

Views from VanDeWalle

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July 19, 2023

Festival and Fair season is here! In the world of Extension, that means that each office is working very hard to prepare for 4-H's role in county fairs. We are gathering volunteers, getting kids signed up, holding workshops, and we're all freaking out a little bit...or sometimes a lot!

As a community, are you also getting prepared? Do you have a community cleanup scheduled before your large event? Perhaps something like a free dump day or a day when the youth will come around and do yard work for those who are unable to do it themselves? These types of programs can grow community pride and build connections in the community.

If you look around your community and don't see a lot of issues, but you think someone else might see a problem. Rural Prosperity Nebraska has some programs that may be helpful. We have three separate First Impressions programs that can help communities make a better first impression on newcomers and visitors.

First Impressions Online is a program where we look at the online first impression that a community shows to people searching your community online. Search engines like google give very personalized results, so even if you searched your own community, you may not get the same results as a traveler would get when they search from a different community. We have a survey that we have two people complete, one on a computer, and one on a mobile device. Even using different types of devices, search engines provide different results. We then compile these results and give an in-person presentation to the community. This program costs \$300 per community.

We also have a Peer to Peer First Impressions program that matches two similar sized communities together. Each community recruits a small team of people to visit the other community. Extension then prepares each team through a quick training and gives them questionnaires to fill out during their visit, which include an online component. As the teams visit, they answer questions about the physical aspects of the community as well as their interactions with local community members. We then compile results and present the results to the communities. The costs to the communities vary, but mostly consist of the costs associated with their team's visit to the other community, which usually includes an overnight stay. Communities can expect to spend \$1,000 or more on this project.

Our final level of First Impressions is our Professional First Impressions program which includes a visit to your community by Extension Faculty. These professionals visit your community and look at the community from their professional points of view. They provide feedback based on their areas of expertise such as architecture, placemaking, and event planning. This extensive review is presented in a written report. The cost is \$5,000.

As you can see we have many different levels of First Impression programs. Each of these programs would help communities see issues that they can address. Our goal with any First Impression program is to have communities give the best first impression to visitors and residents. You never know when a random traveler or internet search will lead to someone moving to your community. It may even lead to someone starting or moving a business to community to increase services or employment.

If your community could benefit from any of the Rural Prosperity Nebraska ideas that I've discussed in this column, please reach out to me. I'd love to speak to your community about these topics. You can reach me at jason.tuller@unl.edu or at the Thayer County office at 402-768-7212.

Jason Tuller is an Extension Educator for the University of Nebraska – Lincoln. He works in the Rural Prosperity Nebraska program and covers ten-county area including Kearney, Adams, Clay, Fillmore, Saline, Franklin, Webster, Nuckolls, Thayer, and Jefferson Counties.