

CLEVELAND

MISSISSIPPI



First
IMPRESSIONS
MISSISSIPPI STATE COMMUNITY ACTION TEAM

TEAM MEMBERS

Kay Brocato

Starkville Leadership Forum

Julie Jordan

Mississippi State Community Action
Team

Allen Butler

Starkville Leadership Forum

Chris Latimer

Starkville Leadership Forum

Robbie Coblentz

Starkville Leadership Forum

David Lindley

Starkville Leadership Forum

Chase Frazure

Starkville Leadership Forum

First IMPRESSIONS

A COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT FOR

CLEVELAND, MISSISSIPPI

SITE VISIT CONDUCTED

JUNE 5, 2008

“First Impressions” is a program designed to capture the thoughts and feelings of visitors as they observe for the first time the characteristics of a community. Following a very structured visitation program, a team of individuals with diverse backgrounds document their perceptions of both positive assets and challenges to social and economic growth in a community. Information contained in this report is a compilation of observations by a team assembled by the Mississippi State Community Action Team (MSCAT). This report is not intended as a recommendation for any specific future action or support for any one course of action already being implemented in a community. To maintain this sense of neutrality, the question/answer format used by the team members to make their assessments is rigidly followed in presenting the team’s overall assessment.



How easy was it to get information on the community that you were visiting? Did it accurately reflect what you saw? Did you have difficulties obtaining information on the community through a Web search?

Obtaining information on Cleveland, Mississippi, was fairly easy. The chamber of commerce representative provided us with maps and advice to help us travel about town freely. We did note one street name change not provided on the map we were given, but, primarily, the information provided was an accurate representation of the community.

A Google search for "Cleveland, MS," resulted in the site <http://www.clevelandmschamber.com/> showing at the top of the list. The site, hosted by the chamber and partially funded by the Mississippi Development Authority, gives visitors a very positive feeling about the community. It provided numerous links to a variety of pictorial and practical information, including a link to the second site on the list, <http://www.visitclevelandms.com/>. This Web site is maintained by the Cleveland Tourism Council. It is loaded with attractive pictures and contains an extensive history of the town of Cleveland, as well as information on shopping, attractions and special events, dining and lodging, and an informative narrative on the Delta Blues.





The “Five Minute” Impression

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

Cleveland’s downtown area seems to be the most attractive and inviting area we saw, other than campus. The landscaping and green spaces create warm and inviting places for walking and gathering. We have visited several towns with old railways running through town. Cleveland has done one of the best jobs we’ve seen of turning that space into a positive asset for the community and an attraction for visitors. Kudos!

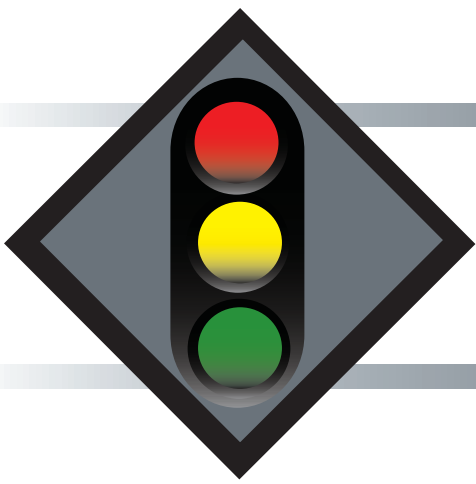


Delta State University (DSU) is perhaps the most significant asset in Cleveland. The campus is beautiful. The residential area nestled between campus and downtown is great. Riding around between downtown and the campus is where we felt at home in Cleveland. It is the area that is the most attractive, has the most character and defines Cleveland.

The highway corridors are a bit cluttered and look like most other highway corridors in Mississippi. The town should work to extend the design, charm and character of downtown eastward, toward Highway 61, so visitors along that route can see and sense more of Cleveland.







Community Entrances

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

Highway 8:

Traveling east on Highway 8 entering town, visitors pass the hospital before the main intersection at Highway 61. The hospital looks nice from the highway. There is a directional sign for the chamber office, but after we turned off of Highway 8, there is not another sign (or we missed it) telling you to make the next required left to reach the chamber building. We felt the chamber is somewhat hidden. A welcome center/chamber office downtown or at the corner of Highways 8 and 61 might be something to consider. It should be more visible to visitors.

The east side of Highway 8 is not the prettiest stretch, but not a disaster either. But, cross Highway 61 and after just a couple of blocks, the image changes. Visitors see the attractive downtown area and soon are impressed with the DSU campus.

After passing DSU, the view quickly changes to agricultural land. There is an abandoned Wal-Mart shopping center with just a handful of active tenants. This shopping center and parking lot need renovating and updating. This is an eyesore on the west end of town.

We suggest that you consider some ways to further enhance Highway 8. Evaluate adding a median or even making a boulevard. There could be decorative lighting, sidewalks and more trees.

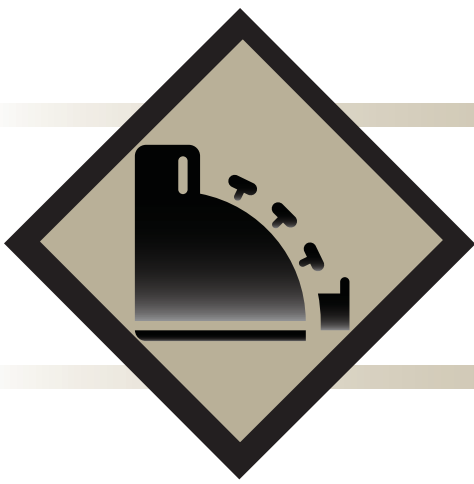
Highway 61:

This is the main north-south corridor and the main commercial district. It looks like any other highway strip in Mississippi. There are signs, parking lots, commercial buildings, strip centers, and more signs. The directional signage and street signage aren't clear.

On the north side, the buildings are generally newer and look better. There are a couple of new motels that look nice and have nice curb appeal. This is also the industrial park end of town. One company along the highway looks nice. The rest of the industrial buildings are just off the highway and somewhat out of view.

The city welcome signs are nice, but the landscaping around these signs was a bit overbearing and somewhat hides the sign.

Along the south end of Highway 61 there are several areas where landscaped median could replace concrete. This would help the look. Along the right-of-ways there are several areas where planting trees would be another way to add greenery and soften the concrete/asphalt dominated entry. With the development on the northern end, this might be more challenging, but certainly adding trees where possible will help.



Downtown Business Area

Observations about the general appearance of the downtown area:

The landscaping was impeccable and well-maintained all along the walking trail park. The power outlets along the way are excellent and indicators of concerts or other events. The sections of cobblestone sidewalks and crosswalks were a nice touch. The walking trail is long enough for real exercise or a nice long stroll. The benches, trash receptacles and lighting make the space between the businesses feel communal. The Cleveland Depot Library is a great building. We were warmly greeted and learned of several positive programs happening in town and at the depot.

City hall is easy to find and very nice looking. The fire department building appeared to have been recently renovated and was eye catching. The Delta Arts Council created a real asset with the renovation of the theater and the corner gas station.



The courthouse is a large, good-looking building, but, better looking from a distance. The large trees and wonderful shade around the courthouse create a pleasant environment. The lawn could use some care and perhaps the addition of more colorful plant material in spots. One team member said, "As I approached the front, it became a little confusing as to which door to enter. There was no entry through the doors of what looked like the front of the building." The window air conditioning units hanging out on the front of the building aren't very attractive. The Christmas lights strung all around the courthouse were very noticeable. It may be that they light the building at night, every night.

In general, the downtown area is impressive. It appears that Cleveland has done an excellent job of supporting downtown merchants and maintaining a vibrant city center with a nice mix of government services, retail, residential, restaurants, recreational opportunities, museums, art, and other non-profit activities. We encourage Cleveland to keep up the efforts. Work to extend the character and design features in the downtown area east toward Highway 61, particularly along Highway 8. Expand the use of the brick cobblestone crosswalks to other streets. The clock tower is a feature that could be used in other places in town. Look for ways to enhance and promote the link



between campus and downtown. You might consider bike paths or decorative lighting or banners along Court Street, or even Highway 8.

Another wonderful feature in downtown Cleveland includes the other large green space off Commerce Street and Jones Bayou. The bayou has a nice, cooling affect at the south end of downtown and extends the green space. In fact, the entire area from about Commerce Street west to campus is soft and cool. The bayou, all the charming old trees, the extraordinary green spaces, the gorgeous rose garden, brick pavers, and other landscaping in the downtown area, keep the region cool and soften the impact of concrete, roads and buildings. Don't give this up and, again, expand the same feeling eastward.

Describe the buildings, displays and signage.

With just a few exceptions, the buildings are in good shape. The facades are nice and the colors attractive. Some of the buildings could use new paint and a few of the awnings need attention. We noticed some boarded-up buildings across the highway from the downtown park. They may have been in the process of being renovated, but we could not tell. Work on the region along Highway 8 between Sharpe Avenue and Highway 61.

We did observe that several of the shops had air conditioning units draining out onto the sidewalk. This looked kind of nasty. It could be messy—maybe costly if someone slipped. Clearly, the tallest and maybe largest building downtown is vacant and a wonderful opportunity for development of apartments, condos or other mixed-use space.

The signage is OK. Most of it is attached above the awnings with a few signs attached to the awnings. We didn't really catch anything distracting.

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

We observed a good mix of professional and retail merchandise. One team member said, "I visited the local bookstore and found the merchandise current and desirable." The variety and quality of downtown shopping was better than most towns the size of Cleveland. We expect the DSU student population is a positive asset for the downtown merchants and all merchants. There are some restaurants that seemed busy, too.

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

Local merchants were extremely hospitable. Customers were greeted and conversed with briefly. The downtown hardware clerk was friendly and helpful. The folks in the courthouse also were very helpful, knowledgeable and had good things to say about Cleveland.

What public amenities were available: drinking fountains, benches, public restrooms?

We saw plentiful benches, a gazebo and a pavilion downtown. The benches and trash containers were of a particularly high quality. Crosswalks were frequent and clearly marked in a uniquely decorative way



with ornamental, waist-high boundaries.

Comment on appealing landscaping and the streetscapes in general.

As noted earlier, the landscaping downtown is a major asset and significantly contributes to the charm and character of downtown. Continue to expand the same features along connecting streets such as Collins, North and South streets.

- The rose garden was exceptional.
- Crape myrtles were attractively uniform.
- Large, older trees provided much shade and color to the space.
- The facade of the buildings was similar, but unique.

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







Other retail shopping areas (big box retailers/shopping malls)?

The local Wal-Mart was attractive from all sides and the parking lot was uncharacteristically well-maintained. At least two other chain drug stores were accessible and equally attractive.

We already commented on the old Wal-Mart shopping center area on Highway 8. It is an eyesore. The other shopping center areas are typical. The older ones would certainly look better with a façade facelift and the addition of trees and medians in the parking lots. The Fred's parking lot along Highway 8 near downtown looks bad. However, some of the developers have taken steps to add some landscaping and improve the curb appeal.







Industrial parks/commercial areas

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

The large industry adjacent to the chamber of commerce building was attractive in some ways. The grounds were clean and well-groomed. Exterior surfaces were neatly painted and uniform. Vehicles were not visible from the front, leaving the space looking uncluttered to a passer-by. One industrial area housed what seemed to be a residential trailer park. Most of the trailers were untidy with tall grass and weeds. Scrap metal debris was visible, along with a disproportionate number of vehicles—some seemed abandoned.







Health care services

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

The hospital was a high point in the tour. The exterior of the facility is clean, attractive and has a communal sort of main entrance. The landscaping is nice. Approaching the hospital from the front at the main entrance seems to declare that this is a place where people are well cared for.

Comment on the availability and condition of facilities for physician, dentist, optometrist, and other medical care.

One team member remarked, "This could have been an oversight on my part, but I don't recall other health care facilities on my part of the tour." Other team members noted seeing some dental offices. But in retrospect, the teams do feel like they must have missed seeing the health care facilities.

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

We did not notice any.





Housing

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

The team visiting the neighborhoods east of Highway 61 noted that MLK Jr. Boulevard seemed to be some sort of dividing line. The houses to the east all looked nicer than the houses to the west. The housing on the north side of town appeared to be in the low- to mid-range level. Of particular note was the consistent presence of bars over windows and doors. The houses, yards, streets, and driveways were well-maintained and attractive. Very few, if any, abandoned or blighted houses were noted. We observed no abandoned cars. Also, automobiles seemed fairly proportionate to the houses, which is not typical of lower-end neighborhoods. Homes did not seem overcrowded under each particular roof, nor were they crowded upon one another.

On the west side of Highway 61, there are wonderful neighborhoods between downtown and campus. In the area out by the country club, there are also some very nice neighborhoods and some new subdivisions with large homes.

The housing market looked just fine in Cleveland.





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

One team member observed a particular apartment complex that she felt was one of the least attractive spots on the tour. Full porches, windows, doorways, yard areas, and alleys signified a sort of permanent residency. Clotheslines made the property untidy, as did the overflowing and cluttered trash dumpster areas. Another unattractive spot was the trailer park which appeared to be located on the grounds of the industrial property. The grass and weeds were uncharacteristic of the rest of the landscaping in the town—tall, unwieldy and quite unkempt. Neither of these rental dwellings appeared to be inhabited by people who were intending to build or who were in transition between property ownerships. The exterior clutter seemed to indicate that inhabitants had resided there for some time and had no intention of leaving.

On the other side of town, there were some nice apartment complexes near campus and in other areas. But, the team saw one near the campus that needed renovating. There are several complexes that appear to be subsidized housing. Most were well-maintained in and around the area of the park.

There are some downtown apartments, and from what we learned, this is a growing trend in Cleveland, as in many other towns.



Schools

Do the schools appear to be adequate in size or do you see the use of temporary classrooms? Are they well-maintained?

We observed one “in-home” day care business. It looked attractive and inviting from the outside.

There seem to be, basically, two sets of schools. Along Highway 8 is Cleveland High School, along with a middle and elementary school in the same area. Then, Parks Elementary School is on the southwest side of town. On the east side, there is East Side High School and a middle school and elementary school in the area.

The grounds of all the schools were in good shape, but nothing extraordinary. In some of the buildings the window-unit air conditioners were prominent, as was some exterior clutter (plywood, scrap metal and miscellaneous maintenance refuse). The buildings were in good shape and from the outside appeared to be well-maintained. The private school was out on the west side of town and looked nice, too.

Delta State University has a wonderful campus. The performing arts center is impressive. The team did comment about the type of brick and one said there was a little too much of the “speckled brick” for his taste.

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

We found the information available at the Mississippi Department of Education's Web site. When asked about the public schools, one resident commented about some equity issues between the schools. She was not real specific or negative with her comments. The information available online indicates a level of racially segregated schools. This situation can become an issue over time.





Faith/Religion

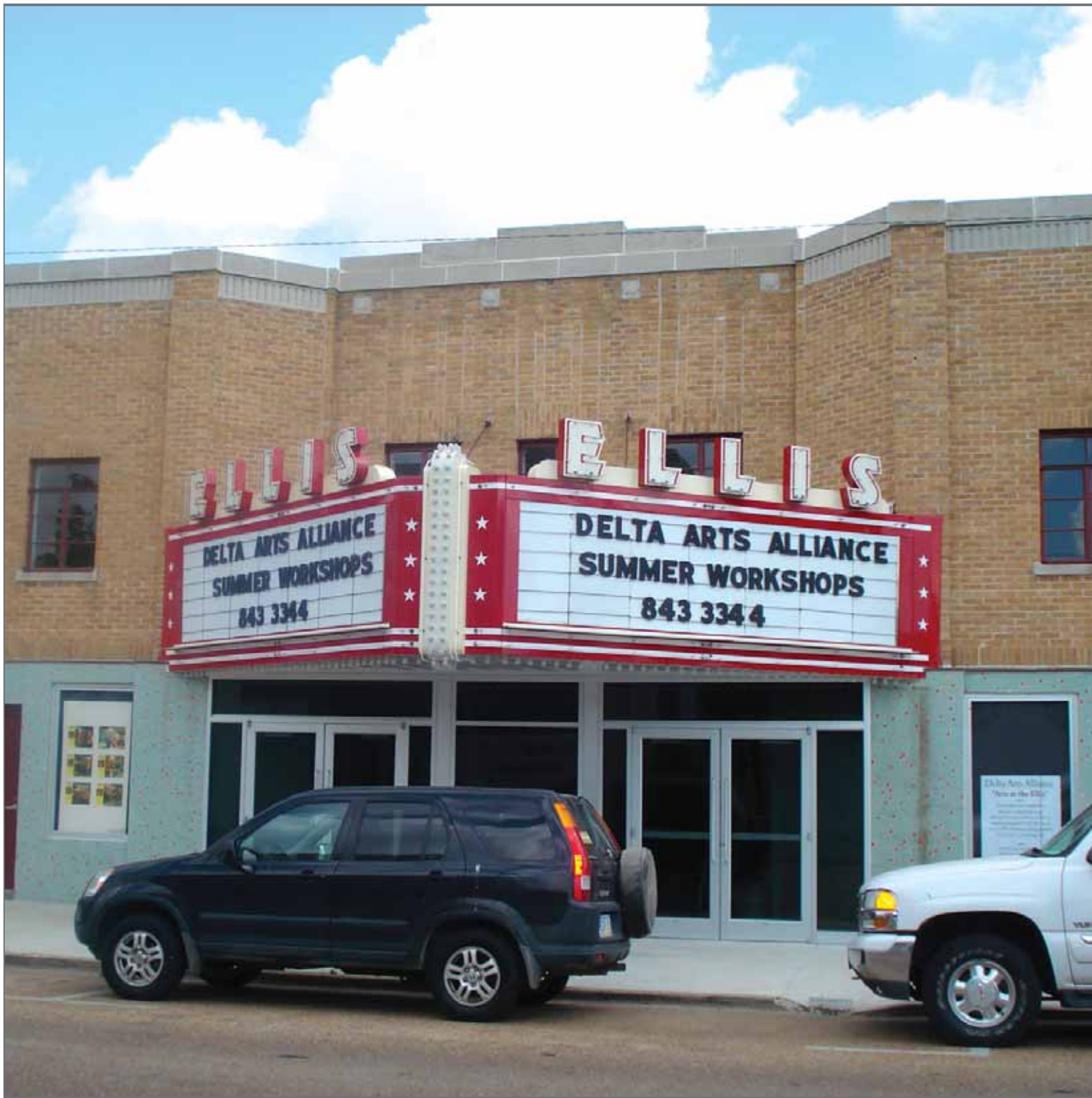
Comment on the number of denominations and the physical appearances of the churches represented in the community. Did you observe any evidence of church-sponsored community services?

We observed Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, and Church of God in Christ denominations. There was some temporary signage announcing a church picnic near one of the public parks.

Are there any facilities or statements that some would view as intrusive or that would make someone feel uncomfortable if they were not of a particular faith?

No.





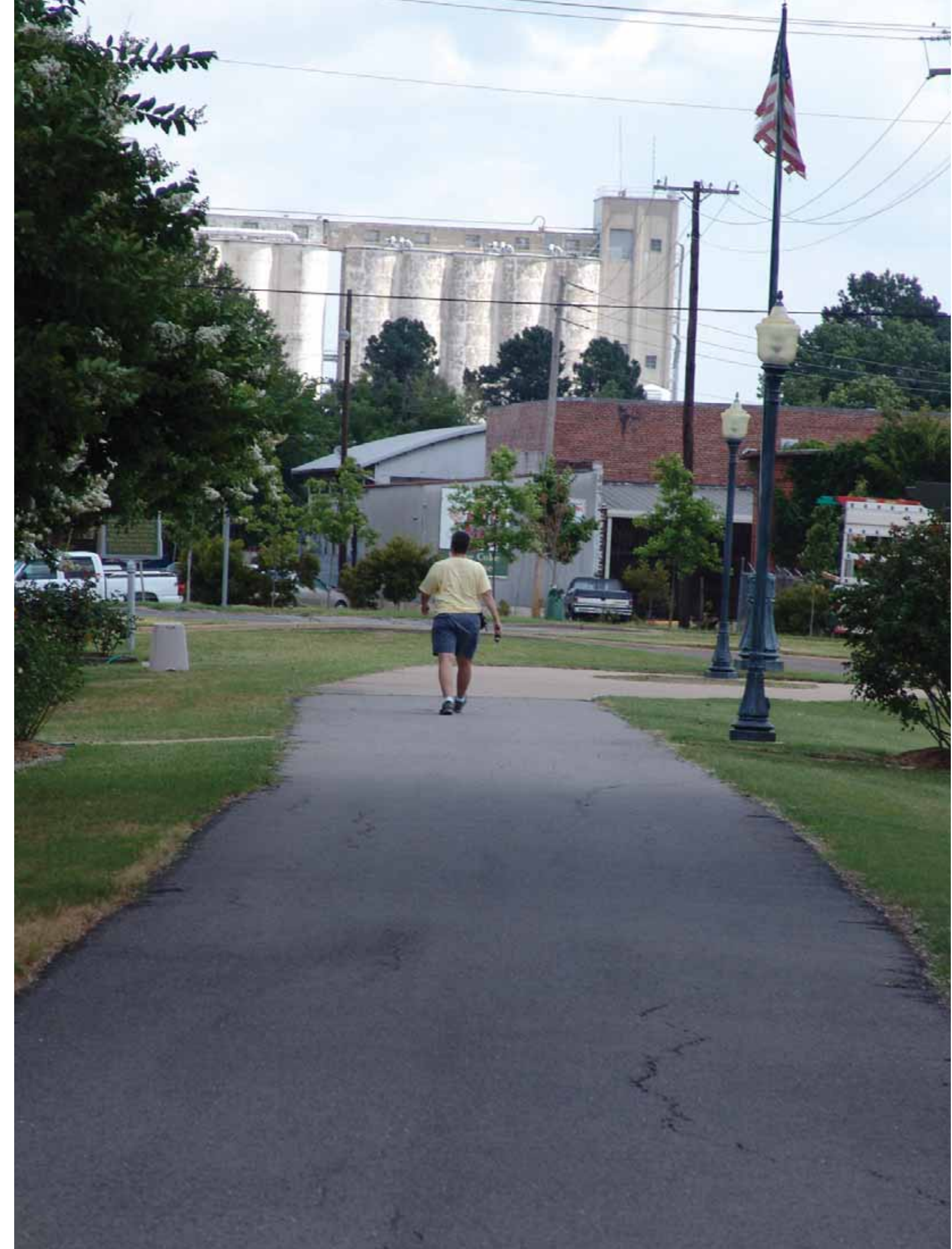


Civic

Tell about the variety of nonprofit organizations and clubs within the community. Did you observe any evidence of civic organization activity?

The Delta Arts Council that we already mentioned is an asset for Cleveland. We also saw a couple of other non-profit type organizations.







Residents

In what ways did you find (or not find) people helpful?

All were quite helpful. The people were friendly and generally positive about Cleveland.

How did the people talk about their community? What were their attitudes about their schools, public leaders and community services?

There were relatively few people to talk to in any of the areas that we visited. The parks were completely empty. During the middle of the day, the downtown had almost no walking/biking traffic. People were just running in and out of stores.

A team member spoke to one resident who explained that she had returned to live in her hometown because she wanted to be close to her relatives. She did not seem overly enthused about living in Cleveland, but she did claim that the town was a nice place to live and grow up. Though no specifics were mentioned, she did express that there were “drawbacks” to living in Cleveland.

What is your opinion on the knowledge of community members about their community?

The residents we spoke with were very knowledgeable and helpful with information about the town, the depot, city hall, the courthouse, and the chamber.

Are there some segments of the general population that would not feel comfortable in this community? Did residents reflect the diversity that is represented in the rest of the country?

We saw no evidence that anyone would feel uncomfortable living in Cleveland.





Public infrastructure

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

- Streets were quite clean and tidy throughout the city. There wasn't a spot where litter really seemed to be a distraction.
- Downtown sidewalks were plentiful on each side of the street and down the middle or the median green space.
- There are neighborhood sidewalks in the area around downtown and campus. As in many communities, the sidewalks need repairing. However, in the areas where there is just grass growing through the cracks, a little grass killer would make things look neater.
- Parking seemed adequate in most areas.
- Lighting was lovely with nostalgic fixtures in the downtown areas. Outlets were frequent and in working order.
- Benches, trash receptacles and fire hydrants were high quality, nicely painted/finished, and neat.
- There are nice, decorative street signs in the downtown area. But, as noted earlier, trying to read street signs and know where to turn off of the main highways isn't easy.

Did you observe land-use planning?

The team members were somewhat mixed on the responses to this question. There is some zoning, but there are areas where structures look out of place. This could be from a grandfathering situation. We would like to encourage Cleveland to look at the idea of design-based codes or design overlays for various districts or sections in town.

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

As noted earlier, city hall is a professional, attractive-looking building downtown. We were very well-received and visited for several minutes with the ladies working in the office. They shared information and a map and directed team members to the chamber for more information. One suggestion is to keep brochures and other items found at the chamber at city hall, too. For visitors who are likely to end up downtown first, they will find city hall before they find the chamber.

Comment on police/fire protection:

The police station is in a very nice-looking brick building, but it needs a fresh coat of paint on the woodwork. The volunteer fire station building had been recently renovated and looked great. Additionally, Cleveland is home to some type of regional emergency response service.



Quality of the library:

The library is near downtown and looks fine. The depot library on the walking trail is more of a service center than a library. And, there is a large university library at Delta State.

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

There are three park areas in Cleveland. Bear Pen Park is great. It is spacious with lots of green space. There is a set of baseball fields in one area and softball fields in another. Bear Pen Park is a sportsplex. There is a pond, a walking track and lighted tennis courts. New, modern playground equipment was colorful and inviting. We noticed the Frisbee golf course, too. Older playground equipment was well-maintained and brightly colored with fresh-looking paint. Bear Pen Park is a major asset for Cleveland.

There was another park near East Side High School. The north side looked abandoned. There, the gates were closed and we noticed some trash. The other side of the park looked really nice, including the pool. Early in the morning the pool area was vacant, but after lunch, the pool was full of children. The playground equipment was in fair shape and there is a large grassy area for play. The Fireman's Park is a much smaller neighborhood park.







Recreation/Tourism

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

- Delta State University
- The Fighting Okra
- Blues music seems to be a community identifier on the Web site, but not much evidence of this was noted during our drive around town.

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

We didn't see anything indicating festivals or events.

Please elaborate on any significant natural or manmade features that have the potential of drawing people to the community?

- The unique downtown
- The Martin & Sue King Railroad Heritage Museum has potential to attract visitors. We understand the opening has been delayed.



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

- The chamber office was fairly easy to find and staff were friendly and knowledgeable. But, Cleveland might consider moving the chamber office downtown and making it a more visible welcome center. The chamber office landscaping needs some upkeep. The planter outside was full of weeds.
- Downtown merchants were friendly and eager to serve.
- The train depot downtown is naturally a place visitors would stop, and it should have plenty of visitor information and a well-trained staff to help visitors.
- City hall is also a logical place for people to stop.

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

- The team had lunch at the Warehouse Restaurant and we all felt like we'd enjoy visiting there again.
- There are several specialty shops downtown and other restaurants that looked interesting to visit on the next trip.
- For pilots, there is a well-known flight school operated by Delta State.





Using Your Senses

Was there any specialty food item, bakery, restaurant, or candy store that you will remember?

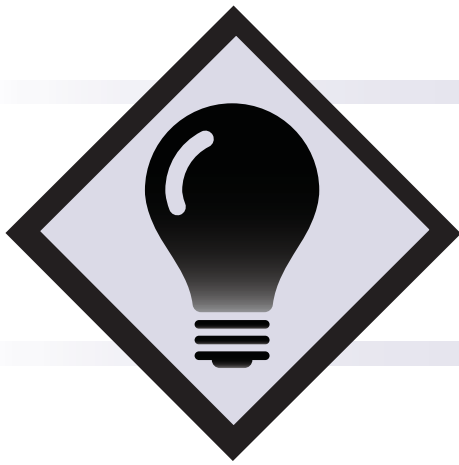
- The barbecue nachos at the Warehouse Restaurant

Did you have any experiences that impacted the way the community feels?

- All felt fairly positive.
- Conversations at lunch revealed a typical socio-economic divide between the two distinct areas of town; real estate, schools, etc.







Wrap-up

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

- Downtown area
- Delta State University
- The entire railway park area, including the walking trail, depot, museum, and bayou
- Bear Pen Park
- Delta Arts Council
- Large landscaped entry sign is nice
- Potential of the multi-story building at the end of main street
- More shopping than anticipated

What are the biggest obstacles/challenges facing this community?

- Highway corridors; improving the look
- Power lines, power lines, power lines
- No obvious attraction that is typical of the Delta, particularly related to the Blues Trail
- Competing public schools within the same system
- Being in the Delta; overcoming perceptions

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

- Hospital
- Bear Pen Park
- The Warehouse Restaurant
- Downtown bookstore
- Downtown walkway
- Quaint, neat downtown
- Rose garden by the museum
- The funky looking building on the highway
- A very faded and tattered flag right by the highway—it needs to be retired!!!



The First Impressions program has been used successfully to assist communities in several states following its creation by Andy Lewis, University of Wisconsin Extension Service, and James Schneider, director of economic development in Grant County, Wisconsin.

first IMPRESSIONS

MISSISSIPPI STATE COMMUNITY ACTION TEAM

If your community is interested in participating in the First Impressions program, please contact us for further information:

Dr. Virgil Culver, Director
Mississippi State Community Action Team (MSCAT)
Mississippi State University
P.O. Box 6215
Mississippi State, MS 39762
Phone: 662-325-6703
E-mail: virgilc@mocat.msstate.edu
www.mocat.msstate.edu

This project is funded by a grant from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA). SBA's funding should not be construed as an endorsement of any products, opinions or services. All SBA-funded projects are extended to the public on a nondiscriminatory basis.

First IMPRESSIONS

MISSISSIPPI STATE COMMUNITY ACTION TEAM

Mississippi State
UNIVERSITY

Discrimination based upon race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status is a violation of federal and state law and MSU policy and will not be tolerated. Discrimination based upon sexual orientation or group affiliation is a violation of MSU policy and will not be tolerated.