

First Impressions

Compiled Team Report



Community Visited: **Erie, KS**

Date Visited: 10/18/24 (Friday); 10/31/24 (Thursday); 11/8/24 (Friday)

1. Pre-visit web search: How easy was it to get information on the community you were visiting? Did it accurately reflect what you saw? Did you have difficulties obtaining information on the community through a web search?

- a) It was very easy to get information on Erie from a web search and I feel like the information obtained accurately reflected what I saw in the community. The county government page was accessible, the Chamber Facebook page was active and there was state tourism page that came up easily and linked to a local Erie tourism page – both were helpful in finding information about the town. I will say that web site information did favor a historical perspective of Erie – from the “Old Sailors” celebration through the dinosaur park – this is charming but perhaps could put off people looking for a community with modern facilities or attractions. It may be worth having a conversation about painting a picture of both “old town charm” and everything you need to live comfortably – day care, housing, medical services, new school facilities, police/fire, etc.
- b) ErieKS.com is the city website, it was easy to navigate. The design is dated. [TravelKS](http://TravelKS.com) [<https://www.travelks.com/places-to-visit/cities/erie/>](https://www.travelks.com/places-to-visit/cities/erie/) seems like accurate information. The Facebook page is nice and very active.
Erie, Kansas. Tourism: Not all material seems updated. No community events listed.
- c) City of Erie page came up first on google search which is good. There was a good list of activities, clubs, churches, etc. But some links were outdated, for instance, the last council notes were from 2022 and the last schedule for Old Soldiers and Sailors was also 2022. The Chamber Facebook page seems to be well maintained and kept up to date.

2. The “Five-Minute” Impression: After taking a five-minute drive through the community without stopping, the following reactions were noted.

- a) Erie presented as a lovely community covering a sizeable area with several notable features including a lovely downtown, lots of different housing categories, multiple government facilities, churches and nice schools. Overall, the community felt like it was sleepy but populated and seemed to care about itself. There is a nice sign about Erie on Highway 59, but I entered over the bridge using the detour and there was not really any signage to indicate the community. As noted above, the downtown was well marked once you entered it with great streetlights and banners, but I do not recall any wayfinding signs leading me to the lovely downtown.

- b) Clean, seems like a proud town, not much for shopping or dining. Lots of activity on Main. There were nice planters. From 59, there is nothing coming from the north except Pete's. There is a nice sign about midway and then a big welcome coming from the south. Nothing directs us to downtown.
- c) My first impression is that there is a lot more to the community than most will ever note by driving by on the outskirts of the highway. It looks like a nice small town, clean and safe.

3. Downtown Business Area Describe the buildings, signs, infrastructure, etc. Explain what type of businesses you observed and give a description of the variety and quality of merchandise displayed. Describe the customer service received when you entered those retail businesses. (Were you greeted? Did you have to ask for assistance?)

- a) Erie has a charming, clean downtown that features nice sidewalks and beautiful, historic-looking streetlamps with welcome banners featuring local businesses. Downtown also had beautiful large planters that were kept up and multiple benches. The downtown had several facilities, including a library, church, County Courthouse, City Hall, banks, insurance agencies, and a museum, among others. I visited on a Friday with good weather when schools were not in session and saw kids riding their bikes around town, people walking into the county courthouse, and a few people congregating. There was a homeless man sleeping on a bench by the bank, but we walked by him without incident. I visited a flower/gift shop and a hardware/flea market. There was lots of variety in the hardware/flea market, but it was fairly low quality and messy but that's typical of a flea market. The gift shop was nice enough – you could find something if you needed a gift. Downtown had several social service organization storefronts, at least one dining establishment, multiple bank and insurance offices and a liquor store. The restaurant was upkept but could be more welcoming with a menu posted outside. There was a "sidewalk café and "club tropics" which appeared dilapidated/closed but was not clearly marked as this. The board of education, insurance agencies, meat locker, and law office were clearly marked. The body shop was active. I was greeted at both shops I visited. The flower/gift shop had a fairly aggressive dachshund who barked for multiple minutes before the shop person greeted me. She seemed surprised that shoppers were there, but she was likely working on flowers in the back and there were not any other shoppers walking around downtown. The flea market lady was kind of hidden at the counter behind a lot of stuff but said hello and asked if we needed help. Both ladies were conversational as I purchased items and friendly.
- b) Some buildings were well-maintained, sidewalks were clean. I saw a store owner sweeping. Possible homeless man sitting on Main Street with head covered, then sleeping. There was something like a thrift store with new items included. It had lots of items and variety. Very musty. The door was open. I was not greeted, they did not realize I entered, probably because the door was open. Several banks and other professional offices.

- c) It is an older downtown but well kept. The streetscape was nice, and the banners looked good. Most of the buildings appeared to be kept up and occupied. Not a lot of retail available. Most businesses were service – banks, insurance, farm bureau, law office, board of education, city hall, courthouse. I noticed one retail discount store and several restaurants which weren't open yet when I was in town. I also noticed the funeral home downtown. I noticed the car wash downtown looked to be much more functional than the old one located on the highway. I didn't visit any retail spaces downtown.

What public amenities (drinking fountains, benches, public restrooms, trash receptacles and wi-fi, etc.) were available? Comment on landscaping and streetscaping. Did you have difficulty finding parking? Could you access multiple services from where you parked?

- a) There were lots of nice benches around downtown as well as trash receptacles. Parking was easy. The sidewalks and crosswalks were nice. There was a nice carwash near downtown. The city and county government facilities were nice, and the extension office was well-marked and looked nice. The museum was well-marked and welcoming. I parked near the county courthouse and visited, walked to the city hall, visited the veterans' memorial space, walked around banks and office spaces, the restaurant and the two shops I visited. The streetscaping was very nice, and lighting appeared plentiful after dark.
- b) There were no fountains, several benches, no restrooms, lots of trash cans, and pretty planters. Easy parking with handicap accessibility. Sidewalks with Braille. Seems inviting. It's fall. Buildings were not in horrible shape.
- c) I noticed trash cans. Not a lot of other public amenities, however the courthouse and city are all downtown and available for public restrooms as noted. Parking was very accessible. Lots of easy street parking. Downtown was comfortable and welcoming.

4. Other Retail Shopping Areas

Describe other retail shopping areas. Were the areas attractive and easy to access?

- a) I ventured over to visit the Dollar General as well – this area is particularly easy to access because it is near US Hwy 59. I have been to the service station on the highway and visited the grocery store before it closed. This area feels more commercial than the downtown, but it was clean and easily identified and accessible. There was also a larger thrift store which was closed and a barber shop in this area.
- b) Dollar General and easy to get to. The grocery store was closed but there were lots of cars. At Pete's, they were just there to do their job, nothing more.
- c) The main retail seems to be by the grocery store and Dollar General, also in close proximity to Pete's. The areas seemed clean and offered plenty of parking. Dollar General employees were very welcoming. The USDA Service Center and barber shop were also located in this area.

5. Industrial Parks/Commercial Areas

Is there a defined area where manufacturing industries could easily locate/expand? If so, describe.

- a) Yes – there is a rail area and multiple ag production areas. An industrial area seems to be notable near the high school and there appears to be room to expand if land is converted.
- b) Not that I could find.
- c) I don't know if there is an area for expansion, but I did notice most of the commercial/manufacturing areas were located on the east side of town, a decent distance from downtown/highway corridor. I noticed the A-Lert facility as well as a large Beachner Grain facility.

6. Health Care Services

Comment on the availability and apparent quality of hospitals and emergency medical services.

- a) Yes – for a community this size, there were multiple well-marked and accessible health clinics. Labette Health near downtown, a pharmacy near downtown, and a Neosho County medical center. The law enforcement center was very large and modern.
- b) Ashley Clinic and Pharmacy seemed easy to access.
- c) There is no hospital, but I did see two different clinics – one run by Neosho Memorial Hospital and one by Labette Health. I also found the EMS services located out by the Jail, operated by Neosho Memorial.

Comment on the availability and condition of facilities for physicians, dentists, optometrists, public health, and other healthcare providers.

- a) The medical clinics and pharmacy appeared in either newer or serviceable condition. I did not notice optometrists or dentists.
- b) It felt adequate.
- c) The facilities seemed well kept. I didn't see a dentist or eye doctor.

What long-term care services, assisted living or nursing facilities exist in the community?

- a. I noticed well-marked senior housing areas and a senior center. There was also a large long-term care facility near the high school that looked well-maintained.
- b. I found a guest home estate. It seemed nice.
- c. The Guest Home Estates located by the high school seemed large and nice. I didn't go in, but it seemed like a good facility for the size of town.

7. Housing

Give a brief description of the existing mix of housing stock. Does the local market have housing that would appeal to all income wages? What challenges do you see in regard to finding acceptable housing? (Neighborhoods, size, properties for sale, etc.)

- a) I think Erie presented a good mix of housing options – the homes downtown were well maintained, there were older but nice single-family neighborhoods and large trees surrounding downtown. There were low resource apartment buildings and senior housing that were well marked and maintained. There were a few large, high income homes/estates within city limits as well. I did not notice many properties for sale, and this may be a challenge as with all small towns. There were many new homes near the new high school for those looking for newer construction.
- b) It seems like a good mix. Not sure about availability though.
- c) I would say the housing was very average for rural towns in southeast Kansas. I noted all the houses on main street were mostly kept well, which was nice. There seemed to be a variety of size/age houses in the community. The newer construction, more expensive houses all seem to be on the outskirts or out of the city limits. I didn't find any "new" neighborhoods - however, I did see a sign about land donated for a future development. I thought that was a great way to advertise an otherwise empty lot and show potential progress for the community. I searched for houses on realtor.com and there were a few options but not a lot of variety.

What kind of rental properties did you observe for people interested in building or simply living in the community prior to buying housing?

- a) There were apartments. I could not determine if a property was a rental, but the city office did give me a list of six landlords, so that felt promising for someone new to the community to have multiple resources to call and inquire about housing.
- b) I didn't notice anything. Received a small landlord list.
- c) I couldn't tell what was rental and what was not. I saw two different "housing authority" type apartment complexes. One toward the highway and one farther into town. Both looked like they were kept up ok, and occupancy rates seemed high.

8. Schools

What schools are present? (Head Start, Preschool, K-8, High School, Post-Secondary, etc.) Do the schools appear to be adequate in size? Are the buildings and grounds well-maintained?

- a) There was a great childcare center. The high school is very large and modern. The grade school was also large and older but still well maintained. Sports facilities were large as well.
- b) The elementary school was easy to find and was an older building, but ok. The high school was harder to find, but a nice, newer building.
- c) The high school on the edge of town seems newer. The grade school in town seems older, but definitely kept up well.

Were you able to find online information in the community that helped assess the quality of the educational system?

- a) Yes – the Erie public school web site was easily found and contains a lot of great information for new families and friendly photos. There is a lot of good information on that web site that is easy to access to an outsider. This is really a great school web site.
- b) I was able to find the information online.
- c) USD 101 website looks good and seems functional.

9. Childcare

What childcare services are available? Is it affordable?

- a) I do not know about affordability, but the childcare center looked welcoming and large. The city office reported that there were also in-home childcare providers but did not have a list.
- b) I saw a new childcare facility.
- c) The new facility located downtown. Not sure about rates.

10. Faith/Religion

Comment on the number of denominations and the physical appearance of the places of worship represented in the community. Did you observe any evidence of faith-based community services?

- a) Erie has a lot of well-maintained churches. You can tell that this town has active members in a variety of denominations and that these churches are integrated into the community. The Erie Federated Church appeared particularly large and active in the community.
- b) I saw several churches.
- c) I saw a variety of churches. The First Christian Church just off the highway was busy on a Friday morning, possibly a funeral. I saw several other churches that were well kept and looked like they were healthy. Also noticed some signs around town for churches.

11. Civic

Tell about the variety of nonprofit organizations and clubs within the community. Did you observe any evidence of civic organization activity?

- a) Multiple civic organizations were observed as having signage or storefronts downtown – Masonic lodge and American Legion were particularly well-marked.
- b) I asked at city hall, and they couldn't name many. What I did find was due to my online research. I saw the big bean town sign.
- c) The only information I have on groups came from the website. I inquired at city hall but didn't really get a lot of information. They mentioned the Mainstreet Memories group that does the Old Soldiers and Sailors reunion. I didn't see evidence of civic activity.

12. Public Infrastructure

Comment in general on the streets, street signage, sidewalks, parking, lighting, restrooms, landscaping, and streetscapes in areas other than downtown.

- a) Street signage was adequate, and many neighborhoods had sidewalks. I did not visit during dark, but there were adequate streetlights. I did not notice deliberate landscaping other than downtown, but single family homes were a mix of people who really kept up landscaping and fairly bare but clean yards.
- b) Signs were average. They didn't have one from the highway to the main street. I would have liked more wayfinding signs. For the most part there were nice yards and city streets were ok. I didn't see any public bathrooms.
- c) Most of the streets seemed normal for a rural southeast Kansas town. Fourth Street was obviously newly paved and possibly widened. At City Hall, they referred to it as the "new project." I did not see a lot of potholes; it seems like the streets are well maintained.

Comment on city/town hall (How were you received? Was there information about the town available?)

- a) The county courthouse had multiple employees and a line of people waiting to be served. The people appeared friendly. The city hall had 1-2 visible employees. I was received by a friendly enough woman – not overly friendly – but she answered my questions. She provided me with the landlord sheet which was posted and to the community billboard for other information like local business cards and service people. I was the only visitor to city hall during that time.
- b) Nice people. They had some information out front, but a town guide would be nice. They couldn't tell me a whole lot.
- c) The first impression was that the city hall worker was very busy and didn't want to take a lot of time to visit. However, once she warmed up, I got some information about civic groups, landlords in town, etc. We discussed how the town is pretty quiet on Fridays as school is out. From what I understand, they just started a four-day school week this school year.

Police/fire protection:

- a) The law enforcement center was large and clearly marked. The woman at the hardware/flea market mentioned that police protection was known as a great resource in Erie when I spoke to her about the homeless man I saw. I did not notice the fire facilities.
- b) Saw the Fire Department and county jail; saw the police driving around.
- c) I noticed an officer patrolling as I drove through town. I saw the fire station out by the high school which looked nice. The Neosho County Law Enforcement agency looks new and modern. I didn't really see any signage though and think it could be difficult to find for someone coming into town.

Library:

- a) There was a well-marked library that looked welcoming.
- b) The library was a nice building.
- c) The library looked busy however I didn't actually see any signage. It looks like maybe they started to repaint the sign, but it wasn't done yet.

City parks (walking tracks, ballparks, playgrounds, sports complex)

- a) The swimming pool is older, but nice. The recreation center was clearly marked, and the city ballfields were adequate. The Dinosaur Park and playground park were both charming.
- b) A nice ballpark and city park. It could use more equipment.
- c) The ballparks located east of town looked like they were well kept but nothing fancy. An upgrade of those facilities might be nice, as I would imagine out-of-town folks coming for recreational ball during the summer. Dinosaur Park is a very unique feature of Erie. It was locked up and open by appointment during winter hours. I noticed one small directional sign toward the park on Fourth Street, but I would encourage larger signage for visitors.

13. Recreation/Tourism

Is the community well-known for any particular attraction or event? Do they have a community slogan that capitalizes on that asset?

- a) The "Old Sailors and Settlers" event is promoted in a few places, and the town seems to be proud that it is the "oldest" celebration of its kind. The dinosaur park is also promoted and well-maintained.
- b) Old Soldiers and Sailors, there is a big sign about it. Their nickname is Beantown.
- c) The entrance sign mentioned old sailors and soldiers reunion. I asked about that at City Hall, and it was explained as their city festival held in July and includes a rodeo.

Did you see any indication of significant events taking place in the community that would be of interest to both visitors and residents?

- a) I did not notice any upcoming event promotions.
- b) Yes, the main town festival has potential to be a big draw.
- c) Not much happening on a Friday morning – however I noticed the super nice Erie Red Devis coach bus at the bus barn. It made me wonder if there was a football game that evening, etc.

Elaborate on any significant natural or built features that have the potential of drawing people to the community. (Public art, museums, lakes, campgrounds, regional heritage locations).

- a) The high school is large and modern – I could see regional events being successful there and drawing crowds. The dinosaur museum is charming and upkept but not a lot there to keep people a while. The history museum was well marked but I did not visit. It could be a draw if there were signage/facts outside leading people to learn more by going inside. This town clearly values its history. I did not notice public art other than window decorations.
- b) A museum was there, also a dino park, but it is closed, only by appointment.
- c) I noticed a museum downtown, but I think that the Dinosaur Park could be a significant draw to a select group of people – especially families with younger children. I think the golf course north of town is also a draw.

Is there an obvious visitor's center, chamber of commerce office, main street office, or other facility that serves the needs of visitors? Comment on the staff, facilities, signage, visibility, etc.

- a) I did not notice a visitor's center, just the city hall. The American Legion and Masonic Lodge appeared to be active, but they did not have any public events posted or welcoming information for new members.
- b) There is not a visitor's center.
- c) There is no office. Per city hall, there is an active chamber, which I also noticed on social media. It is not staffed – strictly volunteer.

Are there any restaurants, specialty shops or attractions that would bring you back to this community in the near future?

- a) The pizza restaurant was nice – I've eaten there before and would again. Neither of the shops (hardware/flea market or florist/gift shop) would bring me back again in the future – they were a nice community service but not a destination shop.
- b) No, there seemed to be only one restaurant open during the day. It is good, but I wouldn't call it destination dining.
- c) I didn't see any restaurants open on a Friday morning. I noticed the pizza place was scheduled to open at 11am. I also noticed a nice bar and grill at the corner of 4th that would be a fun place to visit in the evening. I also saw a bowling alley that is a unique feature for a town the size of Erie. I think that could be a draw for area communities.

14. Wrap-up

What are the most positive things you observed about the community?

- a) Erie really is a charming community that appears to have many of the services you need in a small town and a thriving church/civic membership community. The town was clean, and the downtown was maintained. You can tell that effort has been made to put a good face forward and to take care of what they have. There are a lot of housing options and school facilities and law enforcement are particularly strong.
- b) I found proud, friendly people. Main street is probably pretty in the spring and summer.
- c) I visited the cemetery east of town. It was well kept, which typically tells me a lot about community. If a town doesn't take care of their cemetery they tend to slack on many other things in the community. Kudos to Erie for the positive experience. Most of the town really seemed clean. Yards were picked up. Porches decorated for fall. The proximity to larger towns such as Parsons and Chanute are good for livability as a bedroom community. So many things are located downtown. I believe the courthouse, funeral home and Erie Locker are three key things that bring out of town people to the community. More retail options downtown may keep people there longer when visiting.

What are the biggest obstacles/challenges facing this community?

- a) The emphasis on history, both online and within town makes this sleepy town still seem a little "stuck in the past" instead of energized. To me, it felt like there is a solid group of people who care about this town, but that these people are probably all older (60+) and concerned with keeping things up, but also maintaining a focus on the past rather than trying new things or presenting art, activities or events for younger families. This is not entirely bad; it feels traditional and "homey" but that may make it hard to break into for an outsider who doesn't already have connections to the community.
The downtown is really nice and wayfinding signs from the highway and other main pathways through town would be nice. I thought I had been to Erie before traveling down Hwy 59 and visiting places near there, and I never would have ventured into the downtown without a reason to – signage promoting the downtown, holiday parades, events, etc. might add energy to this nice place.
- b) No signage to Main Street. Lack of housing. No draw from the highway. There is nothing to do once you venture off.
- c) Currently I would say that the bridge being out is a huge hinderance. I would imagine that typically, there is a lot of highway traffic, but the bridge out has slowed much of that. Otherwise, I imagine it is difficult to keep retail/restaurants open with proximity to other, larger towns.

What will you remember most about this community six months from now (positive or negative)?

- a) I will remember how much the town seemed built for families and the people seemed to care about children. I brought along my 10 year old daughter on this visit, and this instantly helped develop a relationship with everyone I met that day. The woman at Dollar General advised me that my cold medicine was in the bag my daughter was carrying and to be careful about that. The facilities seem to ensure there are places for local children to play sports and have recreation. The businesses did not mind children congregating on their bikes outside of their doors. It was a very family-friendly community.
- b) The homeless guy on Main Street and nowhere to eat or shop.
- c) There is so much more to Erie than what someone sees when they pass through on the highway. The farther you get into town, the more you come across. From downtown to the jail, school, etc., this community has many amenities for a small town. You can get groceries, get your hair cut, do your banking, and even visit your local doctor without leaving the community. I will also remember some businesses unique to a town the size of Erie such as the bowling alley and motel. I could have missed a cafe, but one thing I will remember is that it's not a town in which I would plan on getting breakfast except for Pete's on the highway. 😊

How much money did you spend while you were in the city you visited? \$85
(Please include total purchases: Gas, soft drinks, food, purchases. No detail necessary.)



First Impressions was developed by the University of Wisconsin-Extension and adapted for use by K-State Research and Extension. Restructuring was made possible through a partnership with the Dane G. Hansen Foundation. For more information, visit: <https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/community/civic-engagement/first-impressions/index.html>

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Revised 4-25-24