



# First Impressions: Sturbridge Mass.

Autumn 2018

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## Compiled by

Jason Hoch, Town Manager, Town of Williamstown

Andrew Groff, Community Development Director, Town of Williamstown

## Evaluation Team

Williamstown's evaluation team consisted of 6 individuals:

Andrew Groff - *Town of Williamstown*

Jason Hoch - *Town of Williamstown*

Greta Kipp - *Main Street Hospitality, Williamstown Chamber of Commerce*

James Reische - *Williams College*

Susan Puddester - *Town of Williamstown Planning Board*

Vicki Saltzman - *Clark Art Institute, Williamstown Chamber of Commerce*

The team all traveled individually and experienced the community at varying times throughout the month of September and early October 2018. Team members generally experienced calm seasonable weather ranging from overcast to sunny.

## Prior to Arrival

### Impression of Sturbridge Prior to Arrival

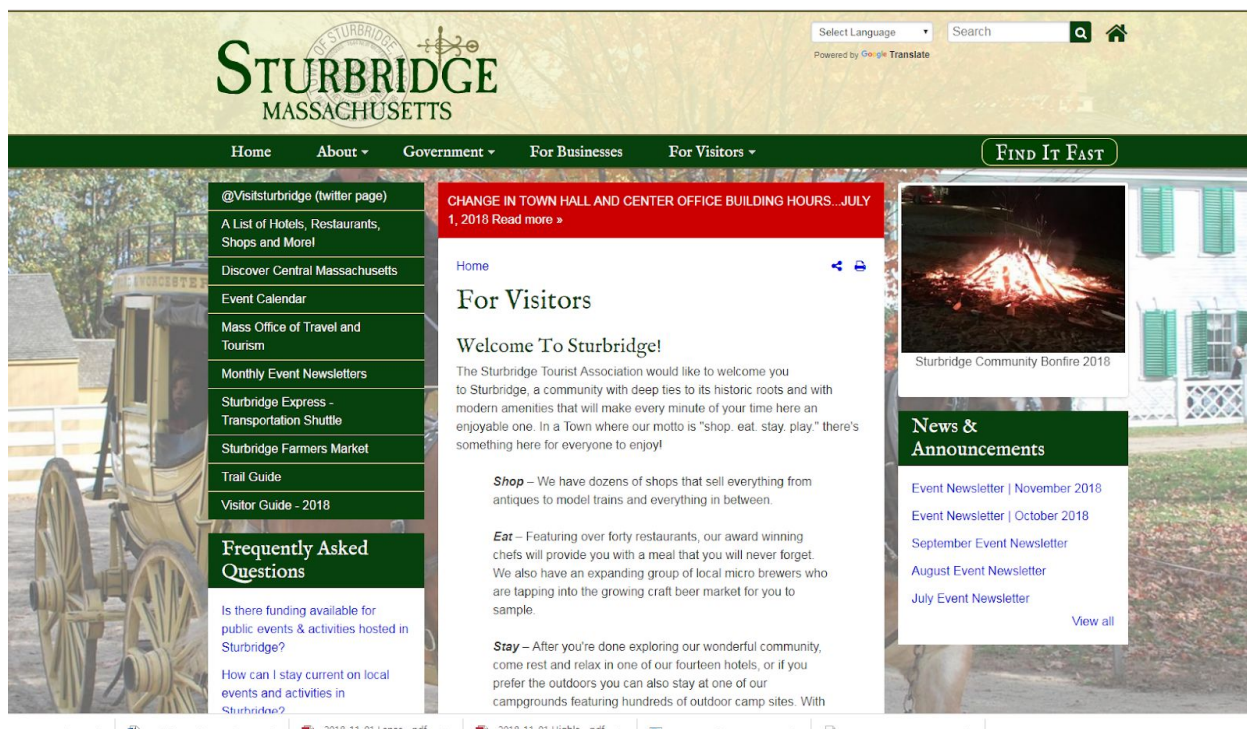
Team members generally had a positive impression of the community prior to conducting the visit. Most knew of the community due to the presence of the Old Sturbridge Village Museum, local inns and wedding venues, as well as the town's strategic location at a major highway crossroads. Team members also noted that the community has a positive online presence.

### Quality of Online Resources

#### *Town Website*

Most Williamstown team members visited the Town's tourism website and the team was evenly split on its functionality. There was agreement that there was much information provided on the site but many found it to be most useful for residents and less well

oriented to tourists or other visitors. Some users found the integration within the general municipal website confusing. The print directory included as a link was most helpful in understanding the offerings in the community.



### *Other Online Resources*

Team members noted that some of the more common web tools for tourism information aggregation including Yelp! and TripAdvisor were well populated with helpful reviews on restaurants and other attractions within the community. Some of the other available local resources, including sturbridge.com and sturbridgetownships.com to be confusing and limited. One of our team members noted that in an effort to attract more overnight and repeat visitors some aggregation of information about other attractions in the surrounding area would be helpful.

### *What was sense of community was created by the online information?*

Nearly every team member described their initial pre visit perception of Sturbridge as a “Ye Olde” community. A place that celebrates its history and quaintness, a place with a traditional New England feel. Most noted they felt that the Old Sturbridge Village was the



primary reason to visit town and that there were a decent amount of outside options for dining and shopping.

## Ten Minute Impressions

### I. Community Gateways

#### *I-90 to I-84 to US 20 West*

Over half of team members ranked their first impression of this gateway as a 5 (on a 1 to 10 scale) with two outliers a 7 and a 4. Many also noted that the entrance to Old Sturbridge Village from this entry was somewhat confusing, adding that signage and intersection improvements at this gateway could help create a sense of arrival to help orient those coming off of the highways.

#### *MA 131 from Southbridge*

Some group members traveled into Southbridge and then returned back via Route 131. It was noted that there is some appealing architecture along this route but is hidden amongst the strip mall type developments housing basic local services. It was noted that there is a distinctly different feel to the look of things when crossing from Southbridge to Sturbridge. One team member noted that this was due to the more mill type design of Southbridge; another noted that it appeared Sturbridge had stringent design standards for signs.

#### *US 20 from Brimfield*

This gateway was used by nearly the entire group including some that exited the community in this way. There was agreement that there were some good retrofits starting to occur on this pedestrian unfriendly corridor such as bike lanes, but these disappeared after the edge of town. Others noted that there was a much more limited sense of arrival along this corridor. East Brimfield Lake at the town line offers

a scenic entrance to town. Perhaps highlighting the recreational value of the lake could enhance this gateway.

### *US 20 from Charlton*

Only two team members traveled in this direction. One thought the corridor provided a better than average manner of hiding some of the big box development and seems to be controlled by strict sign standards. It was also noted that traffic was quite heavy along this corridor at varied times of day.

### *Exits 1, 2, & 3 from I-84 Northbound*

All but one of the team also traveled along this corridor. It was noted that there is quite a bit of forested open space in this area that is attractive but exit 3 in particular is cluttered with confusing road signage and typical franchise outlets. One team member noted in regards to these issues, "these are a necessary evil of being in a major

interstate intersection region but didn't help Sturbridge stand out as a special place."

This seems to be a constant for the team members. The interstates, particularly I-84



are great for easily getting people into the community but unfortunately split the community into several distinct sections.

## Business Districts


All of the participants from Williamstown viewed the Town's business districts during their individual trips. It should be noted that in response to the post participant surveys there was some disagreement as to which part of the community was the "Downtown" or "Central Business District". Some identified this area as that around the Town Common and some felt that the downtown was in fact the Fiskdale area of town along Route 20 West.

### I. Fiskdale Corridor



This section of Sturbridge was visited by all of Williamstown's team, ranking it a 5 with one ranking of 7 for an aggregated score of 5.4. About two thirds of team members said that this corridor felt to them to be the community's Central Business District. Many found the similar issues of the area lacking a true sense of place and arrival, but noting that the storefronts had pleasant displays and signage. Many team members focused on the auto oriented nature of the area, and the fast speed of traffic through the district. Efforts to increase the

pedestrian friendliness of the neighborhood and slow traffic could help highlight the successes that are occurring in the area. One team member noted that a downtown by their personal definition is "a place we could park the car and just walk around to



shops and restaurants”. While team members found parking was generally convenient, it did not offer the ability to leave a vehicle and explore on foot. Many noted parking in the area seems to be intrinsically linked to each individual business. The neighborhood could be enhanced through additional improvements and public investment to get to that type of walkable environment. This was the most pressing concern for team members and showed in answers to multiple questions in the recording form. The limited perception of walkability and the auto oriented nature of much of the district is likely hindering greater utilization and engagement of additional visitors, or to extend the visit of those visitors coming to see the museum.

Team members observed that there was a number of options for someone looking for antiques and other New England themed gift options, but some noted that with the presence of Old Sturbridge Village they expected more retail outlets similar to the general stores in Stowe, VT and Stockbridge, MA. However, other team members added that there is a solid foundation in this area to build upon. One team member noted that if it becomes easier to walk between locations in the near future and some consistency is brought to the area’s streetscape, the area could attract more people visiting the nearby Old Sturbridge Village looking for that classic “New England” retail experience. One particular area to focus on, noted one individual, could be increasing awareness of the numerous antique stores along the corridor. Something that could possibly appeal to history conscious Old Sturbridge Village visitors. One team member noted a possible slogan, “Visit Old Sturbridge Village, then take home your own piece of history from our antique shops.” Team members that traveled on weekends were pleased with the amount of retail options available on those days but there was broad agreement that the seemingly standard 5 PM closing time for most local retailers is too early.

All team members found that the restaurant options were varied and diverse, especially considering the size of the community. Team members were generally pleased with the service received as well.

## II. Town Common

Team members found this area to be the most attractive area of town with its classic New England green and the historic Publik House Inn dominating the landscape. One team member especially enjoyed the Farmer's Market on the Town Common which they noted was very well attended. All team members however noted a feeling of limited walkability and expressed a desire for additional businesses to visit in this section of town.

## III. Other Retail Areas

Team members who visited outer retail areas found that there were the expected suburban auto oriented business of gas stations, fast food, and a handful of big box retailers. One team member was surprised to find a Kolache bakery in a seemingly random strip mall area. One also noted that several of the big box type retailers are seemingly well positioned to be less visible from major roadways than one typically expects. Others noted they would travel more than 30 miles to return to Sturbridge Pottery and Yankee Spirits.

# Tourism Sector

## I. Tourism Overview

The team ranked the tourism sector a score ranging from 6 to 8 and most individuals noted that the tourism sector seems to be dominated by the Old Sturbridge Village museum. It was also noted by team members that OSV appears to receive very heavy traffic from various visitors. One team member noted being in attendance one beautiful autumn day that included large numbers of school groups and foliage tour bus trippers. There was broad agreement that OSV could benefit from some further mitigation of the impact of high visitation on facilities and enhancing its wayfinding materials and signage.



### *Symbols, Signage, and Branding*



In regards to symbols and signage it was evident that the Town is working on wayfinding and branding with a weathervane as a clear symbol. OSV also has the distinct branding of the cricket sign. They have some visual similarity but are not closely linked. The team thought the logos complimented each other but there could be continued community wide improvement and expansion of the wayfinding program.

### *Natural Resources*

It was noted that Wells State Park and some of the town owned natural areas seemed like pleasant and attractive places to visit. Others noted the presence of some other lakes, notably near the Sturbridge Host Hotel, that could be areas to enhance accessibility and amenities to provide additional natural areas for recreation as a complement to the built environment.

### *Hotels and Accomodations*

None of the Williamstown team conducted an overnight visit but most stopped in to check out some of the local hotels, notably the Publick House which most team members found to be a positive community asset. One team member noted that it seemed the Publik House and Sturbridge Host had a robust wedding business, a likely positive contribution to the tourism sector. The group further noted that there seemed to be a range of lodging options available but the majority of these are chains and budget options. It was observed by one team member that an additional boutique hotel would be a positive new development to broaden the range of lodging alternatives.

## **II. Areas for Improvement / Development**

The team centered on several areas for improvement and continued tourism growth. Several discussed the possibility of the Fiskdale section of town being

developed and promoted as an antiques corridor, especially if combined with increased walkability. The Town Common area would also likely benefit from increases in pedestrian infrastructure and additional businesses, if this could be accomplished while maintaining the neighborhood's historic character. Another major area for development and improvement of the tourism sector is an increased focus on beautification of waterfront areas. Most team members were surprised by how much water there is in the community but it can be hidden behind typical suburban type developments. There was agreement that this is an underutilized resource. Finally, one team member who ventured eastward to view the corridor into town from Charlton was amazed at the sheer volume of vehicles and visitors at the Treehouse Brewery just outside of town. Exploring ways to get these visitors to stop and eat or shop in Sturbridge on their way to I-90 and I-84 could potentially be a path for continued visitor growth in Sturbridge.

While these possibilities for additional tourism sector growth noted by the team should be closely looked, the overarching observation by all team members was that the driving force for tourism in Sturbridge remains Old Sturbridge Village. All team members enjoyed the museum and found that folks attending seemed engaged and enjoying their experience, but that the Village shows signs of its seemingly heavy traffic. A take away for many team members was that the Village and the Town should work together to continue to improve the experience within the Village and the town for the many visitors looking to experience a slice of the past that visit every year.



## Housing, Business, & Services

The Williamstown team observed that the housing stock within the community seemed older, mostly post-war, but quite well cared for. However it seemed to lack diversity in type and is primarily single family in nature. The business community as noted in previous sections was observed to be oriented towards a handful of local services and hospitality uses. Most team members were unable to determine what the town's major employer would be. Most agreed that there seemed to be an acceptable balance of businesses and services to meet community members needs.

In regards to development, potential team members noted that the community could possibly attract significant new business related to transportation as a manner of taking advantage of its location at the crossroads of I-84 & I-90.

## Summary

In summary, there were a handful of major themes found by all team members as follows;

- Strengths:
  - Old Sturbridge Village is a strong existing tourist attraction
  - Strategic location on major highways
  - Good local accommodations are available along with venue facilities
  - The Town also has good access to natural areas
- Constraints:
  - Dominant suburban development pattern
  - Limited walkable neighborhoods and downtown areas
  - Interstates create barriers
  - Some attractions need investment
- Areas to focus on:
  - Strengthening existing venues
  - Drawing more people who pass through the community
  - Creating walkability in existing business districts
  - Improve coordination amongst existing businesses