

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS

## CONNECTICUT

### A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

#### Executive Summary - North Branford, Connecticut

#### Conducted by the visit team from Coventry, Connecticut

November 9, 2017

#### 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.



On November 9, 2017 eight volunteers from Coventry, Connecticut visited North Branford on a clear and cool Thursday. The team was generally expecting *"a small, rural, residential community but with an emphasis on agriculture"* that was a *"middle class suburb of New Haven."* Few members of the team knew much about the community in advance. The team's online research revealed that the community website was *"user friendly - easy to navigate overall and is informative."* Interactive features of the website were noted as a potential way to engage the community. While there was a limited presence on social media, the team was impressed by the quality of brochures and maps and used state data sites and rankings to get a

feel for the character of the community. Based on this research, the team felt there wasn't much promoting North Branford as a "destination" but they were excited to visit. The following is an overview of the highlights and re-occurring themes of the visit. Additional detail can be found in the raw data report available from members of the visit team.





## First Impressions Visit

For the first ten minutes of the visit, the team was asked to drive around town from various entrances. The team primarily entered through the Northford area and their first impressions were that the community was rural and charming with beautiful agricultural and open spaces. *"Northford is very quaint and small with a limited number of businesses that were more service oriented. We stopped at a bakery for a coffee and the owner was very pleasant and helpful to us - very nice!"* As the team moved through town they noted significantly more commercial development in the Route 80 area moving south with variable aesthetic appeal. While some areas were *"a little tacky,"* according to one participant, *"...there was a mix of building styles and ages [and they were] well maintained"* with few vacancies and standard signage. They found neighborhoods were generally beautiful and well kept with few areas of blight and a mix of housing types, although some noted they did not see any clearly multi-family or affordable housing. Tourism did not appear to be a significant focus for the town although the team noted that the lake, agri-tourism opportunities, and parks (including farmland preservation), and recreational facilities could be assets to promote.

The team was impressed that North Branford offered such a diverse selection of small businesses and commercial areas, contributing significantly to the community tax base. While they didn't observe much evidence of civic life they were impressed by the *"number of public recreational facilities throughout the town"* noting that the *"...CT Sports Park and Ice Pavilion are two unique amenities."* Several members also commented on the apparent quality of the senior center and related activities. *"I was so impressed with the senior center...the Director was outstanding and so very enthusiastic about her job as well as the community. She provided an excellent overview of the operation. [There were] lots of machines in the exercise room and the entire staff was so cordial and welcoming."* However, they found that many of these areas were not fully accessible to pedestrians, bicyclists, seniors, families, or people with disabilities. As an example, one team member noted *"I did notice a small playscape/park on a main road, [but with] no sidewalks and busy street [it] may be difficult for kids to access without being driven by a parent."*



*"In some ways, there are two very distinct faces of North Branford. Northford is very rural, agricultural, quiet, while North Branford is much more commercial, bustling, more traffic"*

A recurring theme throughout the visit and the debrief discussion was their overall observation that the two geographic areas of town had very different character and presented as separate communities. *"As an example,"* one team member notes *"...the super clean small grocery store*

worker [in Northford] told me they are the only store in town, however there is a huge grocery store in North Branford." The team also noted that welcome or services signage could be improved to indicate how Northford is related to North Branford.

Overall the team had the feeling of a "*a pleasant, livable suburb.*" Reflecting the consensus of team members, one commented that they would most remember "*nicely maintained neighborhoods, great school facilities, friendly people.*" When asked what was the most outstanding feature of the community, team members had a variety of comments including: "*a pleasant, livable suburb,*" "*Very neat and clean, well maintained properties - both residential, municipal and commercial,*" "*I was surprised with the scope of what was offered to the seniors and I would gladly share with my community. I am wondering how the town can afford to offer such a comprehensive program*" and "*the farms, both in their beauty and usefulness.*"

### **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. Diverse range of businesses and services including restaurants and services
2. Abundance of agricultural businesses
3. Friendly, welcoming character of the town

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

1. Improve signage, walkability and connectivity between areas of town and amenities
2. Support agricultural assets including agri-tourism development
3. Capitalize on existing recreational facilities including the lake

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

1. Community cohesion between Northford/North Branford
2. Threats that wooded land/open space - agricultural land could be developed if not protected
3. Lack of diverse housing options

The teams from North Branford and Coventry met on December 4, 2017 to informally share the results of their visits. They both felt this program was a great learning opportunity. They also learned something about their own community by participating in this program. The teams discussed the costs and benefits of commercial development and needed sewer infrastructure to support development, the impact of schools on growth, design standards, housing issues and development, and the role of agriculture and open space in economic development. 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.

*This report was prepared December 2017 by Laura Brown, UConn Extension, and Susan Westa, Connecticut Main Street Center based on raw data from team visits and notes from the community debrief session held on December 4, 2017. For more information visit*

<http://communities.extension.uconn.edu/connecticut-first-impressions-program/>