



## **First Impressions Revisited\***

**A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement**

**The Center For Community Economic Development**

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS REPORT

**For**

**City of La Crosse**

**Dates visited: October 26-27, 2007 and November 18-19, 2007**

**Report Written by: Catherine Neiswender, Community Development Educator, UW-Extension Winnebago County**

**Program Developed by: Professor Andrew B. Lewis, Community Development Specialist, Center for Community Economic Development, University of Wisconsin Extension. Edited: 9-6-2002**

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



## INTRODUCTION

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### **Purpose**

The purpose of the First Impressions Program is to help a community learn about existing strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of the first time visitor

### **Limitations**

The two primary limitations to this exchange were the distance and the size of the City. To offset the distance (approximately 4 hours drive one way) the team worked with the La Crosse Visitor's Bureau to find hotel rooms at government rate. This enabled team members to stay overnight. To accommodate the size of the city and the limited hours available to each team member, we divided the main categories up among the team, assigning categories to members that reflected their strengths and interest. By staying overnight and focusing our visit, we believe we were able to thoroughly cover La Crosse.

### **Conditions of Visit**

Weather conditions in October were pleasant; average fall temperatures, light rain, and some strong wind on the second day. Conditions in November had temperatures in the 30s with variable skies throughout the two days. Conditions were favorable for visiting and exploring the City.

### **First Impressions Team**

- Arlene Schmuhl, Oshkosh Visitors and Convention Bureau, Visiting Team co-leader
- Kea Schmuhl, student at Brandon Middle School
- Catherine Neiswender, UW-Extension Community Development Educator for Winnebago County, visiting team co-leader
- Vicky Redlin, Winnebago County Parks Department, Expo Center manager
- Shirley Mattox, retired teacher, former City Councilor
- Stephen Hintz, Partner, Public Administration Associates, LLC, retired UW Oshkosh political science professor, former mayor of Oshkosh
- Susan Kepplinger, City of Oshkosh Planning Department
- Tracie Schlaak, Oshkosh Visitors and Convention Bureau (visiting UW-La Crosse with daughter)

### **Process**

While there was one team, the group, due to personal schedules, split into two and visited La Crosse on two separate dates. The Team met in advance to review the First impressions guide and clarify the sections they would focus on. Each section of the report contains a

general summary of the overall comments and then lists the individual comments from team members. Because the team members provided such rich it was decided to keep the detailed comments rather than condense them and lose the richness. Some team members did additional research in advance of the visit, including phone calls to City Departments. In many instances, team members rated the category on a scale of 1 to 10, which are noted in the detailed comments.

## THE FIRST IMPRESSIONS RESULTS

### PRIOR TO YOUR VISIT

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**Summary of comments:** *Team members found information about La Crosse easy to access, and mostly of good quality. In some cases, there was too much information available on the web.*

#### **How easy was it to find information about the City of La Crosse? What was the quality of the information?**

- Easy. I Googled City of La Crosse and found the City's main page easily. From there, I was able to click on "Moving to our Community" site which included neat, informative video clips and what seemed like endless links to find out all kinds of information about the city and its services. While I didn't follow all of them, the breadth of information seemed appropriate. There was also a link for Visitors, which connected me to the CVB, tourism etc.
- Learned that the city slogan is Grand River-Great City
- Quality of information is very good. Might be a bit much – e.g. lots of sites to visit, some of which redirected me, but generally OK.
- Two fest links are broken (from great river city/visitors and tourism); map link is broken.
- I don't like the restaurants link that gets you to a generic 'yellow pages' type of page. A locally sponsored page would look nicer. Personal preference.
- The city website has almost too much information to digest! In regard to the Visitor Guide, her comment about the photos in the guide was, "It looks like everyone is having fun, I wouldn't mind going there."
- I found the map in the Explore La Crosse magazine to be less than helpful. I think you could provide more detail by having the map take two full pages.
- The three websites I used were:
  - La Crosse Convention & Visitors Bureau - [www.exploreLaCrosse.com](http://www.exploreLaCrosse.com) Rate = 8; I found the information I was looking for after a few clicks. It seemed to cover everything a visitor would be looking for. I would of liked to see more graphics though.
  - La Crosse Tribune - [www.LaCrossetribune.com](http://www.LaCrossetribune.com), Rate = 4; I was continually amazed by the extreme negativity of the comments on the website. After reading it for a few days, I was surprised to see anyone living in the city. The comments gave me the impression that it was a very 'backward' community. When I started

using it several months ago, it appeared to be very cluttered but that has changed recently with their new look.

- Grand River Great City - [www.grandrivergreatcity.com](http://www.grandrivergreatcity.com), Rate = 1; This site looked perfect until I started using it. The photos are beautiful and it seemed from the list of links that it covered everything I may have been looking for. I was disappointed after using it. The links that worked, opened in new windows, took me to sites I had already found or didn't work at all. There really wasn't any original content

## PAST PERCEPTIONS

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**Summary of comments:** Most team members knew La Crosse as a River City with a nice downtown. Most members did not have a lot of prior experience in visiting La Crosse.

**What was your perception of the community before this visit? What did you expect to see?**

- Small community on the river. Quaint downtown with minimal recreational opportunities.
- Medium sized city, located between the Mississippi River and bluffs; Nice looking, unique natural features
- Known for its Oktoberfest, its drownings, the 10-commandments 'issue', and the largest 6-pack
- I'm expecting an active downtown, attractive community, nice views of the river, fall colors. I'm expecting to find a relatively decent meal for dinner.
- I know very little about La Crosse. May have been there for a meeting many years ago, but if so, little memory of the place. I know this is a river city and there is a state university there. I am not sure what to expect overall, but I am looking forward to going after reading "Experience Historic Downtown La Crosse". Having lived in Muscatine, IA and worked in the Quad Cities, I have some experience with river cities and know they can be treasures as well as seedy.
- I was aware of the unique location between the Mississippi River and the bluffs, the active convention center, and the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.
- I visited La Crosse about 35 years ago and I remember going up to Granddad's Bluff and the magnificent river. Two years ago, when I drove to the Company Store which is in Town of Campbell and not very attractive, I visited Downtown La Crosse and spoke with shopkeepers on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street and Pearl Street, walked to Hackberry's for supper and decided I would come back for a much longer visit because there was so much to explore. La Crosse appeared to be more than the college party town. I know La Crosse is the setting for the Jazz Festival, Oktober Fest and beer companies, UW-LC and Viterbo College, a movie setting, and that the City has invested millions into a revitalized Downtown & riverfront with a Convention Center.

## THE "FIVE MINUTE" IMPRESSION

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**Summary of comments:** Everyone on the team noticed the bluffs and found them to be striking. Wayfinding signage was positively recognized, as well as the historic homes and downtown. The presence of billboards detracted from the initial beauty seen by the team.

***After taking a five-minute drive through the community, without stopping, the following reactions were noted:***

- Beautiful scenery, nice historic homes. Disconnect between outer shopping mall area and downtown. Big Pepsi billboard in front of gorgeous bluff was distracting.
- I like the use of more and smaller location signs, “Historic downtown” etc, rather than all on one sign. With limited time to view coming in on the highway, signs with lots of info are not readable in just a couple of seconds. Smaller signs are more noticeable and readable.
- Coming into the City from the east, the topography is beautiful and interesting. The topography and the river, islands, etc. impressed me immediately and provided an important and positive backdrop for my experience of the built environment. University campus attractive. Downtown appears to be busy and quite nice.
- The bluffs along the highway as you enter on Highway 16 are amazing. The community seemed very similar to many in that there is major retail along the highway which changes to residential the closer you get to the downtown. There were some great older homes mixed in with those that appeared to have been built in the 1930s - 1950s. When we were first driving through, Kea noticed a bar called Kellogg’s Keg. She asked if they had bars for kids here. She also wondered if Kellogg’s knew they were using that name.
- La Crosse appears to be a neat, clean city. It has an older, well-developed downtown. The housing stock is older, but is generally well-maintained. There is good ingress and egress for the city. Directional signage is good and there is good street lighting, especially in the downtown.
- The bluffs, visible from everywhere, and the river are the setting for an attractive city that is easy to maneuver through a street-grid system following the contours of the river and bluffs. The buildings are of mixed variety in height and mass with a large percentage of substantial, older structures. There is also evidence of new commercial construction and additions. The city has invested in a variety of lighting of the major roads and Downtown. There are neighborhoods of lovely tree-lined streets and shopping areas that lack landscaping. There is a sense of importance that this is a regional center with major hospitals, a brewery, industrial buildings and a vibrant city center. I could not find urban sprawl.

## COMMUNITY ENTRANCES – OBSERVATIONS OF EACH ENTRANCE

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***Summary of comments:*** Entrances were rated fairly high with most team members commenting on the signage and shopping. Again, the presence of billboards detracted from the view.

### HWY 16 – FROM HWY 90 GOING EAST TO WEST

- Pepsi billboard spoils the view. Lots of popular chain stores. Nice signage location. Typical urban sprawl on the way in, clean, but the billboards are an eyesore. Lots of green space. Nice street trees. Way finding signs could be more helpful. Not sure what is up with all of the pedestrian crossings, motorists don’t appear too compliant with them, probably should have a stop light for pedestrians at the University crossing on 16 near downtown. Rate: 7.5 out of 10 for quality

- Highway 16 – East to West contained a wide variety of things to see. It was commercial on the outskirts, to residential, universities and the cemetery in the center of the city, then downtown business district and ending with the parks (Riverside and Pettibone) to the west.
- Highway 16 – Small amount of construction. Bluffs to the left were very pretty. Did notice that Onalaska had all the shopping – none in La Crosse (at least on Hwy 16);
- Nice Onalaska sign
- Typical non-descript big- box entrance – most seems fairly new, so it was clean looking
- Noticed Downtown La Crosse signs fairly soon, directed me to downtown, schools etc
- Lots of billboards on 90 with hotel information and directing me to “Gateway” – probably means this entrance is more attractive.

#### HIGHWAY 35 FROM I-90

- Again, urban sprawl. Light pole banners are nice. The undevelopable wetland area is a wonderful amenity – great habitat – a real asset to the community. Passed through some older areas nearer downtown that could use some attention.
- I entered several times using EXITS 2, 3, 4, and 5. The recommended exit appears to be Exit #3 with signage for the Historic Downtown. It is a good road with good signage, good lighting, and landscaping in certain areas. Exit #5 also is a good entrance, especially if you want to go to the University. Exit #4 is satisfactory, although there is no reason to use it to get to the heart of the city. Exit #2 is appropriate to go to the airport and the industrial park, but coming south through the Town of Campbell is not impressive. La Crosse was wise to have a clear and attractive entry point coming from the town.
- Note: The broadcast signal for tourist information AM 530 never came through on my radio. It should either be fixed or the sign should be removed.
- The Hwy 16 exit #5 (8) approach to the city was breathtaking with the powerful beauty of the bluffs; however, a proliferation of billboards marred the experience. The huge Valley View Mall and subsequent strip malls appeared to be in La Crosse, but they really were in Onalaska. Although only a small sign announced the entrance into La Crosse, the directional signage was attractive and easy to read. The 4 lane arterials, often with a middle turning lane, were built for moving traffic and not for taking in the sights. The UW-L campus and student housing on one side and the Oak Grove Cemetery’s landscaping on the other were helpful landmarks. It was easy to follow the way-finding signs to Downtown and continue on south finally turning onto MM, a winding, steep Rustic Road with homes tucked in the wooded hills. I was not sure if I was in La Crosse but wound back. The south entrance on Hwy 14/61/35 (7) was bordered on the right by natural rocky formations; the 40mph speed was fast for a visitor. I found it difficult to stop at ShopKo Mall on Mormon Coulee Rd. Although there were curb cuts, there was no access for the entire length of this older mall fronted by a 5-lane highway and no landscaping to soften the asphalt. Approaching La Crosse from the west on Hwy 16/14/61 (8), the huge bridge crossing over the Mississippi River provides a marvelous view of a city below with a network of streets going in all directions. One-way split roads on Hwy 35 exit 3 is confusing for anyone, especially at night, looking for an address, or trying to stop. There were shops and motels on the east side and the river on the west. The larger overhead street signs on lights at intersections is most helpful.

- The quality of city entrances is mixed: varied levels or lack of landscaping; too many billboards detract and distract; magnificent bluffs and waterways create a natural identity; road quality is satisfactory to good; The Gateway message is uneven and lacks harmony: “welcome to God’s country” and “welcome to commercial highway”. Due to the traffic volume, no parking, and higher speeds, it is difficult to list specifics as one drives on gateways into larger cities.

#### HWY 33 ENTRANCE (VIA B TO O TO OA TO 33)

- Obviously very beautiful, reminds me of West Virginia (tight hills, nestled homes). The beauty masks some of the ‘ugly’ stuff
- Sprawl – homes were well hidden, older developments so trees are bigger
- 33 itself is newly widened, so it feels nice to drive on
- No “Welcome to La Crosse” sign at the entrance – figured I entered the City proper when I first saw the sidewalks; T. Shelby – nice, neat, clean, even the mobile homes
- Saw historic main street sign near 33<sup>rd</sup>, then the entrance looked kind of worn and old
- Some interesting façade work done (Village Shopping Center) – which helps, but the entrance itself overall still looks a bit rough.

#### PUBLIC BOAT LANDING AT PETTIBONE PARK

- Nice boat landings for public use
- Trails were well marked with info kiosks
- Nice, clean, open, lots of parking, public restrooms.

## HOUSING AND RESIDENTIAL AREAS

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**Summary of comments:** *Good variety of housing seen and a fairly high average score for quality and affordability. There were mixed impressions about the housing areas near downtown and around the campus. There is opportunity for downtown housing. Members felt that new homes were the least available.*

#### QUALITY

- I primarily experienced the older neighborhoods, including the historic area and post-WWII area east of downtown, the University housing area, and French Island. The historic residential district is a delight in terms of the condition and variety of architectural styles represented and the tree-lined streets are an appropriate and necessary compliment.
- There appears to be a good mix of housing types and price levels overall. The University rental area was not bad – while there appeared to be many converted single-family homes there was not too much negative architectural alteration. The portion of the University off campus student housing I visited was in an unexpectedly clean condition – no cars on lawns and I think I only saw one couch on a porch. The older residential area on French

Island was worst I was able to find (perhaps I missed another area) and it still wasn't that bad.

- My final observation on this is the apparent opportunity for development of upper floor residential uses in the downtown area in historic buildings.
- Housing area surrounding Old Town North looked neglected, lower income, weeds, garbage cans out, no garages?
- Student Housing around UW- La Crosse looked a bit iffy, junky
- Residential neighborhood east of UWL and west of Losey Blvd – nice, middle-upper class. As I got closer to campus, housing seemed to deteriorate with a transition to more rental/college apartments (many of which were not kept up) . I know campus housing can be unattractive, but it detracts from the overall impression of the City.
- The residential area between UWL and downtown (where I would want to live in order to be walking distance to downtown) has some nice areas, but a lot of rentals and college housing. Not sure I'd find a place to live
- Lots of beautiful historic home
- Neighborhood west of George, North of Gillett – (Logan HS neighborhood) – generally very neat, simple architecture, and affordable looking.
- The housing stock of La Crosse is older. It varies from lovely Victorian mansions to very modest one-story structures. In general, homes and neighborhoods appear to be well-maintained, although there are the usual student housing issues around the University. All streets have curb and gutter and are in pretty good condition. However, I did not see any new homes or neighborhoods within the city limits, although I did see new subdivisions in Onalaska. There are several new apartments and upper floor conversions in the downtown area. Like other older cities, La Crosse needs to pay increasing attention to seeing that houses and neighborhood infrastructure are maintained. It also must grapple with the fact that older houses have lower property value than newer houses and the tax yield will not be as great.
- There is an abundance of older housing stock in all sizes and conditions from modest bungalows to huge mansions (9). There are two sizable historic districts with architecture covering a variety of styles. There are a number of facilities for senior housing; one tall brick building with a first floor community room was always lit and filled with people (8). There are scattered lots for housing infill (4). A “new mansion” was built on Cass Street where there are grand old homes, obviously a very desirable neighborhood in which to live. I did not find any new subdivision neighborhoods with new houses. This may be a problem for someone dead-set on owning a new home in a new subdivision (3). The number of rental properties is very high at 49%. This may be accounted for by the number of students at the 3 schools of higher education. The area near the University has suffered the effects of rental properties being a cash crop with little investment in improvements. In Downtown there are new, attractive apartment buildings with attached parking facility. There are also renovated apartments over existing, mixed-use businesses providing for a people-centered Downtown (8).

#### AFFORDABILITY

- After looking at the classified section of the paper, it appears that homes for both sale and rent appear to be quite affordable. Overall, I would rate the housing affordability at a 7.



- The real estate guide booklets indicate that there is a good deal of affordable housing available if persons want to buy older housing.

#### AVAILABILITY

- Again after looking at the classifieds, there appears to be a good selection of dwellings both for sale and for rent. There also appears to be a broad range of types of units. The number of efficiencies struck me, there are many more than in Oshkosh, which is helpful for low-income persons.
- Existing/older homes – 8; New homes (not enough data); Housing for seniors – 7, Apartments rental housing – 9.
- Existing/ Older Homes (9); Housing for Seniors (8); Vacant lots for infill (6); New Homes (4); Apartments/rentals (9)

#### APPEAL

- It is difficult for me to conjecture on how different groups would find the overall appeal for housing. It seemed like a nice selection in terms of both price and type, with very good public supported amenities. Speaking for myself, under the right circumstances I would be very open to relocating to La Crosse
- This is an “eye of the beholder” answer. I like older housing and was particularly attracted to some of the older substantial properties. But my guess is that younger and more affluent home buyers are looking at new subdivisions in Onalaska, Holmen, and West Salem. For lower/middle income buyers, I would believe that the city offers some very good opportunities. The housing opportunities downtown may attract younger, professional, and single renters and buyers.
- The traditional, older home is the staple for most housing. There are now five Neighborhoods identified and approved by the City council since 1998 for improvement measures based on the needs of the neighbors and the city. There are monthly meetings with city staff and citizen input is at the heart of its success. The neighborhoods can apply for funding during the budget process for amenities, such as tree planting. Each neighborhood receives \$3,000 -\$5,000 for improvement projects. There are plans for a Neighborhood Commission representing all neighborhood groups. There is also a grassroots organization called “Livable Neighborhoods” acting as the watchdog for quality of life in neighborhoods. Their publication, “The Front Porch” updates neighborhood concerns. La Crosse is one of the safest communities in the USA making this a desirable place to live and raise a family.
- It is difficult to rate anyone’s preference for certain types of housing. I prefer living in my small 1924 bungalow made with quality materials that is near shopping, church, and downtown. Maybe, when I can no longer climb stairs or look after my house and yard, I will consider another housing option. Senior housing should ideally be near a bus line, in walking distance to grocery store, parks, library, and medical facility. Nationally and internationally, young people are flocking to downtowns as are older couples. I commend the City of La Crosse for its support of mixed-use and urban living apartments in the Downtown area. There is the perceived need in the marketplace for houses to have more

rooms than are used; each bedroom must have its own bath; children don't share a room/bed any longer; and a guest-room which may be used occasionally is a necessity. When living in NYC a studio apartment is treasured. The same may be said about the availability of housing stock in any given city. Make sure that there are attractive, safe neighborhoods, quality housing, in close proximity to amenities. I believe that the City of La Crosse has realized the importance of strong neighborhoods and that a tax base can be maintained if there is pride in the neighborhoods and that quality housing stock is maintained. The City needs to take care with its zoning and design standards for multiple housing units and ensure that their presence is an addition to a neighborhood, not a detriment.

## EDUCATION, HEALTH, SOCIAL AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

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**Summary of comments:** *These categories are very strong assets for La Crosse, especially for a city of its size. Most team members listed the various schools, medical facilities and social services that they encountered, visited or researched. Comments below include some observations of conditions found. Several comments mentioned dangerous crosswalks.*

### EDUCATION

- La Crosse has a solid reputation for a wide availability of excellent education opportunities. There are the obvious signs of schools - school crossings, crossing guards, and school buses for 35% of students. The public school system and private schools of various religious denominations offer K-12 programs in neighborhood schools and church complexes. The UW-L with 9,000 students is nationally recognized for many of its unique programs. Viterbo University, a liberal arts College, has a long history in La Crosse and has expanded its graduate enrollment through creative programming (in which I enrolled for a number of years). Western Technical College is a regional anchor for further education. There is also a professional Bar(tender) School. La Crosse and the region is fortunate for the opportunities provided for an excellent higher education degree.
- 3 middle and 10 elementary schools noticed; 4 high schools – seemed relatively new
- 2 colleges w/ tech school; beautiful campuses; could use signaled crosswalk for students
- I was surprised to see an unmarked intersection by Lincoln Middle School. There was street parking on all sides of both cross streets which made it difficult to see if anything was coming. I can't imagine what this intersection is like when school is getting out.
- Fence around school make you feel trapped
- Preschool/Kindergarten/Head Start: There is a free 4-year old preschool program through the public school system with +400 pupils attending a school, childcare center, or private school. There are a number of preschool private and church centers, and Montessori Society for ages 2 ½ - 5. La Crosse also has a Head Start program.
- The La Crosse Public School system has an enrollment of 7,213 pupils in 10 elementary schools, 3 middle schools and 2 high schools. Besides traditional school programs, there are many special programs including: SAGE in grades K-3, Choice/Charter Schools with programs from grades PK – 12<sup>th</sup> at Coulee, Montessori PK-8<sup>th</sup>, School of Technology/Arts K-5 and T/A II 6-8, North Woods, International K-5, LaCrossroads 9-12, and more inter-

school programs in middle schools, AP classes, Before/After School programs, and International staff and student exchange program.

- Associate Superintendent Kathie Tyser was gracious in sharing information about the public school. The school district publishes a complete booklet on their offerings. Like Oshkosh there is an *upcoming referendum* that addresses the serious need to renovate aging school buildings and either add to or build a new school. Community input is crucial for support and it was collected through a survey. The schools' buildings appear solid but there is always the continued expense of maintenance and replacement of boilers and roofs, etc.
- The Lutherans have four elementary schools and Congregational Church operates a preschool. There are also private church schools in adjoining communities.
- I would rate the educational opportunities very high **(9)** for students to obtain a quality education in the city of La Crosse from Pre-K –12 through nationally-recognized universities and technical college. It is important for community support of this system and to maintain the buildings in which these outstanding programs thrive.

### College/University

- Dorms very accessible to all of the classes at UW-LAX. Within walking distance. I talked with a couple of college students – they LOVE the UW-La Crosse.
- The college kids I stayed with LOVED their college. It's within walking distance of everything. Classroom sizes small – teachers readily available to students. Lots of Asian diversity. It's small. Lots of diversity in general.

### HEALTH CARE

- Lots of dentists, offices affiliated with both hospitals, usual optometrists
- 7 nursing homes with most having easy access and nice grounds
- La Crosse has two fine, quality hospitals/health centers that serve the west central Wisconsin region. They are wonderful resources. As long as the regional health care market exists, these institutions will do well. But if the patient base shrinks, La Crosse will have excess hospital beds (like Oshkosh with a second hospital).
- The presence of two hospitals **(8)** that serve the region is a great asset to the city. There is a robust building expansion at Gunderson Lutheran. As a visitor I was puzzled at the lack of architectural unity of this huge complex. Franciscan Skemp provides options for medical care and hopefully can save its niche in the presence of expanding Gunderson Lutheran. Both serve the schools of higher education for medical and nursing intern and educational opportunities.

### SOCIAL SERVICES

- 4 youth centers
- 16 pages of services listed in the phone book! Services are widely varied: Aids, Alzheimer's, Correctional, Birth to 3, Big Brothers and Sisters, Guardians and Conservators, Volunteers, domestic violence, family and kids, unwed mothers, Hmong,

habitat for humanity, gay youth alliance, mind-body, senior services, support groups, child abuse, nutrition, education etc.

- Did not see any busses or public transportation
- Flyers in library and some windows indicate various functions or fundraisers for a variety of social services or non-profits (eg Humane Society fundraiser). Indicates a level of engagement and local support
- The Catholic diocese has a huge center for social services in what seems to have been a former seminary on East Avenue South. Other Church groups also provide services. Of course, there are the government programs evident in the County seat.

## CIVIC SERVICES

- There is a Hmong Community and Cultural Center recently renovated by citizens and open to the entire La Crosse community for meetings. With a \$2,700,000 bill, I hope that there is a good business plan to enable the success of this project.
- As I walked the streets of downtown I spoke with two workmen who were putting up interior walls for a Youth Center that will be available to church groups in the city. It is in an old building in the historic district and will continue to bring young people together.
- The Gertrude Salzer Children's Museum at 207 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue South in the historic downtown is a non-profit museum that has three floors of exhibits, two meeting rooms, a theater and gift shop and opened in 1999. This is a success story of a donated building, accompanied by substantial monetary support. Families can go downtown for creative and educational opportunities.

## EMERGENCY SERVICES

- Only one ambulance service listed.
- Saw one city officer and one county officer.
- Emergency rooms and clinics good

## LOCAL ECONOMY

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**Summary of comments:** *Impressions of the local economy were generally good. Team members commented that the downtown seemed active and vibrant. La Crosse is facing similar challenges as are many communities across the country (eg upcoming labor shortages, plant closures, retail moving out of downtowns etc) and appears to be weathering them well. Team members noticed the (inevitable) changes that are going on in the community and downtown. The Riverwalk was a plus to the community. Attention to some of the smaller details/concerns described in the comments below would really help.*

- There are signs that La Crosse has an active, growing economy. Logistics Health, Inc. has completed building a new \$12.6 million International headquarters in a two-building complex located on the riverfront with a fountain and fantastic landscaping. They employed 330 and will add 200 more employees. Main Street Ingredients has invested \$19,000,000 in the last five years and added 100 more employees. Both companies received New

Market Tax Credits from Governor Doyle to support their expansions. As long as La Crosse retains and attracts companies needing educated employees, the economic standards of living should be satisfactory.

## DOWNTOWN

### GENERAL COMMENTS SPECIFIC TO DOWNTOWN

- Buildings generally in good condition, even the empties looked taken care of Downtown
- Overall, I would rate the downtown a 9. It was not difficult to find. The condition of the historic buildings is quite good, and the number and placement of them truly creates the feeling of an Historic District. The cling-on storefront window signs welcoming visitors were a nice touch. Overhanging signs a nice compliment, however the billboards should go away. Traffic felt somewhat congested, but I interpreted that as a sign of a health. A nice mix of retail types as well as types of places to eat and drink, I would rate that a 9. It is nice to have a food store downtown, La Crosse is fortunate.
- At first blush the downtown appeared pretty clean, but a walk revealed some litter and trash receptacle issues that needed to be addressed.
- There appeared to be quite a number of opportunities to develop residential rental uses in the floors above commercial space – my impression is that the upper floors in the historic downtown appeared largely vacant.
- Design of new construction of the Holiday Inn and the Subway, for example was complimentary and a good fit, unlike that of the Radisson. Riverwalk very nice. Water fountains a nice amenity. Lighting nice but perhaps a little overstated. One vacant lot with grass could use some work.
- I visited a limited number of stores, but was well treated when I did. The bells ringing from the Catholic Cathedral added a pleasant dimension to the downtown environment.
- The public art is another huge bonus. Very nice.
- Not a lot of housing. Were upstairs units shops, storage, or apartments?
- Large hotels with all amenities, numerous restaurants and bars that serviced food. River side park very nice. Didn't see large industries in downtown.
- Riverfront is awesome – no question; nice friendship garden
- I found the giant Indian statute to be a bit tacky, and offensive
- Bike trails were well marked
- By reading the local magazine it appears that the Hmong presence is welcomed/embraced
- Antiques on Main – nice shop, proprietor was friendly and willing to give restaurant recommendations (Fayzees)
- Library was clean, not new, but nice, busy mid-day
- All the businesses downtown had “October events” posted in their windows – great touch!
- What's up with the ever-running drinking fountains?? Is that sustainable? What about water conservation?? This left a bad impression with me, especially since La Crosse just signed on to the Sustainable, Natural Step principles
- Medicine Shoppe – recommended for 'drugstore', but didn't have other basics like a Walgreens might. Noticed native flower plantings and new tree plantings which was nice – indicated a caring about the environment.

- There were some 'rough' looking buildings as I was walking around downtown and area around downtown, but it didn't ruin my impressions
- Government offices were located on the fringe of downtown all together in one area – very convenient with new looking buildings
- Some litter build-up in some areas (Cigarettes butts and other garbage was all over the ground despite the fact that there were more than enough garbage cans.)
- Hard to cross street (we watched a mother with a stroller in a clearly marked crosswalk waiting to cross as at least 10 cars went by her without slowing down.)
- People rake leaves onto streets (she felt this made the streets look messy)
- Fire hydrants are green and white
- Some graffiti
- All bikes chained up to poles (she thought they should have bike racks in the downtown)
- Somewhat difficult to find Tourist Information Center downtown by following the signage, but not too bad
- Not an extremely large amount of vacant businesses
- La Crosse has made a major investment in its historic downtown. The building facades, lighting, and sidewalks have been improved. The river park is very attractive. There are quite a few architecturally interesting old buildings downtown and, in general, the downtown has an imposing presence. My only and very minor complaint is that I could not find enough trash receptacles.
- Fortunately, there are other activities in the downtown. The city hall and several county buildings are downtown as is the convention center and several hotels. The vocational/technical college and the diocese cathedral are downtown. There also are several banks and the newspaper office.
- I believe that the city planners and economic development specialists fully understand the dynamics of the downtown economy. Certainly, the strategy of building a strong convention presence has paid off and the current strategy of providing interesting housing choices in order to repopulate the downtown is in keeping with what similarly challenged cities are doing. La Crosse should be commended for the private-public efforts to maintain and transform the downtown.
- The La Crosse Downtown Historic District presents a solid mass of buildings, two to four stories tall, with 96 historic structures! The blocks of buildings enables one to walk in any direction four to six blocks and still be in Downtown. Each shop and business presents an opportunity to interact with sales people who are genuinely pleased to serve you.
- Obviously there has been a tremendous investment in the infrastructure, vintage lighting, thoughtful signage guiding toward Downtown, trees along the sidewalks, and many restored facades. There was an occasional building that was quickly patched with stucco or used inferior materials. As one moves to the edges of the district there are buildings in transition obviously waiting for a developer with an idea. I am not sure whether there is a downtown oversight committee that has standards or offers suggestions to maintain the integrity of the downtown. The "sore thumb building" detracts from the efforts of responsible, historic restoration. However, the energy and investment to sustain and renovate so many buildings is an accomplishment that will need on-going vigilance and continued investment.
- Downtowns need an active population day and night. The mixed-use developments with apartments over the stores and the new apartment buildings will surely add to the lively

mix. I could see myself enjoying living in this downtown community. The People's Food Co-op, within walking distance for grocery items, is an important piece of a walkable neighborhood. "Bread, Books, and Bars!"

- The downtown farmer's market on Saturday morning was pretty sparsely attended with a small number of vendors. Granted this was late October and the weather was a bit brisk. It felt like it was relegated to the outskirts of the downtown. Is there opportunity to move it to the streets so there is more synergy with downtown businesses?

#### SIGNAGE

- Yes, signage for 'historic downtown' was prominent. Didn't go to 'northern' downtown area – it seemed hard to find. Rate overall appearance – 8
- The "I Love La Crosse" sign gave the impression of a great deal of community pride.
- The signage for the Historic Downtown La Crosse Association welcome signs was nice
- Rate =9, Signage and lighting were very good.
- Rate= 4 – 8 (due to billboards!) Many of the stores have appropriate signage for the historic area. There are also attractive historic way-finding signs. There are too many street signs in some blocks, including huge billboards. There is a huge red Coca Cola billboard on the side of a five story historic building and it shamelessly calls attention to itself as being out of place. There are several types of markers identifying historic sites and buildings that contribute to a rich sense of place.
- Rate =6, Some parking signs were faded as to be illegible; Cross walk signs were not heeded by motorists; Other signage was unique and inventive

#### QUALITY OF SHOPPING

- Rate = 6, Lots of specialty shops, numerous bars, no department stores or chain stores

#### WINDOWS

- Rate =5; Most windows weren't set up for displays per se. Those that were had merchandise well positioned.
- Rate = 7
- Rate =8 Many of the window displays were thoughtfully executed, reminiscent of the 1940s – 1950s when professional window designers were hired. The window displays drew you in to the stores. Many of the stores had arranged lovely Christmas decorations and lights. The recessed historic storefront entries were maintained and naturally attracted one to look closer at the merchandise.
- Rate= 6-7: Window displays varied from very attractive and interesting to mundane and ordinary.

#### QUALITY OF MERCHANDISE

- Rate =7; A large variety of specialty shops with a myriad of inventory
- Rate = 8

- Everything seemed to be good quality with the exception of a few of the items in the souvenir shop, although that would be the case in just about any community. Some of the shops only offered very high-end merchandise. It was quite a drive out to the mall area to find a pair of shoes for less than \$300.

#### PARKING

- Rate =10; Public access to parking ramp a big plus. Plenty of on street and off street parking. No problems finding a place to park
- rating a 6 – plenty of parking within walking distance of a couple hotels
- Rate = 3-9
- Street parking was very hard to find. There were parking ramps available but they are overall unattractive. There was a building near Cameron Park that had a unique design. The lower level was retail, there were penthouse-type apartments on the top and the parking floors were in the middle. Also, the covered parking structure by Cameron Park was very attractive. We weren't sure what the purpose of it was but it looked nice.
- Rate=10, I was really impressed by the amount of public parking. There were several parking ramps and good on-street parking.
- Rate =10 La Crosse has really invested in making parking available with various options. Free parking on the street for two hours is the norm. There are three parking structures which are either free or have a 25 cent per hour rate. Paying enables one to stay as long as one needs, without worrying about getting a ticket. I spoke with a police officer who works in Downtown for parking and marks and writes tickets. He is thrilled to be living in beautiful, safe, and exciting La Crosse. He knows most every nook and cranny and all the regular offenders. There was very little graffiti; I noticed two such pieces of work.

#### LIGHTING

- Rate =4; Didn't go out at night but the decorative streetlights were attractive during the day
- Rate =10; The lighting is an important part of the ambiance of a historic downtown and La Crosse has wisely invested in this amenity. The lamps have a variety of one to five globes per post unifying the district. The city crew was hanging wreaths from the light posts. Many of the shops used attractive window lighting.
- Nice lampposts, though many of them had no banners, even though they had poles. Indicates neglect? Lack of coordination?

#### RETAIL MIX

- All big box and mall traffic seemed to be in Onalaska
- Everything you seemed to need or want was within walking distance. There was a convention center, a selection of hotels, several parks, dining and a wide variety of shopping.
- The downtown is heavily service oriented with financial institutions, government offices, restaurants, and bars.



## OVERALL RETAIL

- Rate = 8 – nice variety downtown with all chains in local malls
- There didn't seem to be any way finding signs on the way to the hotel, but once we got there, the location made the downtown very hard to miss. It did take a bit a driving to find the 'North Downtown'
- Downtown very easy to find. Loved the mixture of stores and quaint shops, Rate = 7.5
- The historic feel of the downtown was very nice. The out door seating areas in front of some of the shops was nice but some of the people gathered there made it seem a bit intimidating to enter the business.
- There seemed to be a huge variety of chains for both shopping and dining

## VARIETY OF SHOPPING

- Rate = 9; The downtown offered a wide variety of specialty shopping. We visited a craft store, a bookstore, an art and souvenir shop, a grocery store and an antique mall all within just a few blocks.
- Rate =4 Downtown La Crosse is experiencing the stress that most older downtowns experience. It is no longer the commercial center of the city or region which clearly has moved to the Highway 90 corridor, especially clustered around Exit #5. The only strong commercial business that I saw was Wettstein's Appliance Store. There are some local specialty shops, but not high volume destinations. There are a variety of low to mid-range restaurants and a lot of bars. I counted 12 bars within a two block stretch. My understanding is that the UW-La Crosse students come downtown to drink. There are quite a few vacant store fronts. I am not optimistic about the downtown ever re-establishing itself as a major retail center.
- Rate =6 here is a variety of shopping opportunities and in my several days did not start to cover the entire downtown. Places like Wettstein's are an anchor to the past and present. One of the formulas for a successful downtown: "Bread, Books, and Bars" is obviously filled. There is more than one bakery, a great bookstore, and many coffee shops, cafes, and bars for meeting friends and People's Food Co-op. I was pleasantly surprised with a hearty New Orleans sampler plate at Buzzard Billy's. The waiter was pleased to live in La Crosse. I purchased some cards in a religious goods store, Carl Noelke, across from the cathedral with a well-stocked inventory and a less-talkative sales person. I needed a battery charger for my camera and went to Bob's Moen Photo on Main Street; he did not have the exact product and sent me up the street to May's Photo where I purchased the charger (\$10 more than in downtown Oshkosh) and had it charged. They were both happy to be in downtown but found that big boxes and the Internet, neither which deal in service, were their biggest challenge. As I left May's I asked for a recommendation for a quick snack and she directed me across the street to International Bake Shoppe in "The Square" where the girl showed me the ovens and their plans for expansion. They have been there for nine years and are happy with Downtown. Pearl Ice Cream Parlor was the place on a cold night that young people were coming to for their favorite scoop of Grandpa Oscar's homemade ice cream served in a 1930s setting. It was one of a variety of shops on Pearl Street in a long block building; all the windows and pediments were brightly lit with colored lights. The girl was willing to visit after all the customers had left. Her uncle had purchased

the block about 13 years ago and all the shops were doing well. There was a ballroom upstairs that could be rented for parties. Earlier I had enjoyed a wonderful dinner at Hackberry's where I was the only patron. As I left, three groups of people came in for dinner. There are many more shops I want to explore and meals to enjoy but that will be on a return trip to La Crosse.

## CUSTOMER SERVICE

- Rate = 9; Each place we stopped people were very friendly and helpful. In one store the staff and customers were talking about how all the young people were moving away from the city. In another they told us all about October Fest and that we should come back for that. When we stopped later in the day at one of the business, they told us they weren't going to charge us until after 3pm since there would be a price reduction at that time.
- rating a 7 – The Pearl – everyone was very friendly as well as the Taco Bell
- Rate=10, I visited the Pearl Street Book Store, Kroner's Hardware, the Grounded Coffee House, and the Chinese Restaurant. Other than lunch, I was not buying anything. But I was wonderfully treated by the employees in all of the businesses. They were friendly and helpful. Going into the book store and the hardware store were great "time-warp" experiences and these places add to the attraction of the downtown area, because they are authentic.
- Rate =9, I was pleased with all those who waited on me in the various shops and restaurants, including the post office. They were pleased to wait on me and were willing to talk about doing business in downtown.
- Staff at restaurants/shops were very helpful
- Rate =9, Very good, everyone said 'thank you' whether something was purchased or not

### ***Does the Downtown play a roll in Tourism?***

- The downtown seems not only to play a role in tourism, but also to be a major attraction. The brochure they produce was very helpful and we used it both for the map and as a suggestion list.

### ***Would you find the downtown a desirable place to live?***

- No. The traffic congestion and the number of people in the downtown make it seem more like a place to visit, not to live.
- Generally, Yes. I like living near downtowns, and the walkability to essential places is fairly good. I would want to live in a house within a few blocks, but unsure if I'd be find something to my liking
- No, I prefer a quieter atmosphere

### ***What retail goods to people seem to have to travel for?***

- We couldn't think of anything that wasn't located in either La Crosse or Onalaska.

### ***What retail did you find unusual in a town this size?***

- The abundance of retail seems in itself seems unusual for a city this size. Maybe because there are not any other large cities near by.
- Unusual? Co-op food store. Trolley was a nice touch, though out of service during visit

- I was surprised to find Dave's Guitar Shop with over 2,000 guitars. This is a destination shop for anyone seriously looking for that special instrument. I was totally surprised by the amount of community information included in the CenturyTel phone book. Their headquarters is located downtown and I was able to pick up a complimentary phone book. This business values the strengths of the community and provides a wealth of information for human services, calendar of events, cultural events, area attractions, education information, bus routes, government listings, and so much more. I presume they are smaller than AT&T!

***What stores would you travel a distance to patronize?***

- The Food Co-Op offers many things not available in larger cities. Plus the concept of membership gives a real 'family' feeling to shopping there.
- I would travel more than 30 miles to visit: the antique store, book store, craft shop and co-op

**OTHER RETAIL SHOPPING AREAS – BIG BOX RETAILERS**

- Bridgeview shopping center– a little tired looking, definitely an area for residents, not tourists. Not sure why its on the tourism brochures
- Village Shopping Center – nice, new façade work all the way around the mall, shopping mall for 'locals', not tourists. Supported a local grocery (Quillans)
- I checked out ***Bridge View Shopping Center*** at 2500 Rose Street at 7:45pm. It was an old, tired mall with very poor lighting in the uneven asphalt parking lot. I got out of the car but didn't feel like going in to look around. Near Central High School on the south side is the ***Village Shopping Center*** on State Road. It aims for the quaint look with wood-siding shops painted a variety of colors, including Quillin's Grocery Store. It wound around a triangle of shops and felt neighborly in contrast to most strip malls with huge parking lots.
- I was intrigued with the ***Old Towne North*** off Highway 53, East on Clinton Street and south on to Caledonia Street. St. James the Less Church and rectory are landmarks for the neighborhood. There are wonderful vintage lights up and down the street, 3 bulbs on the corner lights and 2 bulbs in the middle of the blocks. There are lots of small shops, including Caledonia Street Antique Mall. It once was a busy neighborhood commercial street, similar to Oregon Street in Oshkosh. I stopped after 7:00pm to get some homemade ice cream at the Sweet Shop. An older gentleman had just closed for the night. He would be back at 4:00am to make 2,800 hand-dipped chocolate covered cherries. His uncle started the shop 87 years ago and he worked for him as a kid. Years ago they were so busy that he slept in a booth for 5 hours. He works 90-hour weeks in the winter and 40 hours in the summer months. His chocolates will all sell out before Christmas. Sometimes large companies will empty his stock with several thousand-dollar orders. He would rather sell to 100 individuals and make them happy. He was proud of his neighborhood and told me the names of some of the larger stores that used to be there and are now replaced with smaller shops. About 10-15 years ago the businesses applied for a matching grant to put in trees, decorative lights and brick pavers and were assessed about \$500; that was well worth the money. I said I'd return.
  - **Old Town North – Downtown #2**

- No signage – its on the map, but no signs on streets in the area. Finally saw one off of a main street
- Saw nice lampposts, benches etc
- Nice bus stops and ‘push to walk’ buttons (downtown doesn’t have these), nice small parking area and phones
- Again – the bubblers have the water on!
- I saw a bike rack –yeah! Funny that there are none downtown
- My overall impression was ‘why stay’? Aside from a couple of unique stores, there is no food, coffee shops etc to keep me here. Not worth a second visit.

## LOCAL INDUSTRIES

- The economy of La Crosse and the immediate region is based on (1) healthcare, (2) education and `Lutheran, Franciscan Healthcare, Trane, UW-La Crosse, La Crosse County, Western Technical College, the City of La Crosse, and the La Crosse School District. This is a very good balance of employers and this balance provides some protection against economic downturns. In fact, by 2013 there may be a labor shortage in the region as current workers retire.
- The City of La Crosse is in the historic and current position of being the economic engine for the region. Employers within the city provide jobs for people living throughout west central Wisconsin and this has imposed a special responsibility on La Crosse, unlike communities located in metropolitan regions. Outside of La Crosse, the Ashley factory in Arcadia probably is the largest regional employer.
- The City owns several industrial parks and participates in others with the County and adjoining communities. It is my understanding that the Airport Industrial and Interstate parks are currently full, but that there are vacancies in the International Business Park. I visited the Airport Industrial Park and the International Business Park. Most of the businesses are relatively small operations. Although La Crosse would welcome major new businesses, the reality here, as in most urban areas, is that economic growth is driven by retention and expansion of existing businesses. The La Crosse Area Development Corporation is responsible for marketing industrial park land and for working with regional governments and businesses to create industrial opportunities. I spoke at length with James Hill, Executive Director of LADCO, and I was impressed by his knowledge of economic development and his efforts to encourage a regional approach to economic development. Hill indicated that intergovernmental relationships are better now than previously and that the County is playing a more significant role in regional development. Hill met with me on no notice—I just walked in his office—and was extremely helpful and I thank him for sharing his time with me.
- The La Crosse area has several assets for economic development. It has rail, river, and interstate highway transportation services. It has an excellent vocational/technical college for training and retraining workers. It is not too far from the major markets of Minneapolis/Saint Paul and Chicago. On the other hand, it faces tremendous competition from other well-situated regions. It also is beginning to face some labor shortages.

## COMMERCIAL SERVICES/PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

- ATMS were convenient and easily accessed.

## TOURISM

- It seemed like tourism is one thing they really embrace. As we were visiting businesses, we felt that being from outside of La Crosse was the norm. Festivals and outdoor activities as well as historic downtown and river location

### ***Does the community have a slogan/brand?***

- Not that we could figure out. I went back and looked through the Visitor Guide to see if I missed it, but couldn't find anything that really stood out except maybe the Mississippi River.
- Grand River/Great City or Explore La Crosse

### ***Is the community well known for an event?***

- The main thing we were told about when we asked at different places was October Fest. No one mentioned any other events and we asked in several places.
- Octoberfest, River boats, scenery
- Riverfront and bluffs

### ***What have you seen that could be developed into an attraction?***

- It seemed like anything that could be an attraction was already being used as one with maybe the exception of the cemetery. I couldn't really find anything about it or its history.
- There wasn't an event going on at the time we were there. Nobody in the community mentioned any other event except October Fest
- Existing attractions, Rate = 7; We visited Cameron Park. The small private park section looked like a small cemetery of memorial site. It seemed very out of place where it was located. Also during our previous visit we noticed that the small museum at the visitor center had several signs that were misspelled.

### ***Availability and selection of lodging-***

- There doesn't seem to be a lack of lodging in the community; several hotels from budget to full-service; Campgrounds observed were neat and orderly, with many spots filled for so late in the season

### ***Facilities to accommodate a convention-***

- The La Crosse Center in the downtown, but they were a bit pricey for smaller events

### ***Is there a Visitor Center?***

- Yes, found it right away – loved the historic building.
- Customer service at the Visitor Center Rate = 1; No one came down to greet me. Milled around in the lobby for about 5 minutes without any service and then left.

## RESTAURANTS

### QUALITY OF RESTAURANTS.

- Rate = 7, We only stopped in two restaurants but both of them had good selections on the menus.
- Had a wonderful Cajun lunch for a great price
- Grounded Coffee – great coffee, good, basic, home-made tasty sandwiches, friendly; lots of local/eclectic community information to be found here.
- Had a fabulous dinner at the Hackberry (above the co-op). I felt comfortable eating there alone. Very classy. Organic food. Excellent service. Nice middle-high price range on the menu. What an asset!
- Rate = 6-7 The restaurants where I ate were all nice, unique experiences. I enjoyed a good breakfast for two mornings at the Three Rivers Lodge in the Radisson Hotel watching the river and seeing a huge barge pass by. The waiters were attentive and enjoyed living in La Crosse. My New Orleans experience at Buzzard Billy's was good and I would easily return. This was my 2<sup>nd</sup> time eating at Hackberry's and the food was singularly good; the setting was pleasant overlooking Cameron Park across the street. My homemade soup and grain roll at International Bake Shoppe provided a hearty snack in the middle of the day. These were locally-owned restaurants that interest me more than any franchise. There are other interesting restaurants I would like to try in restored historic buildings, such as Piggy's and the Freighthouse

### VARIETY/MIX OF RESTAURANTS.

- Rate =7, Restaurants seem to cover all tastes. There seemed to be a lot of chains but there were also restaurants that were unique to the area.
- Numerous specialty places
- How much outdoor dining does La Crosse have? I noticed the ice cream shop probably had outdoor seating, but it seems like there could be a lot more. It's the trend!

#### ***What do local residents recommend on where to stay, eat or visit?***

- I asked at one of the shops if there were any other places like it in the downtown. She told me there wasn't any other place like hers. She did mention a few places that I might find the type of merchandise she carried.
- The Cajun place and Starlight Lounge

#### ***What local restaurant, specialty shop or attraction would bring you back?***

- Buzzard Billy's, the La Crosse Queen, Pearl Street Books and the downtown grocery store
- The riverboat tours

## GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC SERVICES

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**Summary of comments:** *Generally, team members were positive about local government in La Crosse. There is some room for evaluation and potential improvement in operations and structure of the local government. Team members found the economic development personnel and efforts to be very professional and doing a good job.*

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

- The City Hall is conveniently located in the downtown area and has good parking. The building, constructed in 1970, is somewhat fortress-like but appears to be very functional. The council chamber on the first floor near the entrances is easily accessible. There are two elevators for access to city offices above the ground level. My recommendation would be to spruce up the entry area with displays and pictures—make it more inviting.
- I was struck by two characteristics of city government: (1) the absence of a professional city administrator and (2) the large council size and cumbersome committee structure. The lack of a city administrator means that department heads are more likely to operate their programs in a semi-independent manner without the coordination that an efficient organization needs. It also means that the mayor and council are not receiving integrated, systemic, professional recommendations. The council has 17 members, larger than a city of 51,000 needs to have. There are 70 council and citizen/council committees. Several senior staff members spoke of the need for an organizational audit of city government and the need for a professional city administrator.

### PUBLICATIONS

- Rate =8, First, the City has a very informative website. It is well organized and easy to access. I learned a lot from viewing it. Other publications about La Crosse were available from several sources, although I do not know what the city involvement was in preparing them.

### AVAILABILITY OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INFORMATION

- Rate =9 For industrial development, I was able to obtain very good information from LADCO, as previously noted. For commercial/downtown development and overall economic development strategies, I received excellent information from Tim Kabat, economic development planner in the City of La Crosse Planning Department. Mr. Kabat, like Mr. Hill, met with me at length with no notice, to discuss city economic initiatives.

### CITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ROLE

- Mr. Kabat is responsible for municipal economic development activities and he works primarily with commercial business with a special emphasis on downtown activities. Kabat prepares a bi-monthly newsletter describing what the city is doing in economic development and organizing quarterly city business roundtable meetings with key elected

and appointed officials and community businesses. These are commendable city initiatives. Mr. Kabat's job represents a compromise between a full-fledged economic development department and no municipal involvement in economic development. It makes sense for La Crosse.

- Rate=10: excellent.

#### GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES

- Rate =10 The government employees that I spoke with were all very willing to share information. The city forester, Pat Bonadurer, helped me with information on amounts to budget for park trees and street trees. He also discussed including trees as part of the infrastructure cost when reconstructing streets. I was able to use his and other municipal foresters information when I spoke to the City Council at Budget time. The policeman who was working downtown on parking detail spoke about parking districts and cooperating with university police. He was enthusiastic about La Crosse and thrilled that he was able to live and work here. Tim Kabat, city economic development planner, picked up the phone and was willing to discuss the neighborhood programs for five areas identified for city help. Associate Superintendent Kathie Tyser discussed all questions I asked about the La Crosse Public School System. I was impressed with everyone's willingness to discuss a variety of topics.

#### PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

#### PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

- I didn't see any city buses (although there were bus stops); There is a regional bus service
- I saw many buses and almost got on for a ride but felt the crunch of time and so much to see and do. There were buses at schools picking up children. The fare is affordable at \$1.00 and prorated for seniors and students

#### SIDEWALKS AND STREETS

- Rate= 6.5; In the downtown area, sidewalks and streets are excellent. In other areas, I could not make a clear determination although most streets appeared to be in pretty good condition. Maintaining streets in older Wisconsin cities always is a challenge.
- Rate = 9 Wherever I checked there were sidewalks in good repair with handicap slopes at the corners.
- Streets (7) The streets are in relatively good shape. There are a number of asphalt streets which are easier to repair and maintain. The street painting of traffic lines and crosswalks is clear and clean.

#### LANDSCAPING

- (7): What I saw of public landscaping looked good.
- Landscaping (9) There is a good urban forestry program planting and maintaining street trees (19,000) that enhance the city's environment. Obviously the City council and mayor



are also aware of the benefits of trees and their budget supports the urban forest. I am not sure whether there are landscaping standards for parking lots or new businesses. Older malls and parking lots are lacking in landscaping. Raising expectations for commercial landscaping can motivate others to plant shrubs, ornamental and hardy deciduous trees providing a green canopy for future generations. The landscaping along Riverside Park is magnificent. The landscaping of mature, deciduous trees in the Parks system is commendable

#### PLANNING/CONFLICTING LAND USE

- Any community as old as La Crosse has conflicting land uses. These seem to be managed to a good degree.
- There are the usual transition zone issues around the Trane plant, but this is often the case in older developed cities. The only other potential conflict is the siting of the International Business Park next to the County hazardous landfill.

#### TRAFFIC

- Yes, I did experience congestion, in the heart of the downtown, but it wasn't all that bad. Much better to have congestion than (1) no shoppers (2) loss of historic integrity due to removal of buildings to facilitate traffic flow.
- I did not experience any traffic congestion
- I did not encounter any congestion on the three days I drove in the city. There was traffic and it moved quickly, too quickly when I was trying to locate a turn. When schools were letting out, there was the expected increase in traffic, pedestrians crossing streets, and buses. This is normal life in the city. The street grid-system provides drivers many options to getting somewhere, not always having to use collector and arterial streets. Streets built to move traffic are not viewed as desirable places to live and can cause home values to stagnate.

#### ACCESSIBILITY

- The sidewalks downtown are fairly wide to permit wheelchair use, but the placement of tables and chairs, waste receptacles and sandwich boards can pose a challenge. I don't remember seeing a significant amount of handicapped on-street parking stalls.
- The city hall is accessible
- The street corner sidewalk-ramps enable handicap accessibility. The post office, CenturyTel, and most shops had ground level doors. "The Square" complex was easily accessible.

#### PED/BIKE FRIENDLY

- Yes, very much so.
- There are bike trails and nice pedestrian paths along the river.

- Riverside walkway is a phenomenal accomplishment encouraging walking and biking. From there one can access the La Crosse River Trail that goes to Myrick Park, 700-acre Hixon Forest, and also connect to state trails. In May there is an organized *Bike to Work Week* with business sponsorship, a week of activities, and prizes. Such support encourages using alternative modes of transportation. It creates a healthy life-style culture. The Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program is also encouraging children to walk and bike to their neighborhood school. Parks, such as Pettibone Park, are venues to walk/bike and connect with nature within the city. I am trying to recall whether I saw bike racks to encourage biking throughout the city.

#### STREET SIGNS

- Some were faded and need to be replaced
- Street Signage (7) There is a real effort to standardize way-finding signage with attractive La Crosse signs. However, there are blocks with 15 signs that are overkill, clutter the streetscape, and impossible to drive and read. The larger overhead street signs placed at intersections with traffic lights are extremely helpful for a visitor.

#### BENCHES

- Rate = 7, There are many attractive benches along Riverside Park making it an easy, healthy walk for a senior citizen. They encourage people to linger and visit with a friend, eat a snack, read a book, and enjoy the view. Many of the benches have brass plates acknowledging the donors thus encouraging others to do likewise. I did not notice such frequency of benches in other parks. The more benches there are, the more people will gather and linger.
- Why were drinking fountains downtown always running?

### RECREATION, FAITH, CULTURE AND HERITAGE

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**Summary of comments:** *Team members had positive and enthusiastic experiences regarding these aspects of La Crosse. Impressions were favorable, except for the dog park. There are a wide variety of recreational opportunities that take advantage of local, natural amenities. Cultural and heritage opportunities were appreciated by the team.*

#### RECREATION

##### PARKS

- Rate = 7; We visited Pettibone and Riverside Parks. Riverside is a beautiful park that takes full advantage of its location. It was nice to see all the pet owners walking their dogs along the Mississippi River. I did ask a resident if they had a public dog park. She replied that they did but "it is really lame!"
- Rate = 8 – Riverside Park very accessible. Went at night and was very beautiful. Also went to Grandad's Bluff at night and was impressed at the view of La Crosse
- Well maintained, easily accessible, nice signage and lighting. Everything looked new.(10)

- Rate =9, The City Parks cover 1,400 acres, thanks to the Mayor's vision and the City's adopting John Nolen's Plan in 1908 and the many who donated land. Some of the Parks I visited were: a small city-block Cameron Park (home to the Friday evening Farmers Market), neighborhood Weigent Park, Myrick Park, and Pettibone Park on Barron Island. Each Park has a special character and many have signage explaining the history of the Park. The great number of mature trees makes these Parks inviting places during the summer heat. The Parks are well maintained yet appropriately the Nature Preserve is left "natural". Some parks need more benches.

## PUBLIC RECREATION

- Rate = 7
- One of the places I stopped at was a public boat launch. There seemed to be ample parking for trailers and several people were there. I did notice that none of the people leaving the water with their trailers were doing any of the Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) practices.
- A large variety of offerings. Bike rentals, trees, beach, dog park, kids playground, skiing, hiking, disc golf, boat launches, swimming, tennis, skate park etc.
- I noticed an beautiful wetland complex between the downtown and northern parts of the city. I wanted to get 'into it', but couldn't. Thought I could find an entrance and/or trailhead off the street to get to Red Cloud Park, but couldn't .
- Rate=9 The facilities include playgrounds for kids, well-maintained shelters which can rented, multiple ice skating rinks and an ice arena at Green Island, tennis courts, swimming beaches, 21,000 square foot skate park at Leuth Park near UW-L, and a host of sports fields. Myrick Park's Zoo for native animals and "Kids Coulee" built by 3,700 volunteers resembles "Little Oshkosh". The Parks Department also operates the recreation activities in the City Parks and other facilities. Pettibone Park has a nature preserve, disc golf, an historic wooden pavilion, stone gazebo, and 1920s Mediterranean Revival Beach House. The beach house on Black River will be renovated for \$600,000. Every sport seems to have a facility and an opportunity to participate. The wide range of parks, facilities, and directed activities surely promotes an active, healthy lifestyle for this community. The Southside Neighborhood Center provides a number of classes, including Pilates & Yoga for seniors. There are five Dog Parks in different neighborhoods. The Parks Department offers something for everyone year round and operates with a budget of \$1,818,000, which is less than Oshkosh. They must be commended for providing a marvelous natural and recreational environment for their citizens.
- One funny thing I noticed about Grandad's Bluff is that there was a tavern at the top of a very curvy, winding road. Kind of ironic, isn't it?

### ***Based on your impression, what do people do for recreation/fun?***

- It seemed like many people used the parks.
- Outdoor activities, bars/restaurants, community festivals

### ***What recreational facility surprised you?***

- The view of 3 states from Grand dad's bluff

**What recreational facility seemed to be missing?**

- The dog park is too small with no trees.
- No boat/canoe rentals at riverside park – too late in the season?

**Rate the overall suitability of the facilities for each of the following:**

- Senior Citizens 5, 5
- Families 9, 5
- Singles/Young Adults 10, 7
- Teens 9,5
- Children (12 and under) 8,5

ENTERTAINMENT

**What does the community do for entertainment?**

- Shopping, outdoor recreation, college based activities

**What entertainment does citizens feel they lack?**

- Heard the comment “not enough going on”

**Does the community have a vibrant nightlife?**

- There seemed to be many bar/tavern choices in the downtown
- A lot going on at night due to colleges
- There are a variety of entertainment opportunities offered to please everyone. Viterbo University’s Fine Arts commitment provides the venue for cultural performances of local and national groups in dance, theatre, and music, including the La Crosse Symphony Orchestra. UW-L has an Art Gallery, full music and theater calendars. The Historic Pump House Regional Arts Center with a small 140-seat theater and three art galleries offers monthly literary readings and a modest performance schedule. The Civic Center has the capacity to host regional performances for large audiences. The Gertrude Salzer Gordon Children’s Museum is a family-oriented center in downtown. There is tremendous potential for the local Arts community to play a larger part in Downtown activity by partnering and bringing the arts into local businesses and sharing at the street level accessible to everyone.

FAITH/RELIGION

- Overall I would rate the architecture of the religious buildings, especially the historic ones, as very diverse and well maintained –9.
- Lots of Christian churches, one mosque, one synagogue
- I visited the Episcopal Church – very beautiful and obviously proud of its history, art and architecture – what a gem!
- There is definitely a long history of many religious groups practicing their beliefs in La Crosse demonstrated by the large number of church buildings found in neighborhoods and listed on seven pages in the telephone directory. Some of the many religions represented include: *Baha’*, *Cornerstone*, (*with a walk-in store front downtown*), *Islamic*, *Hmong Faith*

*Alliance, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptist, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Foursquare, Jewish, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist, Unitarian, United Church of Christ, Christian Science, Mormon, Evangelical, Congregational, Catholic, and non-denominational.* This wide diversity of religions, much greater than that in Oshkosh, surely identifies La Crosse as a regional center for religion. Hopefully, the message of faith transfers into members helping others in the community. Religions, although tax-exempt, can quietly provide a tremendous source of community support for those in need.

- Christ *Episcopal* Church is a Romanesque Revival structure with Tiffany windows built in 1899 at the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and Main Street; it is listed on the National Historic Register. Antiochian *Orthodox* Church at 716 Copeland Avenue has the original cornerstone in English and Syrian dated 1909-1917. The Gothic Chapel of the Blessed Virgin of Seven Dolors at the Catholic Cemetery on Losey Blvd South is listed on the National Historic Register as is the Losey Memorial Arch at Oak Grove Cemetery. The beautiful historic Chapel of Angels in the Motherhouse of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration is where the sisters have held a 24-hour prayer vigil since 1878.
- In 1868 the Catholic Church established La Crosse as the seat of the diocese. About 11:30 on Monday I went into St. Joseph the Workman Cathedral, a tall, lannon stone and limestone Cathedral built in 1962, a dominant structure in Downtown. There were people praying and others lining up near the confessional. Three daily Masses means there must be an active, praying community. There are Catholic schools, including one not supported by the church, and a huge diocesan complex for social services. From Highway 14/61 is visible in the hillside the complex for the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe still under construction. There are five registered hermits in the diocese and a new Motherhouse opened in 2000. As a Catholic I am comfortable interacting with the diversity of local church members.

## CULTURE AND HERITAGE

- Octoberfest, Riverfest, Rotary Lights

### **Lack of events?**

As expected, 20-somethings wanted more to do. Others felt there was a lot going on.

- Very impressed by the number, condition and diversity of styles of historic residential, commercial and religious buildings.
- Well kept and operational pump house, city brewery, rose conent mill, Hixon house
- Symphony, kids museum, many college activities open to the public, sculptures in the parks, pump house (art and music)
- There are a year's calendar of annual events and festivals that draw people to La Crosse. It is great for the local community and a great tool for cultural tourism.
- Locally, the Farmer's Market in Cameron Park is held from May 1 to October 31 on Fridays from 4 – 8pm. The local growers organize the event that features meats and produce, arts and crafts, and entertainment. There is an attractive shelter on the edge of the park and picnic tables also used by the employees at Sara Lee on their break. Another Farmers Market on Saturdays from 6:00am – Noon is held at 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Street from June 1- October 31 with a large parking lot.

- The La Crosse Public Library, in 3 buildings, stores and shares a wealth of local historic information accessible on their website. The staff is to be commended for the texts and photos accompanying the “source materials”.
- La Crosse’s participation in the Sister Cities Program exemplifies the ability to connect with cities in six countries and acknowledges their cultures in the International Friendship Gardens in Riverside. The City’s International Committees are each set up to work with a specific city including educating students in the schools. The Public Schools offer foreign languages and have international student and staff exchanges. Recently the La Crosse Chamber Chorale featured a concert of songs from the six countries of the Sister Cities. UW-L Choir, Orchestra, and Jazz Ensemble have performed in Epinal, France. The exchange has involved many hundreds of high school students and two mayors. Trane has facilities outside Epinal. What better ways to connect with the world than through education, culture and business?
- The number of public sculptures is testimony to the importance of art to enhance the public realm. This is shared with all who view it on passing. This is a credit to whoever supported the commissioning and funding of the artworks. The eagle, the Indian, the children waving, each evokes a personal response in the viewer. It is also commendable that City Hall realized the importance of public art and approved the placement of the sculptures. Kudos, La Crosse! Your city has been blessed with natural beauty. Your responsibility is to mirror that beauty in the built environment. It is obvious that you have had thoughtful people willing to drive a vision for a wonderful place to live.

## GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

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### ROLE PLAYING

#### **Consider visiting as tourist?**

Yes, great scenery, historic. Lots of unique shopping and riverboat trips

### INFORMATION FROM RESIDENTS

**Knowledgeable?** Generally speaking if they didn’t know something they direct where to ask. Most would refer you to another business, some would not

**Positive/negative?** A little of both. Shopkeepers seemed positive. College students more negative. The community looked as if they prided themselves on a well kept area.

**Local issue?** Brain Drain

### USING YOUR SENSES

- Marching band practicing on Saturday morning at UWL
- Jazz or Rock band at Vibes as I was coming home from the symphony concert

- Cajun food
- Maple butter at Radisson
- Crisp and clean –small of fallen leaves
- Loud kids partying in the park at night
- Could use more trash barrels and ash trays downtown
- Positive – a lot of things to look at and admire – storefronts, parks, sculpture
- The bells ringing from the Catholic Cathedral added a pleasant dimension to the downtown environment.

## WRAP –UP – LASTING IMPRESSIONS

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### ***Was your perception prior to your visit accurate?***

- Not according to what I read on the paper’s website, but the Visitor Guide info was accurate
- More historic. Downtown much larger than expected. Lots of recreational opportunities other than just the river

### ***Did the information you collected reflect what you observed?***

- Yes
- Pretty much

### ***What is the most outstanding feature of this community?***

- The downtown, historic feel of the area, the riverfront, stores and scenery
- As I initially indicated, I had no preconceived ideas, except looking forward to seeing the historic downtown. I was very impressed overall and intend to return. There were more public amenities than I expected.
- While the built environment was great, I feel the most outstanding feature of the area is the setting – the topography, the river, the amount of wetland habitat. What an incredible resource.

## WHAT WERE THE 5 MOST POSITIVE THINGS THAT YOU OBSERVED ABOUT LACROSSE?

- ❖ Clean well kept downtown
- ❖ Great parks
- ❖ Plenty of parking downtown
- ❖ Great views
- ❖ Helpful people
- ❖ Beauty of the bluffs
- ❖ The downtown mix
- ❖ Great college town
- ❖ Beautiful riverfront

### 3 OPPORTUNITIES

- ❖ Outdoor dining
- ❖ More cohesiveness of downtown businesses – willing to refer customers to each other
- ❖ Usage of riverfront during shoulder seasons
- ❖ Create a venue that is affordable for smaller events
- ❖ More downtown living
- ❖ Don't detract from the natural beauty that is present

### WHAT WERE THE 5 BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING LA CROSSE?

- ❖ Very spread out
- ❖ Keeping college students as residents
- ❖ Public transportation without trolley
- ❖ Filling empty stores downtown
- ❖ Attracting visitors during late fall and early spring
- ❖ Labor market
- ❖ New housing

### FINAL IMPRESSIONS

***What will you remember most?*** Great buildings downtown

***Has this experience given you any new ideas about what is needed in your own community?***

- We need a better downtown with shopping and attractions.
- Bigger isn't always better in terms of convention centers and downtown overall area
- Yes – cohesive signage, a program for community business with historic emphasis
- I took photos of campground, trail sign etc to use in design of new projects here.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

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La Crosse is an attractive, interesting city that is both blessed and limited by its physical environment and historical development. Certainly the location on the Mississippi River played a significant role in the development of the historic downtown and nearby residential areas and it plays a big role today in tourism and convention activity. The bluffs, however, attractive as they may be, impose a geographic limit on the expansion of new residential areas. Growth along Interstate 90 and to the South are more likely to be commercial in nature.

In general, I believe that the public and private sectors are following appropriate strategies for economic development. The economy is balanced with several strong sectors, although retail trade has moved to the outskirts of the city. There are efficiencies in local government that can be achieved.