



**SOUTH DAKOTA STATE
UNIVERSITY EXTENSION**

First Impressions

A program for community assessment and improvement

SDSU Extension's Community Vitality program helps communities assess and develop opportunities and strategies for community improvement. Through the **First Impressions** program communities can learn about existing strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of the first-time visitor. The results from a **First Impressions** visit can serve as the basis for community action. The final report and photographs can also be used as a way to document changes in the community over time.

This tool is particularly useful because as a matter of human nature, all communities have difficulties viewing their surroundings as others – customers, visitors, potential residents, and potential businesses – see them. Our views are skewed by over-familiarization, a lack of differing perspectives, expectations, and a reluctance to be completely honest with our neighbors when dealing with difficult issues, such as the appearance of buildings, customer service, and the maintenance of public facilities.

How does it work?

Volunteers from two somewhat similar communities agree to make unannounced visits and then report on their findings. Participants become “secret shoppers” for the day to discover what they can about their sister community. Participants follow procedures and document their visit using a participant guide to record photos and comments. The guide, which ensures that evaluations and reports are thorough and uniform, is divided into the following sections:

- Prior to your visit
- The Five-Minute Impression
- Community Entrances
- Housing and Residential Areas
- Education, Health, Social and Emergency Services
- Local Economy
- Government/Public Services
- Recreation, Faith, Culture and Heritage
- General Observations
- Information from Community Residents
- Wrap-up

Following the visit, the **First Impressions** reports are compiled and exchanged with the sister community. A “town meeting” is arranged where results are shared with the broader community. This is typically done with a presentation which includes photos that illustrated observations made.

Following the presentation of the report, action planning is the next step to identify specific issues to address and establish working committees. Be sure to include local officials and other community leaders throughout the entire First Impressions exercise. Their involvement will assist in achieving success in resolving the identified issues. Local media involvement is also an excellent way to motivate good actions as a result of the report.

Who do we contact? For more information, contact a member of the SDSU Extension Community Vitality team:

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