

# Ohio State Extension First Impressions Program – New Martinsville, West Virginia Visiting Caldwell, Ohio

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The following report presents key observations gathered from the surveys completed by the New Martinsville First Impression Team's visit to the Village of Caldwell. Recommendations for further actions are also provided.

## Impression of Caldwell before visiting:

Before visiting, the New Martinsville First Impression's Team anticipated that Caldwell would be a small, rural, quiet town with some historical homes and limited amenities and services. From passing by the Caldwell exit on Rt. 77, some team members noted that they were left with the impression of fast food restaurants and gas stations. They also wondered if they would find that Caldwell has experienced some growth because of their proximity to the interstate.

When the Team googled the Village of Caldwell, they discovered a very effective blog that excited them about their pending visit to the community. This blog also identified attractions that they hoped to visit on a future trip to Caldwell in the fall (covered bridges). The Village's website, however, did not provide much information that a visitor to the community would find useful or enticing.

## Initial Impression of Caldwell:

The Team found the town square to portray a charming small town with more businesses and services than they anticipated. Streets were in good repair and green space, especially around the courthouse and the jail, was attractive and welcoming. They noticed some empty storefronts and others that needed TLC, and the same was true for residential areas. They found some areas of the village to be "disorganized" in terms of land uses and quality and type of structures while other areas were charming.

***The entrances to the Village of Caldwell were mixed in terms of signage and attractiveness. The route to the pending Caldwell Downtown Historic District has potential to be an attractive entrance if needed property improvements are undertaken and effective informational/directional signage is added.***

The Team entered Caldwell from a number of different directions and evaluated signage, ease of navigation, attractiveness and the impression it provided for what was to come.

They found Rt. 821 easy to follow and pleasant to drive. The state-shaped Caldwell entrance sign was attractive. Some buildings on this route into the Village needed improvement in order to provide a more attractive entrance and leave the visitor with a positive impression. Rt. 821 appeared to be an indirect way to get to the center of town, but the Team liked going through the residential areas before reaching the square.

Some visitors missed the entrance signs on Route 78. They were curious about the significance of the Bigfoot statue in the Marathon lot and thought an explanation would be helpful. Some buildings on this route could benefit from cleaning up.



*Local Question: Could the old Rt. 78 entrance into town potentially be an entrance into the pending Historic Downtown Caldwell District?*

Some buildings and properties would need to be improved/preserved and some properties fenced along this route to leave a more favorable impression when entering Caldwell. Signage would need to be added to lead you along this route to the downtown. The visitors thought that with directional and welcoming signage as well as some improvements to structures and properties, this route would be a very good entrance to the Historic Downtown Caldwell District. The visitors commented that the Homestead was a great benefit along this route.

***This is how we came into town, and it was a bit of an eyesore.***



***Caldwell's Town Square was quaint, charming and attractive. It provided the focal point to the community and presented a "hallmark movie" impression and atmosphere.***

The Team found the town square to be so charming it would be suitable for a Hallmark movie. Streets and sidewalks were in good repair. They particularly noticed the flags, lampposts and flowers and thought this added to the overall attractiveness of this central business district. The team commented on the diversity of businesses and the attractiveness of the older buildings.



***Nice flags, flowers and lampposts. Streets and sidewalks in good repair.  
Attractive central business district.***

**Every Hallmark movie seems to have a gazebo. We loved this touch! We felt like the square captured a classic Americana.**



Directional signage to other Caldwell features such as schools, parks, industrial parks was insufficient or non-existent. The team found the playground because they asked a store owner for directions. The schools, although they were located right in town – a major plus – were hard to find because of a lack of directional signage. The Team found them by noticing the “school zone” sign on the pavement. They never did find an industrial park.

In the downtown, the visitors noticed some vacant properties and other storefronts in need of improvement. They believed that the vacant properties could be a potential asset, offering the possibility of attracting new investment into the downtown. Also, vacant upper floors could provide opportunities for housing.

The visitors noticed some empty storefronts and facades on some buildings that needed TLC. They felt that the vacant properties could provide an asset for the downtown by providing locations for new business development. Signage on businesses was mixed – some had updated, easily readable signs alongside vintage signs, which left a good impression with the visitors – but signage on other storefronts was faded and/or difficult to read.

**This building on the square seemed to have a lot of potential. This would make a neat restaurant with housing above it.**





***One vacant storefront – with lots of potential.***



***Some storefronts needed TLC.***



***Greenspace and amenities – such as benches and places to relax – added to the welcoming atmosphere of the downtown. It was a walkable, pedestrian friendly place to visit with unique features.***

The Team found the greenspace around the Courthouse and next to the Jail, with benches available, to provide a welcoming atmosphere and provide a location for pedestrians and shoppers to sit and rest. The rows of benches in front of the Courthouse could provide seating for community events. The Team noticed unique features in the downtown that added to the overall positive impression of the square. These included repurposed buildings that intentionally maintained their unique original character.

***Great idea with the benches in front of the Courthouse.***



***We enjoyed this charming area.***



***It was fun to see the old theater repurposed with some of the charm left behind.***



***Great mural celebrating the community! We would have enjoyed seeing more public art.***



The Team felt that some of the “small things” in addition to vacant buildings and needed façade improvements were taking away from the overall attractiveness of the downtown. These included some benches that needed to be replaced or repaired as well as facade improvements to downtown buildings. The restaurant, for example, needed painting and in its current condition could be a deterrent to visitors wanting to stop for lunch.

***Be careful of the little things that can take away from the overall attractive impression of the central square. These benches need to be repaired or replaced.***



***Caldwell's residential areas were, by and large, attractive. Streets were clean and well maintained. Signage visibility could be improved to address blocked street signs. One impression the Team voiced was that land uses and types of housing seemed to be “disorganized” and some residences were in need of improvement.***

Residential areas mostly contained well maintained housing. The Team did comment that residential areas were “jumbled” with a single-family house next to a mobile home next to an apartment building. This left a disorganized impression with the visitors.

The residential areas did seem to have a wide range of housing types for different incomes, single family and rental options.

***Residents and business owners were friendly, helpful and knowledgeable about their community and the attractions and events it had to offer. The Chamber Director and staff in the Courthouse were eager to talk to the visitors, answer their questions and provide information. The village hall staff was also helpful and welcoming.***

The visitors gained a very positive impression about the town's people and business owners based on their interactions in shops, public offices, and on the street. Numerous business owners suggested things to do (Wind up Wednesday, Art in the Square) but did admit that many went to Cambridge or Zanesville for fun. Some business owners voiced the desire for more local support.

The weather was not conducive to pedestrians (dreary and raining), but those that the team talked to were friendly, welcoming and knowledgeable about their community. The team saw very few young people or professionals. Most of the people they encountered were older and appeared to be retired.

The visitors knocked on the Chamber door and were let in by the Chamber Director, whom they talked to at length. He told the team about the potential historic district and suggested where to eat and some things to do while they were visiting. They found him to be extremely helpful and knowledgeable and a wonderful ambassador for Caldwell!

***The door to the Chamber office was locked, but the exterior was still very welcoming. The Chamber was in a very convenient location for visitors, right off the main square.***



***We didn't find this until we were on our way out of town. It was closed anyway. The brochures were helpful though. Maybe better signage would help.***



They stopped at one office in the Courthouse and the staff person was very friendly and welcoming and provided them with an overview of the history of the building. The public restrooms in the courthouse were clean, well maintained and attractive. The staff in the village hall was friendly and informative. The building was clean and well maintained, interesting (retro) on the inside but plain on the outside. Signage was good.

***Written information about local events, attractions and features was available in certain key locations but not in others.***

Visitor information about the village and county's attractions and festivals was available in the Chamber. The courthouse kiosks contained information pertaining to veterans and armed forces, but no materials about local attractions was available. The map they received did not include the location of attractions such as the Shenandoah site, playgrounds, parks or fairgrounds. The Tourism Cabin contained helpful information but without directional signage the Team did not find this office until they were on their way out of town.

### ***Suggestions:***

***Improve welcome, directional and informational signage at entrances and throughout the community.***

Caldwell should consider developing a comprehensive signage program to develop wayfinding and informational signs throughout the village. These signs should welcome visitors to town and point the direction to various features such as the town square, business districts, tourism information locations, parks, clinics, playgrounds, the pool, schools and the industrial park. The Village should also ensure that residential and other street signs are not blocked by other objects, such as stop signs.



***The village square is a key asset for the community and provides an attraction to visitors. A concerted strategy to find/grow appropriate tenants for vacant buildings and encourage needed improvements to building facades would develop this asset further. Also, many upper floors are vacant so could housing be an option?***

The town square is attractive and can provide a base for additional economic activity for the community. The vacant buildings, often seen by communities as a detraction, can also be seen as an asset because they potentially provide the opportunity to bring new businesses, services and investment into the community. Does Caldwell have in place programs that can provide incentives for downtown development, such as a Community Reinvestment Area(s) and revolving loan programs for façade improvement and small business development? If desiring to stimulate the local economy through a destination tourism approach, are there restaurants that would appeal to visitors and can existing restaurants be improved?

The plan to designate the Caldwell Downtown Historic District is a good one and can provide a draw to the village. The new entrance to this district is also a good idea, but property improvements along the route and directional signage will need to be added in order to provide a very positive first impression.

***Interstate 77 and the new Scenic Route 78 both have travelers who pass in close proximity to the Town Square but might not stop for lunch or visit the shops. Are there strategies that would help to market Caldwell to these potential visitors? Can signage be put in key locations? Can the Historic District be used as an attraction to the downtown? Develop a marketing plan to address these potentials.***

Attracting visitors who are “passing through” the area could be an effective economic development strategy. Caldwell, particularly the Town Square, has so much to offer in terms of its hallmark movie feel. It also has the potential to use vacant buildings to develop businesses that will attract visitors to the downtown and the Historic District designation will also provide a draw. The development of a marketing plan to capitalize on these existing and potential assets and attractions can help to stimulate tourism-based economic vitality.

## ***Summary***

The Village of Caldwell is a picturesque town with great potential to attract visitors as a destination community. We suggest building on the existing assets (downtown square, historic buildings/district, welcoming retail establishments and visitor attractions) while addressing detractors from the overall image (vacant storefronts/buildings and those in need of repair). Vacant buildings can be viewed as an asset to attract new investment (housing, retail/services) in the downtown. A well-planned initiative to develop directional and informational signage within the town, and welcome and “promotional” signs at the outskirts of Caldwell, will attract visitors and help them discover key assets. Finally, the New Martinsville visitors identified their image of Caldwell can be used to brand and promote the village to visitors, especially the downtown - that of a charming, “Hallmark movie” community. This brand can be shared through signage, promotional literature, web sites, logos, etc. as a cornerstone of community marketing to the outside world.

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