



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

A program for Community Improvement

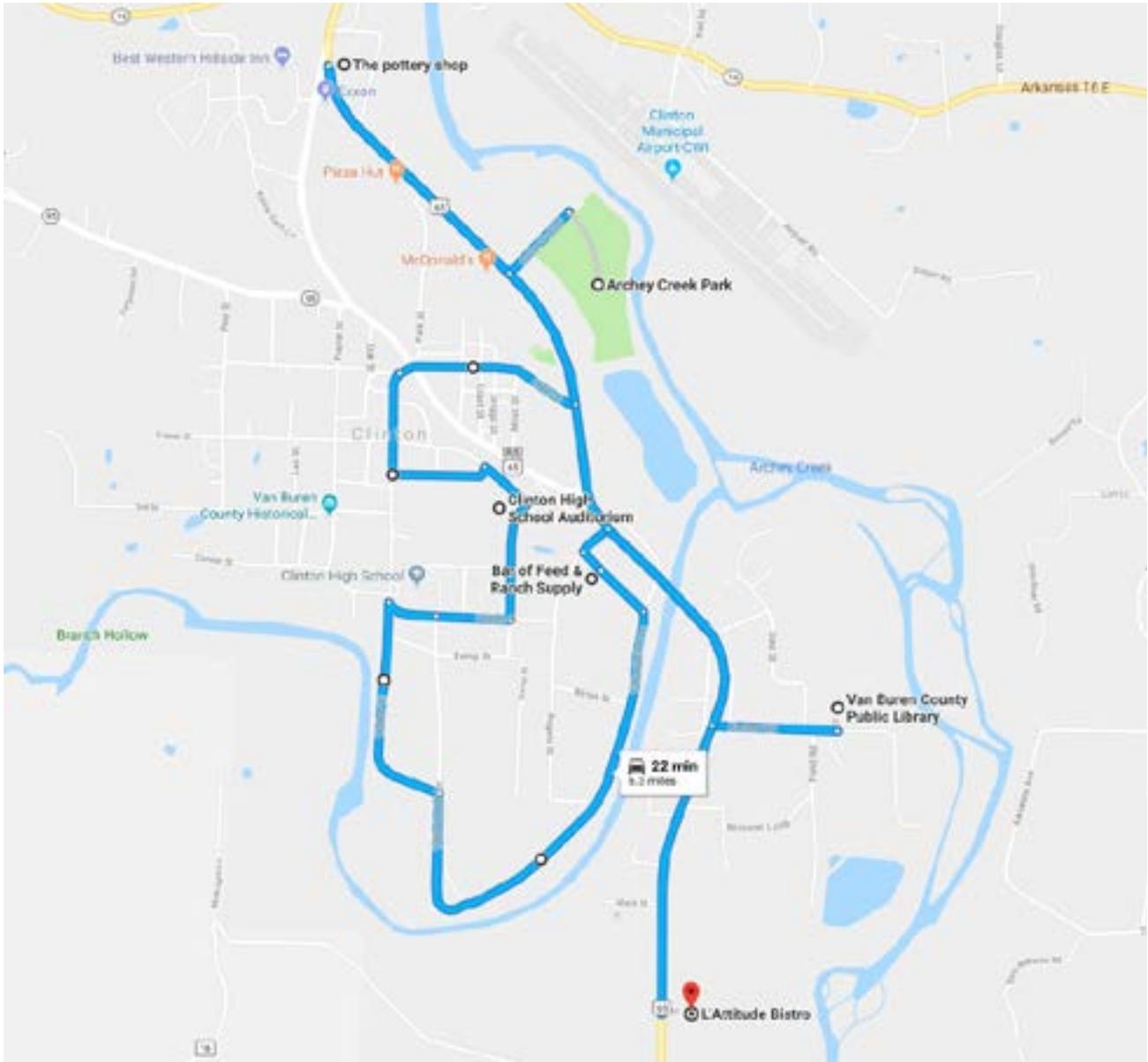
Clinton Community Report

UNCOMMON  COMMUNITIES

making our own future

A WINTHROP ROCKEFELLER INSTITUTE PROGRAM

CLINTON VISIT ROUTE



UNCOMMON  COMMUNITIES

making our own future

A WINTHROP ROCKEFELLER INSTITUTE PROGRAM



VISITATION TEAM PARTICIPANTS

Steve Mosher

USDA, Rural Development

Kay Drilling Jones

Morrilton Volunteer

Tonya Oates

Saint Mary's Regional Health System

Tabatha Duvall

Russellville Chamber of Commerce

Steve Mallett

City Corporation

Dr. Catherine Swift

Fairfield Bay Community Education Center

Phyllis McQuin

Leadership Morrilton

Stacey Daughtrey

Dardanelle Area Chamber of Commerce

Kara Johnson

Arkansas Tech University

Paul Casey

Perryville Volunteer

Other members present were:

Jackie Sikes, Community Tour Guide

Mayor Richard McCormac, Community Tour Guide

Dale James, Van Buren County Quorum Court

Judge Roger Hooper, Van Buren County

Venita Berry, Winthrop Rockefeller Institute

Dr. Mark Peterson, UAEX

Dr. Roby Robertson, UALR

Dr. Vaughn Grisham, Extraordinary Results Communities

Sandy Grisham, Extraordinary Results Communities

INTRODUCTION

The First Impressions program is designed to help a community learn about existing strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of first-time visitors.

The assessment is modeled after the Connecticut First Impressions program developed by Laura Brown of the University of Connecticut Extension and Susan Westa of the Connecticut Main Street Center. These programs are adaptations of the original University of Wisconsin-Extension First Impressions Program developed by Andrew Lewis and James Schneider in 1991 as a structured assessment program that enables communities to learn about the first impressions they convey to outsiders.

On April 26, 2018, community leaders from Conway, Perry, Pope, Van Buren and Yell counties participated in a First Impression Tour of the city of Clinton as part of the Year III component of the Uncommon Communities program.

Uncommon Communities is a community and economic development program that marries the wisdom and methodology of celebrated community development expert Dr. Vaughn Grisham, professor emeritus of sociology and founding director of the McLean Institute for Community Development at the University of Mississippi, with the award-winning Breakthrough Solutions partnership, under the direction of Dr. Mark Peterson of the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service. This comprehensive program produces a group of community leaders who are equipped to assess, plan, visualize and mobilize citizenry to work together in the areas of economic development, education and workforce development, and quality of life and place—the critical elements of thriving communities—with an aim to help them become vibrant and sustainable in the 21st century global knowledge economy.

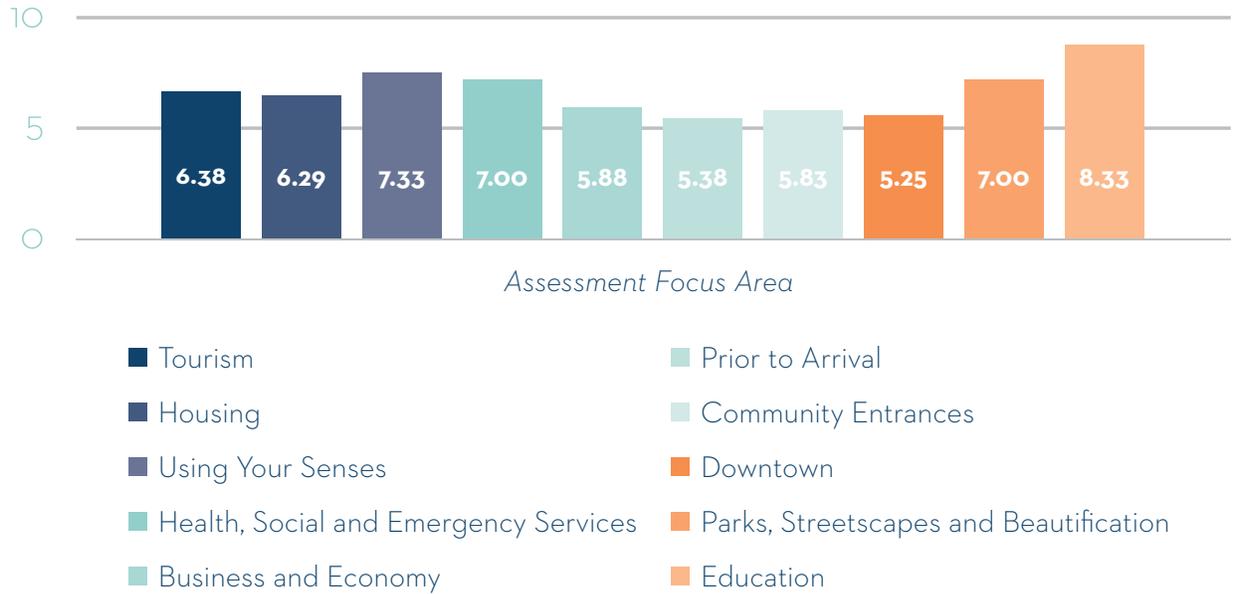
Following the tour, participants who reside outside the city of Clinton participated in a facilitated discussion led by Winthrop Rockefeller Institute staff to gather their thoughts, feelings and perceptions regarding both positive assets and opportunities for improvement in Clinton. Information contained in this report is a compilation of observations by these participants.

In addition to offering these observations, participants were asked to evaluate various aspects of the community using the following scale:

- 9 - 10 = What I experienced far exceeded my expectations.
- 7 - 8 = What I experienced was better than my expectations.
- 5 - 6 = What I experienced met (but did not exceed) my expectations.
- 3 - 4 = What I experienced did not meet my expectations.
- 1 - 2 = What I experienced was far worse than my expectations.



CLINTON AREA FIRST IMPRESSIONS RATING



The graph above provides their average score for each section of the community observed. Overall, downtown received the lowest average score of 5.25, in which participants' experiences met but did not exceed their expectations; while education received the highest average rating of 8.33, in which participants' experiences were better than their expectations.

All told, the first impression of Clinton was positive. Participants were pleasantly surprised by the amount of small businesses in the community, the city's parks and educational facilities. Participants did express concern with the city's lack of industry and noted that the downtown area needed some major attention. Before the first impressions tour, many participants had only driven through the community on Highway 65. As one participant noted, "My limited impressions were mostly based on many trips through town on Highway 65, which is not a good representation of all the town has to offer." Once on the tour, participants were able to view and experience all of the natural resources within the community including the Archey Fork Park and the Little Red River. A recurring theme throughout the visit and the debrief discussion was that Clinton has great potential but must work on a strategy to attract those traveling on Highway 65 to stop and experience all that Clinton has to offer and make sure that tourists and day trip visitors expectations are met.

This report is a compilation of observations and verbatim comments from each of the participants. It is not meant to offer recommendations for specific action; rather its goal is to inform a community action plan.

PRIOR TO ARRIVAL

The past perceptions of the Clinton community were mixed. While some of the participants' impressions were limited and not expecting much, others were expecting to see natural beauty and vibrancy due to the high volume of traffic on Highway 65. Most of the participants were familiar with the city of Clinton and cited both negative and positive perceptions.

When asked what their impressions of the community were in advance of the visit and what they expected to see, some participants answered:

"Looked like a medium sized, average community."

"I was expecting more of what I see on Highway 65."



"I had a poor impression prior to coming. I had only driven through once or twice before and it never was memorable."

"Played in tournaments, Relay for Life and have driven through Clinton so I expected to see a small town with busy traffic, natural beauty and chuck wagon races."

"I've been here for sporting events but never to hang out. I have seen the Pottery shop on Facebook and I have wanted to come shop."

Participants were also asked to share their sense of the community based on online research ONLY. What were their gut reactions? Would they want to visit? Did the community seem welcoming?

Participants' online research revealed limited information about the city of Clinton including local events and restaurants. While the city's website was attractive and very informative, the city's Chamber of Commerce website was unable to load. The City of Clinton's Facebook page is very active with a great following of 2,322 people showcasing a variety of events and things to do in the area. Participants were surprised to find limited information about the Chuck Wagon Races online.

When searching on national websites, such as TripAdvisor and Yelp, the results were limited. While there were several restaurants listed on both Yelp and TripAdvisor with a good amount of reviews, TripAdvisor only listed three things to do. One participant stated, "Very limited information on TripAdvisor regarding what to do only listed Natural Bridge, Archey Fork and Pottery Barn. No mention of anything related to Chuck Wagon Races." Several participants suggested posting the events from the Facebook page to TripAdvisor and to also work with the Greers Ferry Lake/Little Red River Association in order to collaborate and enhance the city's internet presence online.

<p style="text-align: center;">EXPECTATIONS</p> <p>Looked like a medium sized, average community.</p> <p>Not a vacation destination, but a good stop or tournament destination.</p> <p>Small town with busy Highway 65</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">WHAT YOU SAW</p> <p>I am so pleasantly surprised at how beautiful Clinton really is and how much there is to do here.</p> <p>Welcoming people</p> <p>Beautiful Little Red River</p> <p>Good food</p> <p>Natural beauty and Chuck Wagon Races</p> <p>My perception is that Clinton is on the way up - working together with lots of possibilities.</p> <p>Clinton is really pretty and has so much to offer.</p> <p>It's so beautiful and has so much going on. I loved the auditorium/basketball facility. The school is great. I was impressed with everything. Was not expecting it!</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">POSITIVES</p> <p>School Auditorium and Arena</p> <p>Lots of small businesses</p> <p>Plans for growth</p> <p>Chuck Wagon Races</p> <p>Working together with other cities and county</p> <p>Three Rivers</p> <p>County Library</p> <p>Outdoor recreation</p> <p>Archey Fork Park</p> <p>School Greenhouses</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">OPPORTUNITIES</p> <p>Creeks and Rivers</p> <p>Growing outdoor tourism</p> <p>Water Sports and Festivals</p> <p>Downtown renovation</p> <p>Historic Bus Station</p> <p>Pilgrim's Pride Facility</p> <p>Highway 65 traffic</p> <p>Softball/baseball tournaments</p> <p>Homesteading opportunities</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">CHALLENGES</p> <p>Getting traffic off of Highway 65 and into the community</p> <p>Flooding downtown</p> <p>Negative perception</p> <p>Downtown</p> <p>Narrow Streets</p> <p>Industrial Park</p>	



COMMUNITY ENTRANCES

Highway 65 is the major entrance into the community. The majority of the comments revealed a community that experiences a huge amount of traffic moving through Clinton on Highway 65. Overall, participants rated community entrance as a 5.83, in which participants’ experiences met but did not exceed expectations. Positive comments related to the cleanliness along the highway and the wayfinding signage. Most of the negative comments were in regards to the construction.

Approach the community from two major entrances. Grade and comment on each entrance. While there may be an obvious main entrance, there are typically multiple ways to enter a community.

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<p><i>“Loved the wayfinding signs. They looked great.”</i></p> <p><i>“Entrance from South on Highway 65 when you come over the hill is awesome! Lots of potential and community should maximize that entrance.”</i></p> <p><i>“A little busy on Highway 65 but at the same time, a good way to showcase new enterprises that are located in a very visible way.”</i></p> <p><i>“Looked clean and nice”</i></p>	<p><i>“A little busy and cluttered”</i></p> <p><i>“I didn’t really see any big signs signifying I was in Clinton.”</i></p> <p><i>“Lots of road construction on Highway 65 - it is only a temporary negative.”</i></p> <p><i>“Small Signs”</i></p>



DOWNTOWN

Clinton has a traditional downtown with a courthouse square. In the downtown area, participants felt that while there was good signage and parks anchoring the downtown, there were not many retail options or sit down restaurants. Participants liked the historic character of the buildings but also commented on the significant amount of vacant and underutilized buildings. Overall, participants rated the downtown a 5.25, receiving the lowest average rating in which participants’ experiences were met but did not exceed their expectations. Suggestions included hosting a downtown clean-up day, providing incentives for downtown owners to rehabilitate their buildings and adding public art in the downtown.

Comment on the overall appearance of the buildings, displays, signage and streetscape. Is the downtown walkable and accessible? Comment on the quality, availability or necessity for parking in the downtown. Does the downtown play a role in tourism? Is there potential for it to play a greater role.

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<p><i>“Neat downtown. Didn’t even know it was there. Loved the courthouse square - seems to be perfect for a community event.”</i></p> <p><i>“The most surprising part was the fact that there were so many buildings period. Obviously, it was a vibrant downtown in earlier years.”</i></p> <p><i>“Downtown was cute. It has so much potential to be a great venue to host events.”</i></p> <p><i>“Wonderful parks and walking distance to town”</i></p> <p><i>“Main Street park is great.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Noticed a number of empty buildings, a number of them needed some additional upkeep.”</i></p> <p><i>“Narrow roadways, tight turns, is probably easily congested.”</i></p> <p><i>“Saw several vacant buildings, did not look inviting nor a tourism draw.”</i></p> <p><i>“Needs some upkeep”</i></p> <p><i>“Feels a little cramped”</i></p>



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<p><i>“Good Signage”</i></p> <p><i>“Loved the images in the rock”</i></p> <p><i>“Good variety of businesses and buildings”</i></p> <p><i>“Loved the Fabric Store”</i></p> <p><i>“Great opportunity for growth”</i></p>	<p><i>“Not visible from Highway 65”</i></p> <p><i>“Downtown could use some TLC. More unique shopping, etc.”</i></p> <p><i>“Several buildings need repair.”</i></p> <p><i>“Downtown is in a flood zone.”</i></p> <p><i>“Some unattractive window displays”</i></p>

TOURISM

Clinton has several great assets and signature events including the Little Red River, Archey Fork Park and Archey Fork Festival, Chuck Wagon Races and museum. However, many of our participants were unaware of the events taking place in Clinton. Participants were really impressed by the scenic beauty surrounding the city and all the unique photo opportunities. Participants recommended building on these unique assets and continue to work with neighboring communities to cross-promote local events to extend the amount of time tourists spend within the city. Overall, participants rated Tourism in Clinton 6.38 in which participants’ experience was met but did not exceed their expectations.

Does the community appear to have a strong tourism sector? Why or why not? What have you seen that could be developed into a tourist attraction (natural or man-made)? Comment on the quality and appearance of existing tourist attractions.

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<p><i>“Area along Highway 65 looked nice and the view to the east on the hill is beautiful.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Should highlight the Little Red River more and offer unique experiences.”</i></p>



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<p><i>"I liked the Ozarks sign at the Pottery Shop. Seems to be an excellent starting point for advertising natural resources."</i></p> <p><i>"Unique bar ranch"</i></p> <p><i>"The parks, rivers and sports arenas are really nice, but I did not know they were here."</i></p> <p><i>"Chuck wagon races get lots of local advertising but not much on internet."</i></p> <p><i>"Excellent opportunities for water, parks and hiking."</i></p> <p><i>"There are great amenities here, you just need to clean it up and point to it."</i></p> <p><i>"The community works together and supports local events."</i></p> <p><i>"Has kayaking opportunities throughout community"</i></p>	<p><i>"The three hotels are not enough to accommodate hosting big tournaments or events in which the auditorium and arena can hold."</i></p> <p><i>"Limited lodging"</i></p> <p><i>"Did not notice historical monuments or markers - may have just been me."</i></p> <p><i>"Didn't seem to promote rivers and parks beyond regional area."</i></p> <p><i>"There is a lot of traffic that just "passes" through on the way to Branson."</i></p>

HOUSING

There is a diverse mix of housing in Clinton. While there are a large number of single-family homes in the area, participants noticed apartments scattered throughout the community and also an area for seniors specifically. The average rating for housing was 6.29.



Describe the residential housing mix in the community (apartment, townhouses, single-family, multi-family, etc.).

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<p style="text-align: center;"><i>“Saw a mix of housing.”</i></p> <p><i>“Nice senior apartments and senior living center”</i></p> <p><i>“Houses looked nice and neighborhoods looked nice. They had apartments and duplexes.”</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>“Housing located near school needs some work.”</i></p>

BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

Industrial areas are clearly marked on Highway 65, however the industrial park is not clearly marked on maps making it difficult to locate if you are not traveling on Highway 65 going north. Most businesses were clustered on Highway 65. There seems to be ample room for expansion of small industries and businesses in the area. Overall, business and economy received an average rating of 5.88.

Is there a well-maintained industrial park? Why or why not? Would this community be an attractive location for small businesses/entrepreneurs? Why or why not?

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<p style="text-align: center;"><i>“I would think new businesses would want to locate here.”</i></p> <p><i>“Most businesses clustered on Highway 65”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“Good variety”</i></p> <p><i>“Has an industrial park that is available for use”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“It all looked ready for new businesses.”</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>“Didn’t really see industry. The city should wok to attract more unique, quirky businesses.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“Downtown vacancies”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“Has an unused industrial park”</i></p> <p><i>“Did not notice dedicated industrial park. Seems to be sprinkled throughout Clinton.”</i></p> <p><i>“The retail development along 65 is ok but doesn’t present the best side of Clinton, but I understand why it’s that way since 65 is a major highway.”</i></p>



EDUCATION

Education rated the highest with an average grade of 8.33. The school facilities were well-maintained and looked up to date. Participants were very impressed with the Clinton High School’s auditorium, arena and greenhouse. As one participant noted, “the school was impressive with great facilities and it looks like the kids are offered some great opportunities.”

Comment on the availability and quality of schools (pre-school/kindergarten/Headstart, primary/elementary/middle schools, high schools, colleges/universities).

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<p><i>“Facilities were impressive but didn’t hear how academics were rated.”</i></p> <p><i>“Looked great, auditorium was amazing.”</i></p> <p><i>“Great facilities!”</i></p> <p><i>“Greenhouse on high school property was awesome in offering hands-on learning opportunities.”</i></p> <p><i>“Great agriculture program”</i></p> <p><i>“Schools looked great and seemed good”</i></p> <p><i>“Top notch auditorium”</i></p> <p><i>“Wonderful gym and auditorium”</i></p> <p><i>“The school system seems to offer kids some great opportunities through its agriculture and musical programs.”</i></p> <p><i>“People here seem to care about the education.”</i></p>	<p><i>“The school seems to be removed from the rest of the community.”</i></p> <p><i>“Campus is difficult to navigate”</i></p> <p><i>“Hard to get to the auditorium and arena”</i></p>



HEALTH, SOCIAL AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

The availability of healthcare facilities were impressive for a community the size of Clinton. The average rating for these services received a 7 in which participants’ experiences were better than their expectations. Participants highlighted the Ozark Health Medical Center with several independent medical facilities surrounding the hospital. Participants also noted the Meals on Wheels program facility and several dental offices.

Comment on the availability of health care facilities (hospitals, physicians, dentists, optometrists, or other medical offices and clinics, long-term care or assisted living, and other health services such as chiropractic, mental health, yoga, massage); community gardens, the availability of civic organizations and fitness centers; emergency shelters and services.

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<p><i>“Dental office near County Library”</i></p> <p><i>“The hospital was very nice and offered mental health services and a wellness center.”</i></p> <p><i>“New, especially good looking medical center with apparently excellent services.”</i></p> <p><i>“Has a Meals on Wheels program”</i></p> <p><i>“Nice facilities”</i></p>	<p><i>“Didn’t see many clinics”</i></p>



PARKS, STREETSCAPES AND BEAUTIFICATION

Participants were impressed with the city’s park system ranking it a 7. The Archey Fork Park and Clinton Children’s Park received a lot of positive comments. The parks were clean and well-maintained with good signage throughout.

Do areas of the community appear to be developing or declining? Comment on how effectively the community appears to be managing this. Does the community have historic buildings or places? Are they well maintained? What recreational activities or facilities seemed to be missing? Does the community appear welcoming to a diverse range of residents? Why or why not?

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<p style="text-align: center;"><i>“Lots of recreational opportunities”</i></p> <p><i>“The Archey Fork Park is absolutely wonderful. Clinton is so fortunate to have been able to develop such a special natural asset!”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“Neat parks”</i></p> <p><i>“Golf course with an honor system says it all!”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“I’m super jealous of the city parks.”</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>“Do not recall seeing historical markers.”</i></p> <p><i>“Area near park downtown looks cramped. Maybe some creative landscaping could enhance the area.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“Un-kept ditches along some roads”</i></p>

USING YOUR SENSES

Participants toured the community on a sunny, cool afternoon between 10 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. The average rating for Using Your Senses was 7.33. Participants noted there being no offensive odors with lots of activity. Most of the remarks were that it was a clean and quiet area.



What did the community taste like? Was there any specialty food item, bakery, restaurant or other food store that you will remember? What did the community smell like? Were there any offensive smells? What about pleasant odors (flowers, food, etc.)? What sounds did you hear? Please comment on the level of noise in the community (traffic, industrial noises, birds singing, water fountains, music on the streets, trains, clock chimes). How would you describe the overall environmental health of the community (air quality, litter, noise pollution, etc.)?

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<p><i>“The air is fresh and clean and it was nice and quiet but saw lots of activity. The L’Attitude Bistro smelled great!”</i></p> <p><i>“Didn’t notice much trash along the roads.”</i></p> <p><i>“Quiet, no strange smells.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Nothing really stood out, which is both good and bad. There was nothing offensive but nothing really that caught my attention. So doesn’t seem to be anything to eliminate just things to accentuate.”</i></p>

Did you experience anything that had strongly negative or positive impact on the way the community felt to you (children playing, hateful or angry responses, crowded or deserted streets and safety issues, smiling faces)? Do you think your impression would be different if your visit occurred during a different time of day or at a different time of year?

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<p><i>“I am so pleasantly surprised at how beautiful Clinton really is and how much there is to do here.”</i></p> <p><i>“Everyone seemed happy and friendly. Would like to come back during the Chuck Wagon Festival or other event to get a better sense of the community.”</i></p> <p><i>“Everyone was welcoming.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Hall Street needed help with beautification of homes.”</i></p>

REFLECTIONS

At the end of the tour, participants were asked to reflect and create their own list of positive features about the Clinton community.

What local restaurant, specialty shop, or attraction would bring you back to this community in the future?

"The Pottery Shop"

"Bar of Ranch - Wagons -labor day weekend"

"Antiques"

"La Rosita"

"Ate at L'Attitude with live music. Really neat place. Good food and drinks. Loved the creek and parks. Would love a family creek festival on Little Red River near Archey Fork Park."

"Archey Fork Park"

"Playgrounds"

"Connected walking trails"

"Library"

"The Pottery Shop and L'Attitude were wonderful. Loved the photo opportunities at the "The Ozarks" sign."

Would you consider locating a retail, professional, or nonprofit business here? Why or why not?

"Yes, presence of many small businesses was encouraging."

"No, retired."

"No, vacant buildings show this small town is struggling to support existing businesses."

"It would have to be a niche shop. I would think that meets a specific need in Clinton. I am sure there are retail/service deficiencies that would lend themselves to new shops but hard for me to get a sense of what that is. Maybe poll the community and recruit accordingly?"

"Certainly!"

"Yes, there is so much here. It's hidden but once you know all that is here it's great!"

"Yes, especially a western wear retail shop."

Would you consider living here? Why or why not?

"Yes, nice looking school, proximity to Ozarks."

"No, too far from Little Rock."

"It's beautiful, but are the jobs here? Pilgrim Pride plant makes it look like they're leaving."

"Yes, love the people, location and recreation opportunities. Great school facilities. Good place to raise a family."

"Certainly - if I weren't already in my own community."

"Yes, it's so inviting and I love the beauty of the area."

"Sure! They have lots going for them with natural resources and now they have the most important element - spirit."

WRAP UP

In the final section of the guidebook, participants were asked to sum it all up with the following questions:

What is the most outstanding feature of this community?

"School gym and auditorium"

"Natural Beauty"

"Historic bus station"

"Natural beauty - Little Red River"

"The people"

"The recreational opportunities, primarily centered on the Little Red River and Archey Fork Park. Perfect place to have festivals, canoe/kayak races, etc. Obviously, the chuck wagon races are a part of the identity of the community. Embrace and promote."

"The Archey Fork Creek Park and Trails"

"The people and the beauty of the land"

"How the leaders believe they can move ahead - together - regionally."

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

"Longhorns! Bull Statue."

"Clinton High School Auditorium"

"Van Buren County Library"

"Bar of Ranch"

"Dan Eoff"

"The auditorium and agriculture program"

"The rivers and streams"

"The working together and enthusiasm"

"That it is thriving - with half a population than ours - Clinton is booming."

"Positive mayor"

What have you learned that has changed your impression of your own community?

"Use your assets, they are what make you unique."

"The importance of continuing to work together."

"The importance of building on your own assets."

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

"A Festival"

"Need to promote our community and utilize our facilities"

"More education on community development"

"Yes! The cool photo opportunities in unexpected places."

Describe one idea that you will borrow for use in your own community and describe how you will implement it.

"Murals and Tardis"

"Your excellent 'Clinton' brochure that lists the activities and festivals. I'll be back to experience these events."

"A place where people can stop and take a picture."

Additional Comments:

"Clinton seem to lack a true identity that everyone can rally behind. The chuck wagon races are an awesome event and should be promoted but may not be a good theme to define Clinton year-round but definitely needs to be a part of the story."

"Thank you so much for an excellent overview of your community. Best wishes for continuing progress and success!"



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UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS SYSTEM