



# LARUE COUNTY FIRST IMPRESSIONS

OCTOBER 2022

Conducted by

Community & Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky





# First Impressions Program

## Purpose

The First Impressions Program is a service offered through the Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK). This program coordinates anonymous visits to your community by professionals in community and economic development, small business owners, community leaders and more, depending upon your specific community assessment needs.

Analysis includes detailed feedback from internet search engines, social media platforms, and in-person experiences. Visitors document their experience and interactions with community members. These responses are then compiled and presented back to the community by a CEDIK representative.

The analysis will identify strengths within the community as well as opportunities for future development. In addition, the program will offer suggestions and resources to address the areas identified for potential improvement.

For additional information about the First Impressions program or process in LaRue County, please contact Melissa Bond, Extension Specialist at [Melissa.bond@uky.edu](mailto:Melissa.bond@uky.edu).

*While quotations in this report are not exhaustive, they do provide a valuable snapshot of a visitor's perspective in LaRue County from a variety of ages, life experiences, and interests.*

## Team Members

Visits to LaRue County were conducted by 8 team members throughout the Summer and Fall of 2022. Visits were conducted on both weekdays and weekends to capture a variety of activity within the community. Ages ranged from 25 to 65 years, with a mix of young professionals, seasoned working professionals, community development professionals, and retirees. Assessors are from both rural and urban areas. Assessments were completed at an individual pace, allowing personal life experiences to shape participants' impressions. While quotations in this report are not exhaustive, they do provide a valuable snapshot of a visitor's perspective in LaRue County from a variety of ages, life experiences, and interests. Overall, conditions were favorable for visiting and exploring the roads, small communities, parks, and businesses in LaRue County.

## Process

Assessors researched the community on the internet: visited official and non-official sites from search engines, restaurant and hotel reviews, and social media platforms. After completing this "Pre-Visit" phase, your team visited LaRue County in person to conduct detailed exploration and documentation of their experiences. After several hours exploring, assessors document their Lasting Impressions on assets, challenges, and opportunities, and make recommendations for future efforts in LaRue County.

# Community Analysis

## Community Entrances

We entered from I-65 South to 61, and experienced a quaint little town that was very clean. The roads heading into Hodgenville were in excellent shape. My first impression was this town has many banks and many churches!

The business and residential buildings were all in good condition. We passed a lot of pretty farmland and the 2 lanes going in and out made a nice greeting to the community.

As we approached the downtown square, the signs were well marked. The center area with the bicycles and Lincoln was a really cute focal point.

I was surprised at how many pedestrians were out in downtown. This is a very neat and clean community. Hodgenville signs were frequent and easy to see.

Heading to Magnolia, we saw the Hodgenville sign. Some landscaping would really help it stand out. Navigational signage could also be updated. It was well-marked, but aged.

We took Highway 210 into Main Street. We drove the speed limit but many cars either tailgated us or passed illegally/dangerously. This made us uncomfortable to make too many stops on the way in.

As we crossed into the county we saw the typical green county sign. There were dense trees, but not much else. Once we neared Hodgenville there was signage for local attractions related to Lincoln.

There was a good amount of downtown buildings, but not great signage. The bypass that took us to the Lincoln National park seemed like it was still developing, though the road felt newer.

Exiting the community on Bardstown Road, the Welcome to Hodgenville sign could use a pressure wash.

Heading toward Mt. Sherman, the roads got a little more hilly. They could do with a Welcome to LaRue County sign on the Green County/LaRue County border.

We saw a lot of construction and development during our first pass around the county, as if they are preparing for more people to move into LaRue.

The graphic design of some of the logos/businesses was cohesive and modern. Gives the whole town a fresh feeling and seems like there's new energy coming to town.

Downtown's architecture was overall well preserved and gave a real sense of place. I liked feeling like I was back in time.

Most of the storefronts and windows were full and had a display. It made town feel lively.

Even in the rural parts of the county, we didn't notice any litter.

*"This is a very neat and clean community. Even in the rural parts of the county, we didn't notice any litter."*

### Livability

I saw manicured lawns, stately to modest homes, and well maintained roads. Overall the private properties were very well kept and there was a lot of beautiful farm land.

I saw some new construction of subdivisions and duplexes. It seemed like the area was growing.

We noticed housing options within walking distance to downtown that were appealing.

We passed several subdivisions heading toward Buffalo on 62 Greensburg road. There seemed to be good housing options.

We drove through neighborhoods outside of the downtown core. There was a mix of housing types. We also noticed homes on large parcels of land coming into the county with a mix of incomes. We did not see any homes for sale or notice rental properties.

Once you are out touring the county, it feels like there's a wide variety of housing options. Not a lot for sale, though.

The Elementary schools looked new and the middle/high school was in good condition. I saw a preschool and daycare that looked inviting. The elementary schools looked new, and the middle and high schools looked to be in good condition.

I didn't see any awards or distinctions noted on the building announcement signs or banners to know the quality of education.

We couldn't find any print information in the community to tell us about the quality of schools in the area. That might be useful to a family considering relocation.

We saw two elementary schools, the middle, and high school. They all looked newer and in great condition. I would feel good about sending my kids to these schools.

We saw both a preschool and a daycare in Mt. Sherman. There were nice houses in that community, but didn't see any for sale.

The nursing home looked new or updated. It seemed nice from the outside. We also saw Busy Bees daycare and another one, but it seemed like there needed to be more childcare options than just two.

The assisted living/senior center seemed new and easy to get access. I did not see a hospital or urgent care on my visit. I looked online and saw a hospital in Elizabethtown which seems very close, but was surprised there was not an urgent care in Hodgenville.

Other than a dentist and optometrist, I didn't notice any other healthcare services. This is a gap in services for the community if they are looking to attract new residents.

This county has something for everyone: cute downtown, rural farmland and "out in the country" housing.

*"I would feel good about sending my kids to these schools."*



## COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

### Tourism

There were signs for city hall and chamber of commerce. No signs for a visitors center until you visit chamber of commerce and see a sign on the window. Unfortunately they are closed Saturday, Sunday, and Monday so we did not talk to anyone.

There were plenty of the brown tourism signs that were clear and well marked. You can tell from online presence that maintaining Lincoln attractions is important to the community.

While driving around downtown, we were unable to identify visitor amenities from the car. We realized you'd need to get out and walk or go very slowly to spot them. The Lincoln National park had a great visitor's center, though.

There were lots of signs for the Lincoln attractions. It all seemed clearly marked. We also saw a cycling route on US 76.

The chamber was closed but we did see brochures through the window. There were not brochures outside, but that would have been helpful—it would have given us more to check out during their off hours.

We saw City Hall and other municipal buildings. May be time for an official design/branding update to match the energy happening in town.

The visitors center at the Lincoln National Park was very nice. It was well stocked with brochures of the region and the attendants were helpful, friendly and informative.

We visited on a Sunday so almost everything was closed. If they are hoping to increase tourism or draw tourists from the park to downtown, there needs to be more things open on a weekend.

It is clear they are most well known for Abraham Lincoln's birthplace. It seems to be an asset to have a built-in tourism identity in the community. There are several parks and museums that capitalize on that identity.

Other than Lincoln Days and a First Friday I did not see signs for any other gathering events in the community.

We really enjoyed the national park birthplace! So well maintained, gorgeous grounds, and lovely, peaceful shade.

There were several parks and walking trails that were well marked. I felt like they had more tourism to offer than the average Kentucky county. We also saw the golf course, pay lake, and orchard.

Their outdoor and natural landscape is such an asset. It's pretty just driving around exploring!

The Lincoln Museum was very impressive and the staff were helpful in giving us suggestions on how to spend our day in Hodgenville. The marketing as a whole here is impressive.

*"If they are hoping to increase tourism or draw tourists from the park to downtown, there needs to be more things open on a weekend."*



### Infrastructure

The streets were all in good shape throughout town. The sidewalks were clean with marked crosswalks.

A better crosswalk was needed with lights. It was tricky to cross street with cars going in the roundabout. We did not see parking garages, but there was a reasonable amount of street parking.

There was not a lot of parking in the immediate city center, but there was a large lot on the hill behind the Sweet Shoppe that had many spaces available. We found it an easy walk to the city square.

We visited during Lincoln Days, so downtown was very difficult to navigate and it was tricky to find parking. There was not signage about where would have been acceptable to park. It very much felt like only locals knew--and visitors were not as welcome.

The downtown buildings were in good condition and stores seemed well marked. It was nice to hear music while walking the town. Everything looked inviting.

We loved the roundabout entry downtown. Very pretty and inviting. This is an attractive town with well-maintained buildings. The Landing was a great pocket park, loved the benches and tables.

The landscaping was appealing. Having one business open for drinks and lunch while touring would be nice.

There weren't sidewalks along every street so it was not easy to navigate with a stroller. Some areas the sidewalk skipped sides.

We parked in a public lot at the top of the hill. It was an easy walk down to the city square. The square with a statue of Lincoln and bicycles was nicely decorated and looked welcoming!

Crosswalks with lights for pedestrians would be helpful and safer. We had no trouble with parking but it was crowded on the Saturday night we visited.

The landscaping was pretty good in the areas we visited. The fall decorations were attractive to see. It was pretty easy to find your way around town. The roundabout was well marked.

Some of the street signs were small and challenging to read. A larger size would be nice.

The benches and resting areas were well spaced throughout town and appeared to be in good condition. There wasn't any shade at all downtown though.

I saw the police station and fire station—they seemed well marked and easy to access. The library looked new or updated.

I didn't see a lot of vacancies in town. You can tell they have been working hard to attract businesses to the city center.

We saw the industrial park close to the county entryway, and lots of farmland leading into Hodgenville. Seemed like an ag county.

*"You can tell they have been working hard to attract businesses to the city center."*



## Lodging, Restaurants, & Retail

I looked up the Lincoln Lodge after our visit and it had good reviews on Google. It was difficult to tell how to book though, because their Facebook page said they were closed on Sundays.

We did not see any lodging options during our visit. We stayed at a hotel in Elizabethtown about 15 minutes away. It was a nice, clean hotel that met our needs.

We saw a few airbnbs online but they were too small for our party. There was one motel in the county but it didn't have a website so we didn't realize it was a motel option until after we had booked elsewhere. We thought it was only for RV's.

We ate at Little Mexico. The food was excellent, the staff was friendly, and the service was great. It was clean, neat, and had outdoor seating.

We ate at the Red Castle, a tiny burger joint tucked in a corner downtown. There were about 10 stools but it was busy with takeout too. It felt like stepping back in time to a diner. We had good burgers and hearing the locals catch up on town gossip was entertaining.

We ate at Hometown Pizza and really enjoyed our meal! Arrowhead BBQ also smelled great but we had already eaten.

The Sweet Shoppe was hopping on a Saturday night! It was busy and inviting. All the customers outside was a good advertisement for their ice cream. Surely if the other shops on the square stayed open on Saturdays in the summer they would attract customers from the ice cream shop?

The restaurants that were open were very busy. It seems like there's a market for a nice "date night" restaurant.

We saw several local and national chain type restaurants. The places we visited had good prices and services. It seems like there's a variety of options for all types of customers.

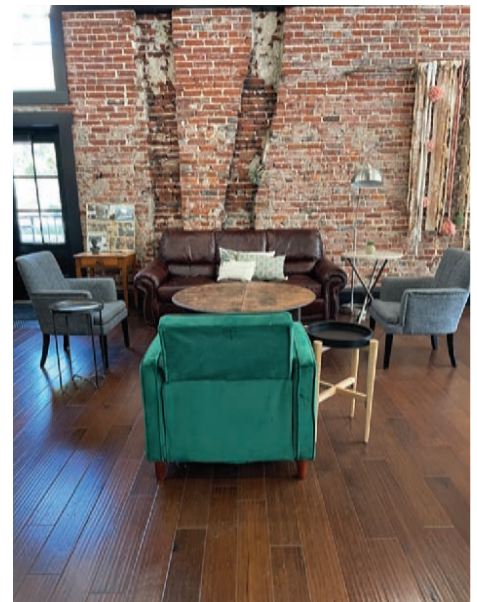
There were limited choices considering we were there on a Saturday night. The local BBQ restaurant must have been busy because they had run out of food. We would have liked to try some of the other options downtown but they weren't open.

We saw normal fast food restaurants, and there was a Honky Tonk style restaurant on the way to the Lincoln historic site. We didn't stop because it didn't appear open.

We LOVED the Vibe coffee shop. It was delicious, well priced, and a lovely space. I would meet my friends there after work or school or host an event there. The staff was friendly and they had a good menu. I would recommend this spot to others.

We weren't able to visit businesses due to the festival downtown, but there seemed to be a good amount of downtown buildings. The signage could improve to know what we were seeing.

*"We LOVED the Vibe coffee shop. It was delicious, well priced, and a lovely space...I would recommend this spot to others."*





## COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

We stopped to ask where to eat and the people were very helpful and nice. However, the shops were not open on the weekend when we visited.

The storefronts were attractive from the outside. Traffic was busy but it was nice to walk around even though the shops were not open. I wish we could have checked out the inside of the shops. Seems like a M-F 9-5 kind of town.

So many of the businesses were closed. We were surprised because it was Saturday afternoon and we thought they would be open to catch those who work during the week.

We didn't see much of a shop local campaign like 'Shop Local LaRue'. This could be a good opportunity!

We visited Beloved Bee. It was so cute and smelled SO GOOD. We bought presents there for family and ourselves. The owner was really kind and gave good recommendations for things to do nearby.

Honest Abe's and the burger place both looked like a lot of fun! The restaurant smelled so good and everyone recommended it to us as we were exploring downtown.

### Arts & Culture

Other than Lincoln-specific statues, I didn't notice much public art in the community. There's a real opportunity for more!

I saw signs for the Lincoln museum and the national park. The signage around Lincoln attractions was very clear and visible.

We saw signs for the Country Jamboree, so the culture in this community must be around bluegrass and country music.

I didn't really see much arts and culture. I didn't notice a lot of murals. I did see one on the way into town of Abraham Lincoln that was brightly colored, but there could be more.

Some of the old buildings had historical explanations alongside them, but I wanted to know more about the Womens club stone building. It really stood out in town.

We saw an arts store and gallery downtown, but it did not have any hours posted. We were there on a weekday and it was closed.

I really liked that there were loudspeakers in downtown that played music. It felt like stepping back in time and gave the whole downtown a cheerful atmosphere.

We saw the Lincoln mural on a cinderblock building traveling on Lincoln Parkway headed to downtown. It was really brightly colored and eye catching! It gave some vibrancy to town. We didn't see any other public art on our visit, though we did see barn quilt squares.

There was a festival happening downtown. We saw a parade and local bluegrass band. Abraham Lincoln is their entire identity.

*"We saw the Lincoln mural on a cinderblock building traveling on Lincoln Parkway headed to downtown. it was really brightly colored and eye catching! It gave some vibrancy to town."*



## COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

### Lasting Impressions: Positives

The people were all very friendly everywhere we went. It was a very welcoming community. They seemed used to having visitors and treated us kindly.

It was very peaceful and quiet. There are several things to do, places to eat, and shop. I was surprised how many restaurants and retail shops there were. I didn't expect to have so many options based on the web research I did before visiting. There is enough to fill a day.

The housing infrastructure seems very reasonably priced. This would be an attractive community for someone moving from a pricier city.

There was a nostalgic hometown feel in this community. The town was clean and well-maintained. We visited all the Lincoln attractions and will return with our grandchildren. We think this is an excellent place to learn about our history. It is worth a second visit.

The National Park had a really nice little trail and the memorial was impressive. I am sad to say I didn't even realize this was a national park until I did this trip. I will be telling others about this gem!

I will remember the Lincoln birthplace and friendliness toward visitors. I will recommend visiting this community to friends.

### Lasting Impressions: Challenges

The lack of urgent care would make it difficult in the event of an emergency that doesn't require a hospital.

There were no hotels in the county. Our stay in Elizabethtown was nice and accessible but I imagine the community would prefer to capitalize on transient tax if it could.

We didn't notice larger employers—it made us wonder if most residents commute to nearby cities.

### Visitor Recommendations

It would be so cute to have some interactive Abe Lincoln hats painted on buildings that people could take pictures with!

We were excited about several of the "coming soon" businesses we saw: the 16th, the Casual boutique, and others. It seems like there is some momentum and the sneak peek storefronts built some excitement. Keep this up!

The cultural identity for the community is Abraham Lincoln. This is cool and a great asset to capitalize on but--what else could they be? There's so much opportunity for more culture in this town. Its got a great jump start compared to many other small towns.

Businesses open on the weekends would be nice—even just one extra day. It was challenging for us to find places to spend time after visiting the national park as many spots downtown were closed.

LARUE COUNTY FIRST IMPRESSIONS 10/2022

*"We were excited about several of the "coming soon" businesses we saw... there is some momentum and the sneak peek storefronts built some excitement."*



# Final Recommendations

Based on the feedback compiled from visits to LaRue County, the following suggestions are recommended for future opportunities:

## 1. Audit existing websites and update information.

Overall, the web presence does not convey all that LaRue County has to offer. Top sites on the search engine had broken or outdated links, and several reviewers commented that the web presence did not entice them to want to visit the community. However, once they spent time in LaRue County they were surprised at all the activities available. Audit existing websites for content and design, and repair broken or outdated links. Additionally, not all amenities were listed on review websites. Encourage a “Review Local” campaign and train businesses on how to list their business online to begin receiving and increasing online reviews.

## 2. Encourage businesses to diversify open hours.

While downtown Hodgenville has a high occupancy rate and attractive storefronts, it gave the impression of a 9-5 town. Encourage more shops to consider weekend and evening hours to give visitors more to do than window shop and wish they could spend in the community. The city, county, chamber, economic development and tourism should work together to assess business owners’ needs and identify a clear marketing and promotion campaign to generate customers to make it worthwhile for business owners to expand their open days and/or hours. For businesses that do have set hours, ensure their times are clearly marked so customers know what to expect and can generate shopping habits based on availability.

## 3. Establish a clear arts and culture identity in addition to your Abraham Lincoln history.

Having Abraham Lincoln’s birthplace in the county gives a unique advantage for tourism and community identity, but some visitors felt there was still opportunity to grow beyond that historical past. The Lincoln tie-ins in most businesses were tasteful and pleasant, but other than Lincoln-specific arts, culture, or museums, there was no other public art identifying the personality of the community. Celebrate the past while also looking toward the future. Every visitor who comes to LaRue County will remember Lincoln when they leave. What else do you want them to remember about your community? What identity, values, and visual culture do you want to express in addition to your most famous citizen?



# LaRue County First Impressions Web Analysis

## <https://www.laruecounty.org>

The page feels very official. The majority of the content targets residents, not visitors. There is quite a bit of content, but the design could be refreshed as it is difficult to navigate. The header link titles are a small size, and the page takes up half a computer screen, seeming very small to the viewer. I had to scroll almost a full page to see any background, history, or narrative about LaRue County.

The menus were a bit confusing with some on the left and some on the top. Many of the links were broken, including the "view video", "just for kids", "calendar of events", and the Kentucky Lincoln Heritage Trail link. There were some spelling errors and web errors.

This site seems for locals and is not a tool to excite a potential visitor to come explore LaRue County. It is not accessible for viewers with sight issues as the fonts are small, and the website is text heavy.

The content is good: the text about the county, the schools, Lincoln, and the welcome message from the Judge Exec are all nice touches. But the site itself is dated and that deters me. It seems like they've gathered a lot of information to share information about the county, they just need a new web design to modernize it.

## <https://laruecountychamber.org/>

This looked newer and fresh while still Lincoln branded. They seem pretty active. The first thing that popped up were awards given to local businesses. If I were considering relocating here and wanted to open a small business, this would be encouraging.

I liked the "succeed here" and "live here" tabs across the top.

## <https://cityofhodgenvilleky.com/>

The video of aerial footage of downtown on the main page was a nice touch! it felt modern. They had a city alert app, an area to ask questions, and links to the facebook page. It was very much a "local" user website with practical information, forms, applications, etc. but it conveyed the material in an organized way. Unfortunately, this page does not come up when you search "LaRue County"--only "Hodgenville" specifically. They should consider their keywords to include LaRue and relevant terms to bring it higher on the search list. (the county jail site was one of the main hits; this site should definitely come up earlier than that!)

All of these sites should work together to create a page that focuses on a visitor experience. Create a half day, full day, and weekend itinerary for folks of all demographics to get them interested in visiting. I couldn't get a sense of the local flavor or what I would do if I visited. Convey community pride and fun!



# LaRue County First Impressions Web Analysis

## Review Sites

More locations need to be listed on these sites! For “Things to Do”, the only thing listed was the national park. On Yelp, when I search dinner options I am taken to Bardstown or Elizabethtown-not anywhere in LaRue County. This really hurts the community.

Google review results delivered the Lincoln Birthplace, Boyhood Home, Lincoln Jamboree, Sweet Shoppe, Laha’s Red Castle and Arrowhead. I was intrigued by Salem Lake, Pearman Forest and McDougal but didn’t see information about those on the websites. Are there outdoor adventures I can participate in, like boat rental or fishing at these lakes?

I looked at Tripadvisor. That info was more useful on local attractions and restaurants. I wanted to try the restaurants, but they were closed on our weekend visit. I was surprised they were closed on Saturday evening. There were beautiful pictures with positive reviews for activities like the park, but not choices for lodging in Hodgenville. Those results pointed toward Elizabethtown.

Have businesses in the area make and claim Yelp pages and encourage customers to do a review campaign for those businesses. This is the cheapest way to support businesses locally.

## Social Media

There is so much untapped potential here. I searched several reasonable hashtags on media platforms and did not find much. Tourism or the chamber could really get some momentum having a social media page or two. I didn’t see anything bad on those hashtags, but I didn’t see anything that was fun, creative, engaging, or conveys an active place where I would want to plan a visit.

The facebook page was up to date and even kind of funny! Whoever is in charge of that page is on it. It conveyed the presence I was hoping to find. On instagram, #laruecounty had a LOT of senior school photos and pics of the town decorated for Christmas. It looked like a sweet Hallmark movie. They just need more content. The library facebook page was active and had posts about upcoming events. This was a good source of information.

## Final Impressions

Overall, I didn’t get a sense of community pride or creativity from the web presence. Tourists seek out places that locals love. Nothing I saw online conveyed that.

Are there recreation experiences nearby? Biking trails? Hiking trails? Lincoln history is great, but what is fresh, new and interesting? What will attract a variety of audiences? I didn’t find many pictures of people having fun in the community. Update everything to showcase what people love about LaRue County!