendliness, and other community attributes. Each volunteer records their observations and these are submitted to K-State Research and Extension to be compiled into a community report. Photographs accompany the report to illustrate points raised by the visitors. Results are presented to the community at large and recommendations for improvement are included. A follow up survey was conducted to determine impacts of the program.

### **Outcomes**

In the follow-up survey to volunteers in 99 communities, 95 respondents from 68 communities reported:

- 94% of volunteers stated First Impressions resulted in a greater awareness of community needs.
- \$7 million were raised through donations, fundraisers and grants to support community needs.
- Improved communication between citizens and city government.
- Blighted properties were removed and community clean-ups were initiated or revived.
- Improved signage was installed.
- Increased volunteerism resulting in community engagement and pride.
- Validation of needs which assisted in obtaining community support and funding.
- Volunteer groups gained a sense of empowerment resulting in successful grant applications.
- Increased cooperation between community groups.

## Success Stories in Their Own Words

We have become advocates for our little town, and we feel enabled to improve our community, not depending on the city to do everything. They have been most appreciative of our efforts. (Blue Rapids)

If we want our communities to grow, we need to be mindful of the impressions and understanding of our new residents and visitors to the community. Complacency is dangerous, and comfortable is complacent. What are the barriers for our new residents? What sets us apart from any other community if they are trying to make a choice? What do they have difficulty finding? What do they want to know? These are the continuous questions that we need to ask each other and every single new resident that we can find. Through that lens we can continue to make progress and be better. The First Impressions program is a great way to find that new lens and create ideas for change. (Ellsworth)

We established a Revitalization Group to make a difference in our community. Our first goal was housing. After participating in First Impressions, we realized signage was a huge issue in our city. We travel these city streets everyday so it was something we didn't notice. We credit First Impressions for bringing this to our attention. Great program that everyone could benefit from! (Onaga)

First Impressions was an eye opening experience. When you drive through the community all the time you don't notice as much until someone points it out. It also made those involved in the community projects work hard to make sure to continue to have a wonderful community to work in and call home. (Downs)

I believe the best part was helping instill some PRIDE that was starting to lack. So often we focus on the issues but the First Impressions Program also reminded us of all that we do have that is awesome and something to be excited about. Please check out our website now! <https://www.lenoraks.com/> (Lenora)

First Impressions really helped give our community an awareness of what story others might tell when they visit our town. We have plans to go through a strategic planning process with our Eco. Devo. Director. I hope that the impact of FI will continue for years to come. We have some projects that we would like to pursue, and we have people who are engaged in making forward progress to continue to improve our community for generations to come. (Holyrood)

As a result of First Impressions, we have a more active PRIDE group, a new City Beautification Committee, a trails group, and a new position, Community Development Director. (Columbus)

The First Impressions Study has given our city's projects leverage as we can validate that outside sources thought these items were issues that needed addressed. Having a group from our community travel to the other city has helped open the eyes of several community members to show them what other ideas are out there and allows us to work together with the same vision. (Cheney)

The beautification and pool project really got the community involved. You see more people assisting with events than before. As downtown appearance improved, the number of events being held on main street has increased. (Osborne)

With impetus from First Impressions, Strategic Doing, and the City Council, Phillipsburg now has a community daycare center operating, the City has created a Vision 2030 plan to make public space and park improvements, and a variety of ladies from the community have undertaken beautification projects. We are working together based on individual interests to make projects become realities. (Phillipsburg)

## Contact

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