

OSU COMMUNITY AWARENESS TEAM OBSERVATIONS Granville visiting Oberlin – 2014

The following report presents observations from the OSU Team's review of Granville's responses to their visit to Oberlin. Photographic images taken by the Granville Visitation Team are included to emphasize key points in their impression of Oberlin.

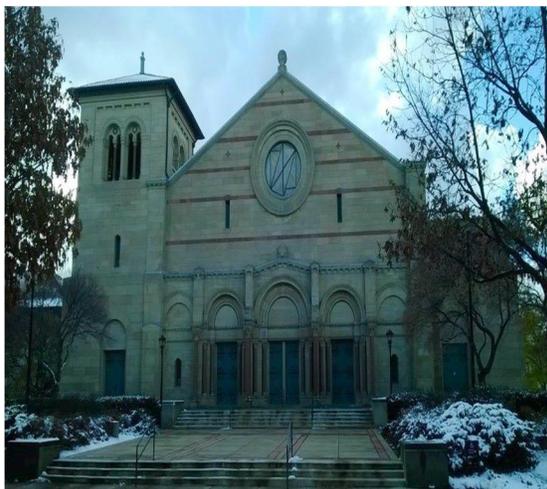
Community of Oberlin Overview:

Before visiting, the Granville Team anticipated that Oberlin would be a small, college town with an overall pride in their place in the abolitionist history and many firsts including the founding of Oberlin college in 1833. They expected a diverse and vibrant community in which the College was a predominant influence. What they found during their visit supported this anticipated experience. They found the Oberlin web site virtual tour to be particularly effective in providing a sense of the community to new visitors.

Granville's overall impression of Oberlin is of an eclectic, exciting, artistic and college centered community. Diversity exists in downtown shops, housing, architecture, residents and the college campus. The community has a wide variety of business and housing types and uses, from upscale senior housing to modest student housing. Diversity, variety and energy are Oberlin's primary impressions.

Architecture on the college campus and in the town effectively blends modern to historic.

The City of Oberlin and Oberlin College have successfully embraced modern and twentieth century architecture to make an aesthetically pleasing visual for residents and visitors alike.



The Oberlin College campus is contiguous to the downtown and influences the types of businesses that are present. The college also influences the residential options. The Granville visitors assumed that housing located adjacent to the downtown corridor, some of it in disrepair, to be student rental housing.

It was apparent that cultural and historical heritage and the arts were important to community residents. The Allen Art Museum was described by the visitors as %world class.+

The Allen Memorial Art Museum is a jewel in the community of Oberlin.



Unexpected art displays and public commentary added to the vibrancy and uniqueness of Oberlin.

Unexpected art exhibit.



We even found a bit of whimsy.



When approaching town from the SR 58 entrance it was evident that Oberlin is a college town with a town/gown atmosphere. One impression was that the town was a little run down due to the presence of many houses that were in need of basic repair. The team assumed these structures to be student rentals. This entrance was also a location for chain stores and other businesses. The renovated train depot and public

buildings (Fire Station) were attractive features. Other entrances were more attractive with farms, large acreage home sites and family residential areas.

Overall, students, business owners and staff, and residents on the street were friendly, knowledgeable and eager to help a visitor find their way around and identify points/places of interest. Some public offices and staff were less helpful and welcoming, and locations/information were sometimes difficult to obtain.

The following provides more detail about key points forming the Granville Team's first impressions of Oberlin.

Downtown Business Area

The downtown business area appears to be thriving, characterized by a diverse mix of businesses and architecture, catering to students and residents. Many businesses are student centered. There are few vacancies in the downtown storefronts. The mix of businesses would be what one might expect from a college community with a diverse student body.



We happily visited two Oberlin coffee shops and enjoyed hot refreshments. Wi-Fi was available. There was a diverse mix of students and residents.



Oberlin business owners represented diversity from Middle Eastern food, an African clothing store and an artisan gallery.



The Oberlin Market had organic items. It was apparent that many businesses embraced “green thinking” whether it was recycling, food choices or reused/repurposed items.

One of the visitor's favorite businesses was Gibson's Candy and Bakery Shop. The owner was an ambassador for Oberlin and very knowledgeable and proud about the City's history and his family business.





One of our favorite stops was Gibson's Candy and Bakery Shop. We were regaled with a complete history of Gibson's and the City of Oberlin from 1900 to the present day. This family owned business is a sweet treat for residents and visitors alike. We all enjoyed a piece of just made ribbon candy.

The downtown area also has a small town feel with attractive business signage, signs promoting local events and an attractive square. It appears that major renovation projects are underway that will add to the attractiveness of the downtown. Overall, Oberlin's downtown was inviting, exciting and walker friendly.

Very attractive downtown square area.





Lovely tree lined streets, portraying an idyllic small community.



We appreciated how clean the streets And sidewalks were. This alleyway was even clean. Thank you!



Attractive street lighting, traffic lights, poles and banners. Public trash cans were not visible.



Other Business Areas:

The visitors noticed other businesses areas on the outskirts of town, with chain stores and some industry. Although the Granville Team mentioned the additional

business areas, they focused more on the downtown main street area in their evaluation of the business community.

Residential Areas:

Housing stock in Oberlin is mixed, from more modest housing to larger stately dwellings. Some homes were well maintained, while others were in need of repair and renovation. Housing types varied from attractive retirement communities (Kendal), to apartments, to single family housing. Diversity in type, condition and architecture is the predominant characteristic of the housing stock in Oberlin.

The presence of what the Granville Team presumed to be student housing, because of its deteriorated condition, left a tired, run down impression with the visitors to Oberlin. This contrasted with evident pride of ownership and attractive landscaping in other residential sections of the community.

Were there any pictures of student housing taken to show deteriorated condition?

Were any pictures of residential neighborhoods taken?

Infrastructure and Parking:

Traffic patterns are easily followed. Some streets were bumpy. The city appeared to be in the midst of street improvement projects. The visitors were impressed by Tappan Square and felt that it was an asset to the community. A number of visitors listed it as a positive asset they observed and a feature that they would remember about Oberlin in the future.

One entrance into Tappan Square, the heart of Oberlin.



The visitors noticed that it appeared Oberlin was undertaking a major renovation of curbs and gutters in the downtown, with what appeared to be tree pits under construction. This will be an attractive addition to the downtown area.



We were impressed by the tree pits and wondered if they were new. One member of our group is the Chair of our Tree & Landscape Commission.

It appeared to the visitors that alternative means of transportation, such as walking and biking, were encouraged, especially biking. There were ample bike racks in the downtown and bike paths were well marked. Streets were generally in acceptable condition and recent street improvements were evident.



Newly paved street had just reopened. Construction remnants were still visible.

The visitors had no problem finding parking during their visit. Parking was convenient, free, easy to find and readily available within a three-block radius of College and Main Streets.



We parked on the street, but we found plenty of parking available.

Signage:

Overall, signage in Oberlin was adequate. Primary streets were well marked but secondary street signs were often missing or difficult to read. Some shop signs in the downtown area were difficult to read while driving. Welcome signs on the entrances to Oberlin, while an attractive and appropriate design for the community, need to be refurbished. Also, the visitors suggested that more landscaping around the entrance signs would be desirable.



Most City and business signage was easily noticeable, attractive and effective.

The existence and effectiveness of signage leading visitors to points of interest was mixed. While the schools and hospital were easy to find, the parks and playground area were not located through signage. The bike trail was well marked, but the ~~no~~ bicycling+signs painted on sidewalk were distracting and left an unfriendly feeling with the visitors. Is there another way that the City can get this important safety point across in a less off-putting way?

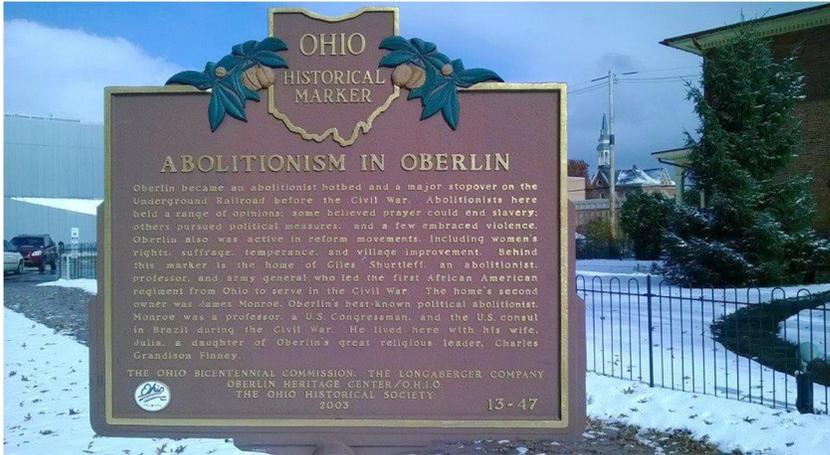


We were put off buy the proliferation of these stenciled signs on the sidewalk. No, No, No left us with a negative feeling.

The visitors had trouble locating the Chamber office (Business Partnership). The Chamber sign was still on their former location on Main Street, and it was difficult to find someone who knew where they had moved. This left a very negative impression for the visitors and made it a challenge to find needed information for their visit to Oberlin.

Signage describing Oberlin's proud history and contributions to abolitionism were effective and informational. This was very clearly a point of pride for community residents.

Oberlin's pride in their past was apparent. The Heritage Center docent as well as many business owners and residents on the street shared Oberlin's rich past.



Oberlin's historic train station-the Lake Shore and Southern Michigan Railroad.

The Historic Oberlin Inn

Information and Hospitality:

Residents and students encountered on the street and shop owners and employees were very friendly, helpful and knowledgeable. They made suggestions about what to see and do. The visitors gained a very positive impression about the town people and students from their interactions in shops and on the street. Also, employees at the Oberlin Heritage Center and Library were very helpful, friendly and informative and made the visitors feel welcomed. Businesses did a good job of advertising each other and community events.



An Oberlin College student who shared his Oberlin experience with us and wonderful statistics about the College.

While information was available at the City Hall and Oberlin Business Partnership, the Partnership office had moved and it was difficult to find someone who knew where they were located. By the time the visitors found directions, the office was closed for an hour for lunch, as was City Hall.

Information, such as maps, brochures and a walking tour, was acceptable and useful. The Oberlin Town website was helpful, but the map was printed from the website and was not very professional in appearance. Ideas that the visitors wanted to steal for use in Granville were the walking tour information and brochures from the school district about each building. The visitors commented that there was no local information available for a visitor who might be interested in opening a business in the community.

The City Hall was a relatively new building, appearing businesslike and functional, but uninviting. The staff was polite, but not very friendly or eager to be forthcoming with information. The visitors had to ask to use the restroom.

Kiosks with area information at the City Hall and Heritage Center were very helpful in providing information to the visitor.



Village Hall kiosk. Heritage Center Kiosk.



We found that Oberlin has an “app” for that.

The staffer at the Partnership was friendly and tried to be helpful, but was not very informed and could not answer many questions that the visitors posed. She provided the visitors with brochures about Oberlin and contact information for the Partnership director.

Additional Comments:

Improved communications - Many shop owners in the downtown mentioned the need for improved communications and coordination between city hall and downtown merchants. Information about plans for major infrastructure renovations are not well communicated leading to frustration by merchants.

We were told the street just opened the day before. Business Owners expressed anger and concern about the lack of communication from City Hall regarding these improvements and general sharing of information.



Improved hospitality . friendliness, knowledge, helpfulness, more visitor friendly and convenient hours - at front line offices such as the Chamber (Business Partnership) and City Hall is needed so that these facilities can serve as effective ambassadors for the community. Visitors to a community they are not familiar with often make their first stop the Chamber or the City Hall to access written information (Brochures, walking guides, business guides, etc.) and talk with someone familiar with what to do and what to see during their visit. In Oberlin's case, the Chamber (Oberlin Business Partnership) had moved and changed its name and was difficult to find. The staff, although friendly and trying to help, was not knowledgeable about the community. Also, the office was closed for an hour over lunch. City Hall employees did not go out of their way to be helpful and did not leave the visitor with the sense that they were welcomed to the community. City Hall also was closed for an hour at lunch. Oberlin has wonderful assets, such as its unique history, the college, the vibrancy of the community, and the Allen Memorial Art Museum (the crown jewel of Oberlin- should be publicized more as a destination). And while the hospitality of the merchants, students and residents is a plus, the friendliness of City Hall staff and knowledge of Partnership staff did not leave a welcoming feeling with the visitors.

Visual impressions - Housing that is in need of maintenance and rehab left the visitors with an impression of Oberlin as a tired community. This is frequently a challenge for college towns with a number of student rentals and involves, at least, increased code enforcement and property improvement incentives to address. Also, the entrance signs to Oberlin need refurbishing and additional landscaping, a much easier, but important, impression to address.