



FIRST IMPRESSIONS
***A Program for Community
Improvement***

For

Bluefield, W.Va.

Sponsored by the City of Bluefield - Board of Directors



Prepared by Alison Chisholm Hanham
West Virginia University Extension Service
Community Resource & Economic Development
Center for Agriculture, Natural Resource & Community Development

Introduction

How do others see our downtown? What are the downtown's good traits? Its negative traits? What can we do to improve and revitalize our downtown? These are some questions and issues that the city of Bluefield, W.Va., explored through a West Virginia University Extension Service program called First Impressions¹. This is a summary report of the First Impressions program carried out in Bluefield in January and February 2002.

Communities often attempt to improve themselves with very little outside evaluation. Often, this sort of approach overlooks real problems and opportunities. The purpose of the First Impressions Program is to help communities raise local awareness of community strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of a first-time visitor. The program provides a fresh, unbiased perspective that can help communities act on problem areas and build upon their strengths.

Visitors to downtown Bluefield included volunteers from the towns of Morgantown, Weston, and Waynesburg, Pennsylvania.

Perceptions Before Visiting

Before visiting the downtown area of Bluefield, several visitors said they expected to find a depressed economy. One visitor thought Bluefield would be an old, ghost town due to the decline in the coal industry and another was also expected to find a run-down downtown area with many empty buildings. Several visitors commented on the beauty of the surrounding area and had experienced some of the scenic spots near Bluefield as a child. One visitor had driven by Bluefield many times on Interstate 77 but never stopped to look at the town.

¹ First Impressions was developed by Andy Lewis, University of Wisconsin Extension resource agent, and James Schneider, Grant County (WI) economic development director. The West Virginia University Extension Service program was edited and revised by Alison Hanham, Community Resource Development.

"I expected Bluefield to be a much smaller town than what I found. I thought that Bluefield would be an old dying ghost town due to the decline in the coal industry but it was not."

"A student I met from Bluefield referred to the area as 'God's country' because the countryside is so beautiful. The scenery is gorgeous. I have often driven through the area on I-77 but never visited Bluefield. I knew Bluefield was in the southern coalfields. Although the surrounding area is beautiful, I was expecting a very run-down downtown with many vacant buildings. Like many other places, I was also expecting to find recent development on the outskirts of town."

"I've recorded memories of oral history from my father, who worked the mines for 32 years in Wyoming County. I worked the mines for 12 years in Wyoming County. As children, on the weekends, we would drive through the 'glory-land' and go to East River Mountain for a family-picnic. Or, we would go to the other areas like the parks. But, eventually we discovered the rivers. There was no longer a need for the rails, the smoke, the beaver hats or the continuous talk about 'strikes' that would take the rest of what wasn't there in the first place. As children we grew up thinking that people in places like Bluefield would take our house away, not give us food and deny us for even our faith lives. That is where the banks were. That is where the payments went that did not get put on the 'script-card' from the coal company - that had it's main offices in Bluefield."

"Expected it to be typical for the state (depressed downtown, for example) with a depressed economy."

After a quick drive through town, visitors were asked to form a five-minute impression of Bluefield. On the positive side, several visitors were pleasantly surprised. They found Bluefield to be much more thriving than expected with many viable businesses downtown and attractive residential areas.

"The houses going into the town were beautiful (with a few exceptions) and the town streets were clean with nice roads (no potholes). Traffic patterns were nice and the building's downtown are kept up and nice looking."

"The Bluefield area is much more thriving and prosperous than I would have expected. There are areas where houses and businesses are run-down but for the most part, my immediate impression was one of surprise. There are many large homes on the way to the downtown area. There are still many businesses operating downtown and there appears to be some industrial manufacturing activity in the area."

"Pleasantly surprised!"

"Nice entrance coming off the interstate, well-landscaped, minimal level of trash. Many nice residential areas."

On the negative side, several visitors expressed strong opinions about the speed of traffic through downtown and the lack of adequate signage to downtown.

"The street signs were very hard to read. "

"There are very small signs for each of the areas that are available. The 'Bluefield' sign is corrupted with signs that direct you to a place outside of the downtown area. We can produce examples from every direction into the Bluefield area."

"Traffic moves at a great speed. Not one person in a vehicle gave way for a pedestrian. Speed of traffic within the business district was fast... too fast for tourists. This was noted especially around the major downtown area. I would not want to walk in this area without extreme caution."

"Go fast or they will run you down. Where are they going? I don't know because I can't find a sign and for sure they are just passing through to get to another place. Entrance signs are terrible and there are no exit

signs. You are on your own and trying to dodge traffic."

Driving Through Town

Town entrances

Impressions of a community often begin at this point. Visitors had very mixed reactions to the entrances to Bluefield. Several visitors had very positive comments about the scenic entrances to town. Several visitors made the point that signs to the downtown area are easy to miss and need to be made more prominent. One visitor commented on a lack of 'welcome' to the city and thought this was an indication that the city might not be interested in bringing visitors downtown. Another remarked on the speed of traffic through town and thought tourists and the elderly would have problems navigating downtown because of the excessive speed of vehicles and lack of concern of the drivers.

"Route 52, 19 & 460 were all the same. They were nice roads with beautiful scenery around them, plenty of pull-off space, good direction signs in and out of the city. Route 120 & 694 had some trash along them & were narrow and in need of some minor repair."

"Entrances to Bluefield from Rt. 52 and 460 are very scenic. What a beautiful area."

"This was probably the worst part of the visit. On each entrance of our visit there was little consideration of a 'welcome-to' our city. Perhaps the city has no desire to bring people down into the downtown. Bluefield is one of the worst towns that I have ever seen, in terms of guiding cars into the area."

"Entrances to downtown are neglected. Why would people want to drive in a place where everyone is exceeding the speed limit, with no consideration for the tourist? Speed control downtown is out of control! Senior citizens would not have a chance with the speeding vehicles that go through all the

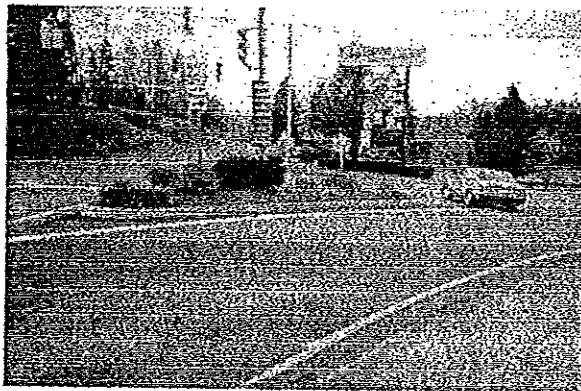
downtown areas."

"Route 19 (north): rail yard not very appealing, perhaps plant trees to block view. Did have nice welcome sign and John Nash sign."

"Route 19 (south): trashy appearance, but nice state and city markers."

"Route 52-460: very nice welcome signs and landscaping, but I missed the turn to downtown. The downtown sign needs to be more prominent."

"Route 52(north): nice welcome sign."



Attractive entrance to the city, however the sign to downtown is very small and easy to miss.

Welcome signs

A sign welcoming people to a place is typically the first thing visitors see. Welcome signs not only create a sense of arrival to a place, but they also provide an opportunity for communities to create a positive impression of their town -- a unique identity -- and exhibit community pride. Visitors had mixed impressions of welcome signs in Bluefield. Visitors commented favorably on the welcome signs on the outskirts of town. However, visitors also noted that welcome signs to Bluefield's downtown are non-existent. This is a lost opportunity to create an identity, promote the downtown, create anticipation of what is to come, and further showcase the historic character of the city.

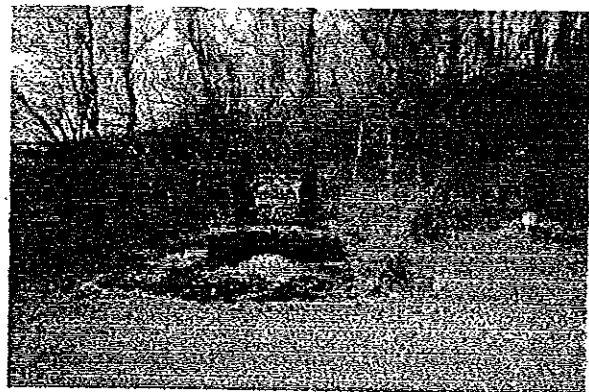
"I saw four different welcome to Bluefield

signs coming into the city and a couple within the city distinguishing it from Bluefield, Virginia. The welcome signs were large and attractive for the most part."

"Welcome signs are very attractive and placed at each entrance to town. There are also some older signs with civic organization logos. Bluefield has done a great job with their welcome signs and has placed them at multiple locations. The signs are probably at the city boundary, which is fair game. However, the city needs to do a much better job of getting people to the downtown with signs."

"As stated before-they would be rated as (2). The sign for Exotic Dancers (below the Ramada) is bigger than any sign that would welcome anyone to the downtown area. We only saw two signs to the "Historic District" and they were 20' from the turn-offs. These signs average 24"X36" or less."

"All entrances except one had a nice city entrance sign."



Welcome signs at city limits are very attractive and plentiful.

Downtown and other business areas

Visitors had mixed reactions to Bluefield's downtown area while driving around town. One of the positive aspects visitors noted was the number of businesses still operating downtown. Other positives noted were the cleanliness of downtown and the proximity of Bluefield State College.

One visitor found many of the business signs downtown in need of improvement. Several visitors thought the area of land occupied by the railroad might be underutilized.

"Even though there were some buildings that needed repaired and some trash that needed picked up overall the business area was very attractive. I am aware that in any city there is going to be some litter and eyesores. There was some coal related and some non-coal-related businesses in the city."

"Downtown businesses have very poor signs. There is definitely no sign ordinance or perhaps no enforcement. A sign code would be a valuable asset to the city. Almost all of the window signs are parallel to the road and a tourist would have to drive slowly to find their spot. This is almost impossible, so you have to determine a parking situation (very available) that will allow you enough time to find your spot without getting a parking ticket."

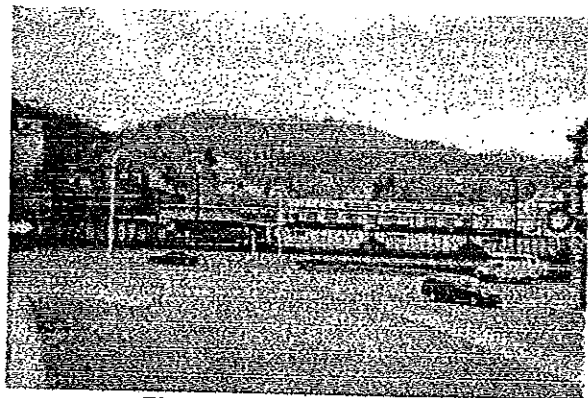
"I didn't see any signs to the downtown as I traveled in on Cumberland Road... only to 'historic information' so I just followed those signs and ended up in the downtown area. There appears to be many service businesses, banks, an Arts center, the Chamber of Commerce, and some buildings that look like they were once occupied with businesses and are now service oriented. There are still some businesses operating in the downtown. This is very promising and conveys a commitment to the downtown. Bluefield State College is near the downtown and this is a plus for the city."

"There is so much land going to waste. This is especially true when driving past the massive flat land owned by the railroad. In fact, the railroad company occupies most of the flat land and there was very little motion. In two hours, we only saw one locomotive pass and it had no haulage connected. There is a vast amount of railroad property that could be utilized as an industrial park if the city and railroad promote a plan for economic development."

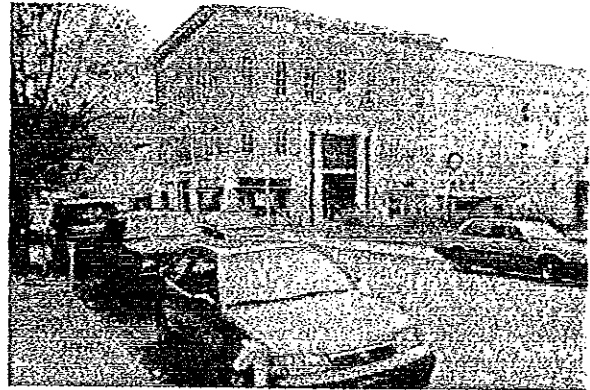
"Speeding traffic without enforcement and strict parking enforcement does not make sense."

"Much larger downtown than I expected; very spread-out. There is not a lot of trash. The Chamber of Commerce sign is very prominent. I liked city of Bluefield sign."

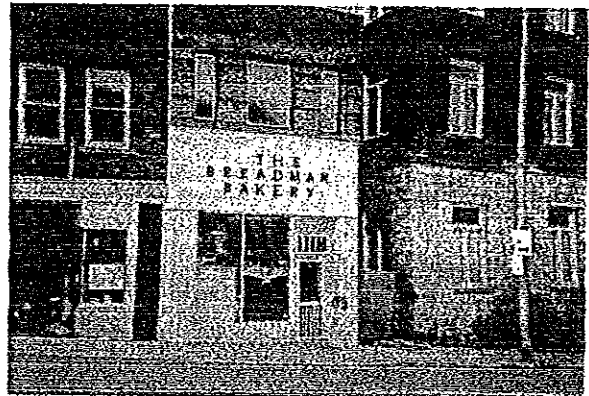
"One positive idea concerning the downtown area was explained to us by the City Manager. There is a streetscape design in the works. This plan is supposed to be announced during the spring. From talking with the City Manager the plan seems to have many of the problems included."



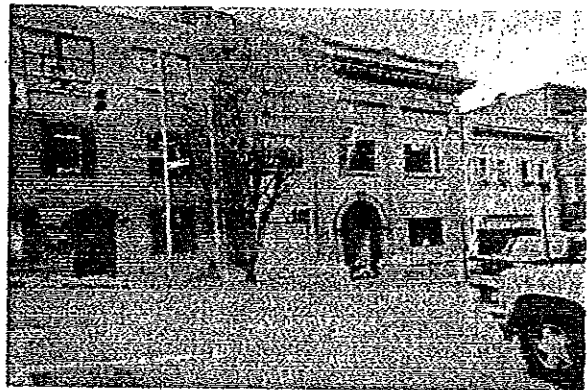
The railroad occupies much of the prime, flat land downtown.



There are many architecturally interesting buildings downtown.



The bakery is an asset to the downtown but does not stand out due to the appearance of its business sign.



Some historic structures are in need of repair.

Other business areas

Visitors identified many other business areas apart from downtown Bluefield. Several visitors noted some industrial areas as well as the typical strip development with grocery stores, restaurants, and entertainment spots. One visitor commented on the lack of retail shopping opportunities in Bluefield and thought this was due to the nearby Mercer Mall.

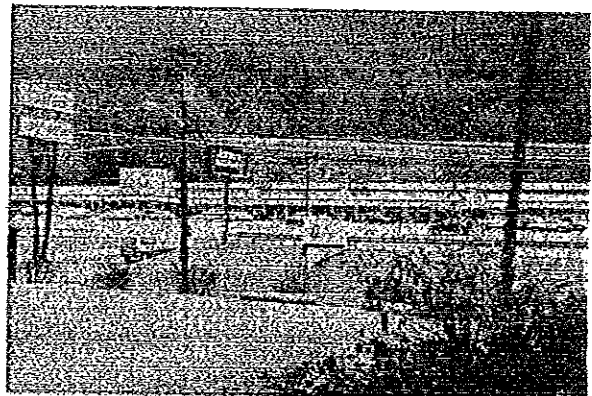
"I noticed typical strip development outside of downtown as well as extensive older industrial areas."

"There were some boutiques and shops around the city that seemed inviting. Overall the other business areas were the same as the city areas."

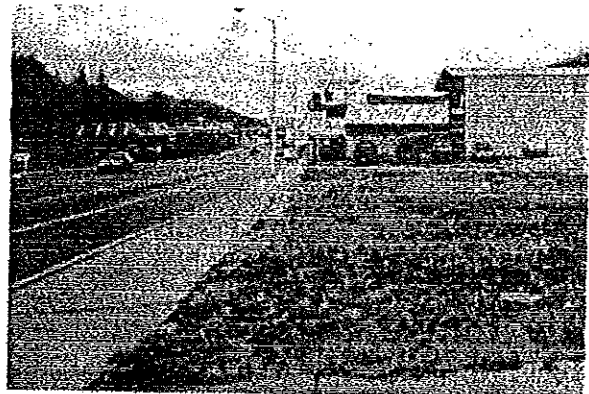
"There are many other business areas on the outskirts of downtown. In fact, there are many on the way to Bluefield, VA. I never knew that Bluefield extended into Virginia. There are some industrial businesses on the stretch from downtown Bluefield, WV to Bluefield, VA."

"The Mercer Mall is 3.5 miles from Bluefield, WV. There are 70 retail stores there. There is not much, if any, retail in the downtown and the proximity of Mercer Mall explains this."

"Other business areas have adequate parking once you get out of the main square of the city. One mile in any direction has more than enough parking area."



Small, attractive shopping center on outskirts of town.



Fast food/strip development near downtown.

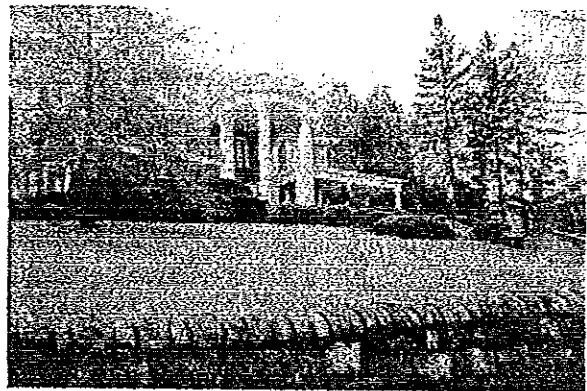
Residential areas

Visitors were pleasantly surprised to find many nice residential areas with well-maintained homes and properties. These were especially noted off Route 52 on the way to downtown Bluefield. One visitor commented that it felt like being in a gated community and noted very few of these homes for sale. Other attractive residential properties were located near the hospitals. Moderate to low income residential areas were also found. Many of these properties are well-kept, however many others are very run-down, and some are dilapidated and need to be demolished. Several visitors also found an attractive housing complex near Bluefield State College and commented that the grounds are attractively landscaped. They also noted that the apartments are filled to capacity.

"Coming into the city, especially on route 52 & 19 were some of the most attractive houses that I saw since leaving Charleston to come to Bluefield. Like any other city, there were some houses between City Hall and the Chamber of Commerce that needed repair and overall yard cleanup."

"There are many nice residential properties on the way into town from Cumberland Rd. There are also some nice residential areas between the two hospitals. There are some less desirable neighborhoods between downtown and Bluefield, VA via Rt. 52. This area has some nice modest homes but also has many run-down properties."

"In the nice residential areas it is beautiful. In the other areas (low-income, middle-class, etc.) there seems to be little concern for infrastructure. When one drives through the nice, upper-class areas there is landscaping around planned circles. Once you get into other areas there are speed bumps and police signs. The nice areas are very nice, almost like a gated community and everyone there seems to think that it's a great place to live. There were very few nice homes for sale."



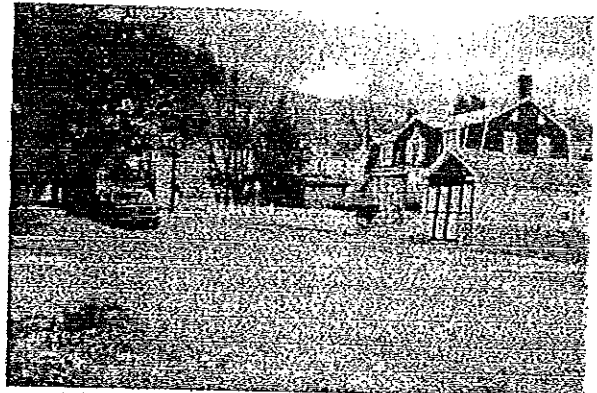
One of many stately homes in Bluefield.



Bluefield has many more upscale residential properties than one would expect.

"We did visit a large housing complex near Bluefield State College. The entire complex was nice with playgrounds and landscaped green spaces. All of the apartments were filled to capacity. Again when we left the complex the road was on a steep incline and there was a difficulty getting onto the main road due to speeding vehicles. We finally had to go back toward the college and pull into the college lot and then back onto 52 south. The college area was very congested."

"I found more nice, older homes and areas than I expected. However, other areas (especially closer to downtown) pretty run-down."



Many modest homes are attractive and well kept.



Many properties are in need of paint and other exterior upkeep.



Several abandoned and dilapidated properties are an eyesore and a liability for the community.

Street signs, traffic patterns, and street conditions

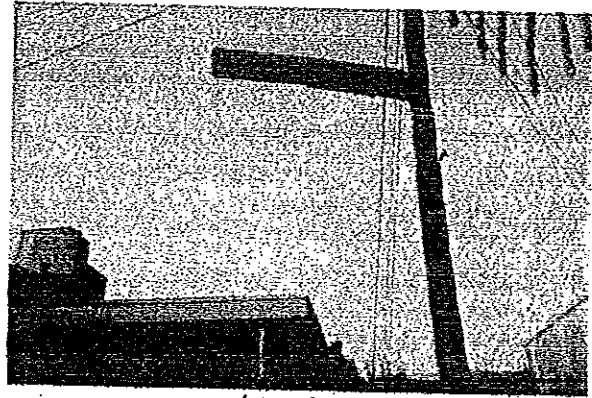
A common failing of small towns and cities is the lack of proper signage and effective street signs. Visitors to Bluefield thought street signs in the downtown area were very good. However, once outside the downtown, visitors commented that the short, post type street signs are difficult to see. One visitor also commented that in some areas, traffic directions signs on the road surfaces have faded and are difficult to understand.

"Coming in from 460 to South 52 is a maze of roads that have faded out surface stick-on directions that are very difficult to understand for an outsider."

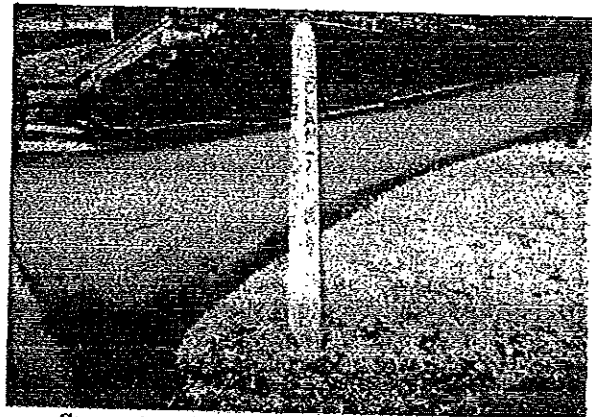
"The pole type & overhead ones were great but the post type were hard to see & some of them had the paint wore off so it was hard to read what they said. Even if they were painted the post type are hard to see."

"The city of Bluefield has also done a great job with their street signs in the downtown area. Signs are white with blue lettering and a blue flower design on them. Street signs in other areas of town are visible, white pillars with vertical black lettering."

"Street signs were well marked in downtown. Older signs harder to find in residential areas."



Attractive street signs downtown.



Street signs in residential areas are hard to read, pillar style with vertical lettering.

Visitors indicated that street conditions and traffic patterns in Bluefield are adequate, however several people thought traffic should be slowed down, particularly downtown. One visitor also commented on the need for guardrails on some narrow, residential streets.

"It is very easy to get around in Bluefield even with two and sometimes three routes running together. Overall the streets were wide, lines well painted and lacking many potholes."

"Traffic is not 'nice' for anyone that does not know the secrets of how to get through intersections. If you don't know how to get through, you just wait. No one on the road shows 'kindness' for anyone. Driving was a nightmare around the city."

"Driving through and around the city is like driving in a large city and there is no real reason for this. The traffic has to be slowed down. Local enforcement of speed limits is necessary."

"Traffic patterns are good. There are one-way traffic patterns downtown that make sense."

"Fast traffic runs parallel to the city and then comes back around into the city from all sides. There seems to be no enforcement for posted speed regulations that are posted in all areas."

"Traffic patterns made sense. Some residential streets are very narrow and in need of guardrails."

Direction signs to local attractions and services

Many small cities and towns also lack good signage to local attractions and services. With the exception of directional signs to local hospitals, the City Park, and Bluefield State College, visitors agreed that there are very few directional signs to services or attractions in the Bluefield area. Again, visitors mentioned the need for

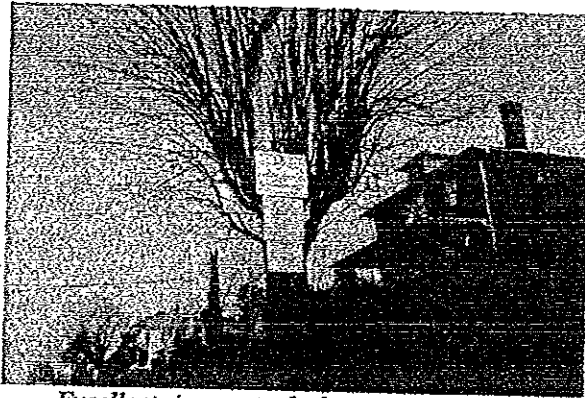
better signage to downtown and commented that signage is either too small or incomplete.

"I was not at all impressed with these type of signs. In fact, they do not exist or at least I could not find them. One example: When I left Route 52 going up the hill to get on the bridge that goes to Bluefield State College, I saw a blue Hospital direction sign and purposely tried to follow the pattern of signs to the hospital and never saw another one. Everything I found that day I just kept driving around until I came upon something."

"There are directions to hospitals, the City Park, and Bluefield State College. I did not see directional signs for area schools or other services. After a few passes through town I realized that there were directional signs to downtown from each direction. The sign on Cumberland Rd. is a bit faded and I missed on my first drive through town. There were several signs for the city park and many for the two hospitals and the library."

"Every sign that we saw was too small. Area folks know the places-tourist don't and can't have the opportunity to view these small signs with the fast traffic flow. There are also very few "pull-off" areas for taking photos or reading a map. Hospital signs were the most beneficial in finding other places. Hospitals are well marked because the public has been trained to recognize the symbols."

"Direction signs to Bluefield State are incomplete. The directions to 52 North are confusing. I found good directions to the hospital. The signs fair for schools if close to them."



*Excellent signage to the hospitals and City Park.
Other signs to services and attractions
are too small or nonexistent.*

Industrial park/area

Only one visitor located an industrial park in the Bluefield area. This visitor had very favorable impressions of two industrial parks near the interstate and commented that both were well defined, clean, and appeared to have room for growth. Other visitors found industrial areas that appear to be active but in most cases are a bit of an eyesore.

"The signs were well defined leading to both industrial parks that I came upon. Both were located near the Interstate and had plenty of room for growth. They looked new and clean and not too busy."

"I did not see a formal industrial park but several industrial areas near the railroad tracks."

"When we asked the city manager the directions to the industrial park, he could not address the question. There seems to be less concern for the economic development of West Virginia and more association with the Virginia Development Authority. Trying to find the industrial park we passed many scrap pile areas that looked like they could become "re-cycling" parks. These sites are a real eye sore around the city. Again there seems to be no regulations that are enforced by the city."

"I didn't see an industrial park. The

industrial area of Bluefield was older but appeared to be active."

Schools, hospitals, clinics, and parks

Schools are an important component of any community and one of the first things people investigate if making a permanent move to the community. The 2000-2001 West Virginia Report

Card for Bluefield Intermediate (see Appendix A) indicates that students' third-grade basic skills scores were higher than the county average but slightly lower than the state average. Students' fourth-, and fifth-grade basic skills scores were slightly lower than county and state averages. Sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade scores at Bluefield Middle School were higher than county averages and higher or equal to state averages. At Bluefield High School, students' scores were lower than the county averages at the ninth- and tenth-grade levels and higher than the state averages at the ninth- and eleventh-grade levels. Tenth-grade scores were lower than both the county and state averages. ACT scores for Bluefield High School were equal to the state average. SAT college entrance exam scores for Bluefield High School were slightly lower than the county and state averages.

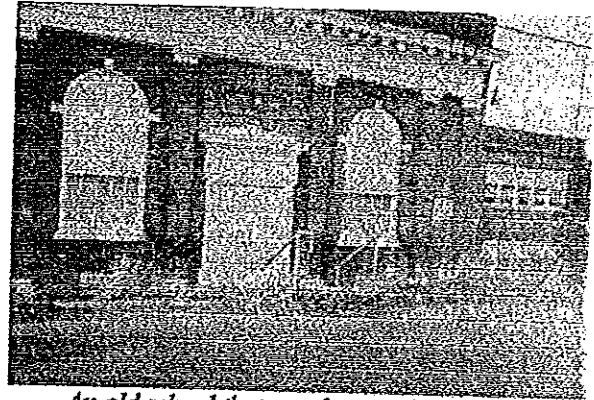
Visitors had generally positive impressions of the schools they saw in Bluefield. Several visitors commented that all schools were well maintained. One visitor mentioned the maintenance and upkeep of one school that now houses the Starting Points program could be improved. Another visitor thought the security at the middle school was very impressive.

"The schools were very impressive and clean looking. I really liked the middle school security; I wish my community had that. There was also scenic beauty around some of the schools especially the middle school. Overall, the schools were outstanding."

"There are many schools. I didn't see a high school but spotted many elementary schools and one middle school. All of them looked well maintained. There is an old school that now houses the Starting Points program. The building looks as if it is deteriorating rapidly and there are many weeds, etc."

"No problems. All schools seem to have additional areas for expansion in the future. The schools that are closed have planning for future development."

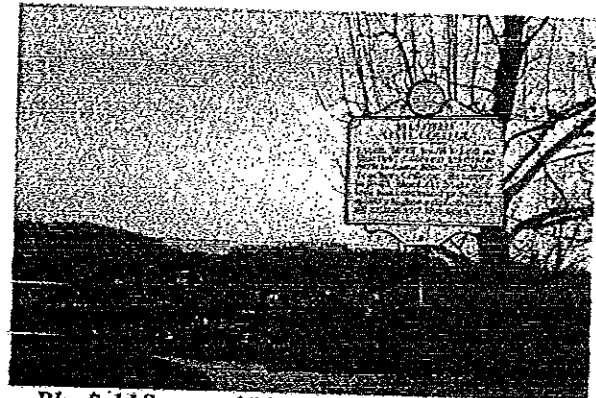
"I drove past 3 elementary schools and the high school; very nice buildings and grounds. One elementary school had a nice neighborhood flavor, with some kids walking home from school."



An old school that now houses the local Starting Points program. The building and grounds need to be maintained at a higher standard to avoid becoming an eyesore.



A well-maintained, attractive elementary school.



Bluefield State and Bluefield College (VA) are both tremendous assets to the community.



An attractive, modern, new school with excellent security.

Hospitals and access to medical care also are important to visitors and potential residents. Furthermore, the relationship between health care and economic development is an important one. The viability of the health care delivery system is an economic infrastructure issue. Recent literature suggests that accessible, quality health care enhances and augments a community's ability to attract new residents and businesses and retain existing ones. In other words, economic development is supported by a strong health care delivery system.

Most of West Virginia fell under the federal designation of a medically underserved area in 1994. This designation covers not only the number of physicians in an area but also the

number of health facilities and other factors. All or part of 48 counties, including Mercer County, were designated as medically underserved. According to the W.Va. Office of Epidemiology and Health Promotion, as of June 1997, Mercer County had 149 practicing physicians and a physician to population ratio of 23.09 physicians per 10,000 population. This is quite a bit higher than the state rate of 18.2 physicians per 10,000 population. According to a report produced by the Center for Rural Health Development Inc., the health care sector does have a highly significant impact on Mercer County's economy. In 1997, 4,145 people were employed by the health sector, accounting for 18.5 percent of the total employment in the county. The average annual wage earned by health care workers was \$28,880. This compares with an average annual wage of \$22,221 for all occupations in the county. Health care providers operating in the county paid about \$171.01 million in employee compensation. As a consequence, for every dollar in employee compensation paid by the health sector, employers in other sectors of the Mercer County economy paid 41 cents. In terms of employment, for each job in health care an additional 0.83 jobs resulted in other sectors. Therefore, an additional 3,427 jobs in other sectors were supported in Mercer County by the health care industry.

Visitors had very favorable impressions of the health care facilities in Bluefield, particularly the Bluefield Regional Medical Center and St. Luke's Hospital. Visitors found both hospitals to be a modern, appealing facilities and were impressed with the medical services available in Bluefield.

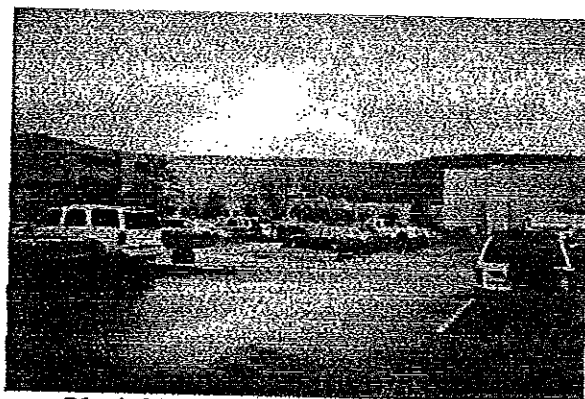
"The Bluefield Regional Medical Center and the St. Luke's Hospital appear to be first-class places. The direction signs to them could be upgraded."

"There are two major medical facilities in Bluefield, the Bluefield Regional Medical Center and St. Luke's Hospital. I am surprised to see two facilities in such close proximity. St. Luke's looks newer and is smaller than Bluefield Regional Medical Center. The Regional facility is quite large

with many satellite buildings nearby where doctor's offices are located. I noticed an MRI tractor-trailer at the hospital. I noticed a nice new dental facility near Bluefield Regional Medical Center. St. Luke's Hospital is inviting with its attractive landscaping and rocking chairs under a canopy at the front of the hospital."

"There is an impressive regional medical center, that is a big employer in the community."

"Ok. Clinics-too small and disconnected."



Bluefield Regional Medical Center is impressive and a big employer for the area.



Many physicians' offices are in close proximity to Bluefield Regional Medical Center.



St. Luke's Hospital is a very attractive facility.



Bowen Field has plenty of parking. This minor league stadium is a tremendous asset to the community.

Recreation and other cultural amenities are also important factors to visitors and potential residents. For the most part, visitors had favorable impressions of the recreational opportunities in Bluefield. One visitor was particularly impressed with the Bluefield Community Center. Another visitor thought the community lacked parks and playgrounds in residential areas.

"The Greater Bluefield Community Center was fantastic. It had an indoor heated pool, day care while working out, clean lockers, indoor basketball court, meeting rooms and many other great attractions. The City Park looked clean, nice and family orientated. Bowen Field is a beautiful ballpark that has tennis courts and plenty of parking. Mitchell Stadium is an excellent football field with lots of parking. Overall, there are plenty of recreation and youth activities in Bluefield."

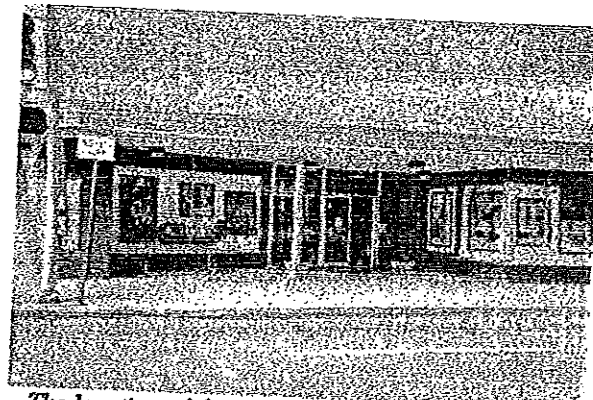
"The city park has several playing fields and bleachers. I saw people walking there."

"Terrible, small and cluttered-up."

"Nice downtown park! There appears to be a lack of parks/playgrounds in residential areas. I noticed a large soccer complex close to the interstate and a nice, large athletic complex by middle school."



Mitchell Stadium, next to Bowen Field, is in excellent condition with plenty of parking.



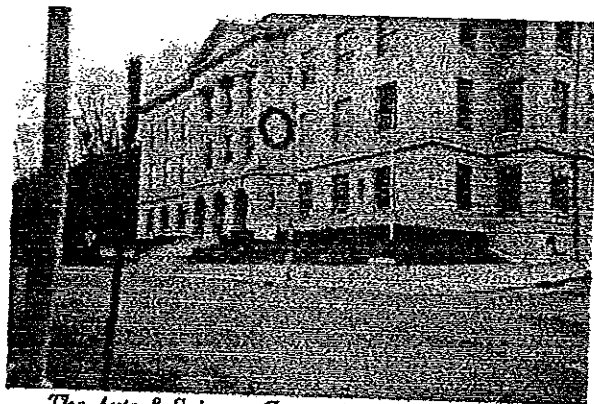
The location of the Wellness Center is a good use of space and probably helps bring people downtown.

Visitors also noted the Arts & Science Center in downtown Bluefield and thought this was a real asset for the community. The Arts & Science Center provides an important point of interest and incentive for residents and visitors to spend more time downtown. However, as one visitor pointed out, a tourist would not know that other businesses are also located within the Arts & Science Center building.

"The Science Center is great!"

"The Science Center is one of the bright spots downtown."

"The Arts & Science Center is a tremendous asset to the community, but a visitor would be completely unaware of everything in the old city building. It's called the Arts and Science Center but you'd never guess from the outside that there is also a gift shop, a restaurant, and the CVB inside."



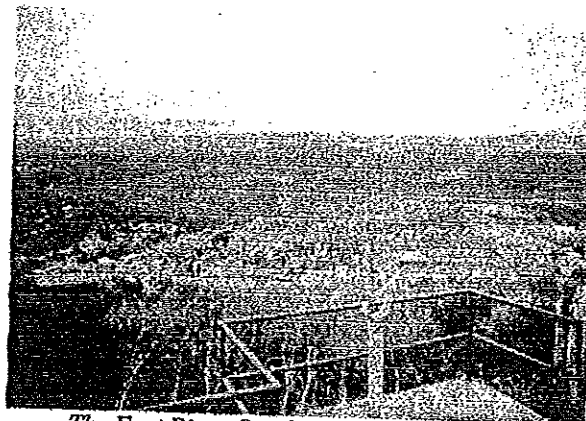
The Arts & Science Center is wonderful. However, how would a visitor know that a restaurant, a gift shop, and the CVB are also inside this building?

Visitors thought the East River Overlook was stunningly beautiful and an important tourism asset for the area. They thought the area could be improved by cleaning up the properties and buildings near the overlook.

"The East River Overlook is stunningly beautiful. The two broken observation posts need to be fixed."

"East River Overlook is easy to find and has attractive signage."

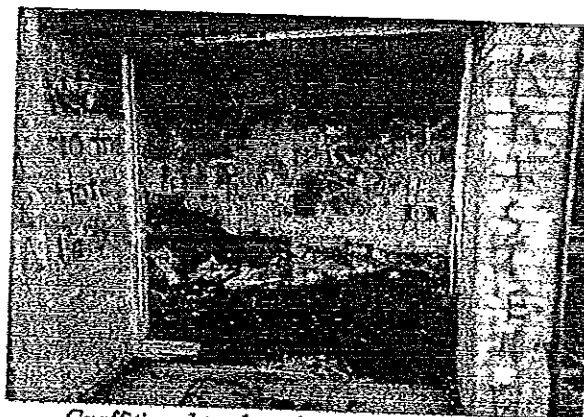
"The empty buildings painted with graffiti and littered with trash next to East River Overlook need to be cleaned up."



The East River Overlook is stunningly beautiful.



This empty building next to the scenic, East River Overlook is an eyesore and detracts from the area.



Graffiti and trash at the empty building near the East River Overlook.

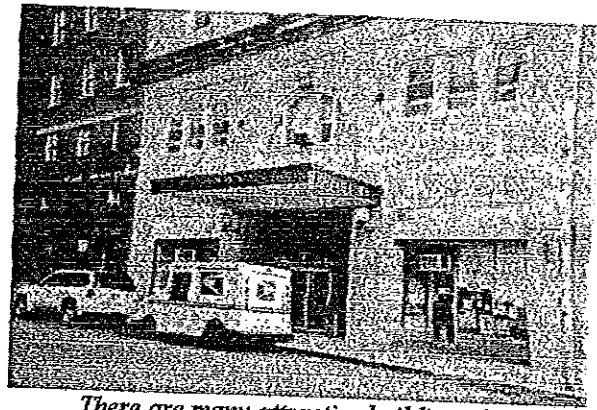
Walking Around Town

Physical appearance of businesses (signs, displays, etc.)

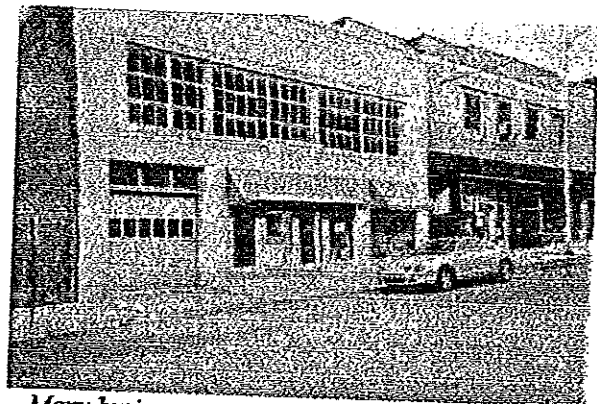
Visitors to Bluefield's downtown business district had very mixed impressions. Several visitors had very positive comments regarding many of the historic buildings, the old city hall, and the small park downtown. However, several visitors commented on the number of empty buildings downtown and the immediate need to maintain some of the historic structures that are showing signs of deterioration. One visitor thought the city could do a lot more promote the historic downtown as a tourist attraction. This visitor also mentioned the lack of appropriate signage for businesses located within the old city hall, commenting that you don't know businesses are located there until you actually walk inside the building. Other visitors commented that there is nothing inviting in the downtown and few pedestrians compared to the nearby Mercer Mall and Wal-Mart. Visitors also noted the small park and the trees that have been planted downtown, commenting that these aspects add appeal to the downtown streetscape.

"Bluefield has all the advantages of city life while at the same time all the advantages of living rural. All of the businesses were attractive and for the most part had well defined signs."

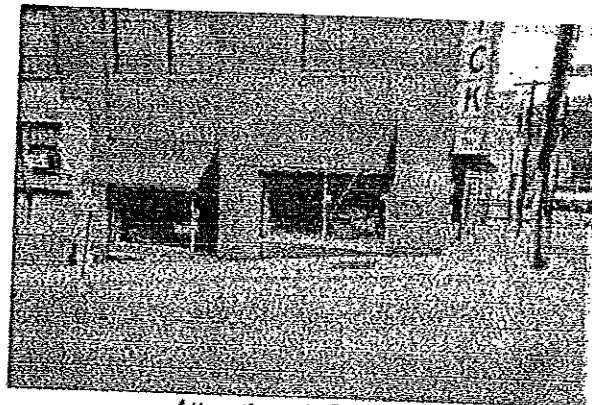
"Businesses were nice and well kept. There are some vacant buildings downtown, but they are generally in good condition. Signs and displays were appropriate. I thought the downtown mural and park was nice and well kept. The trees add appeal to the streetscape."



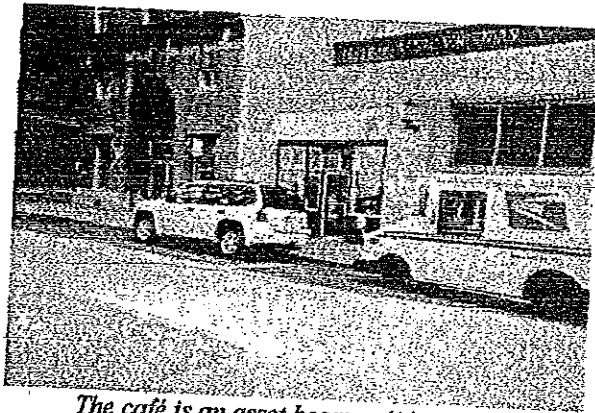
There are many attractive buildings downtown.



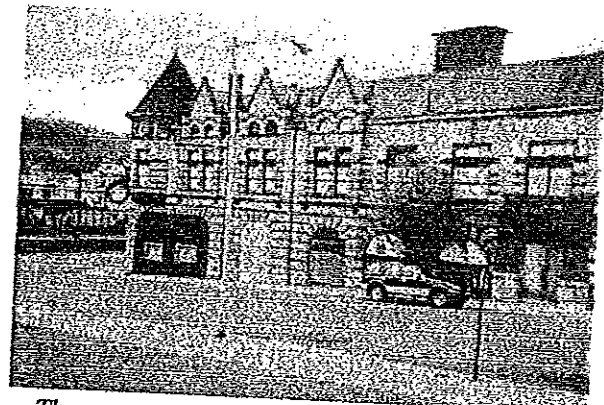
Many businesses are attractive and well maintained but nearby empty storefronts detract from the general appearance and convey a negative business climate downtown.



Attractive window displays add appeal to the downtown.

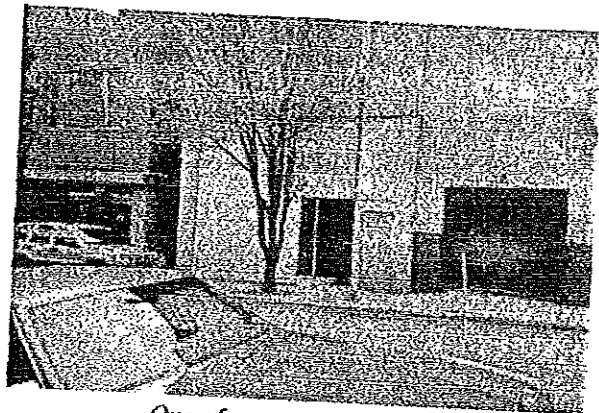


The café is an asset because it is one of the few eating establishments downtown.

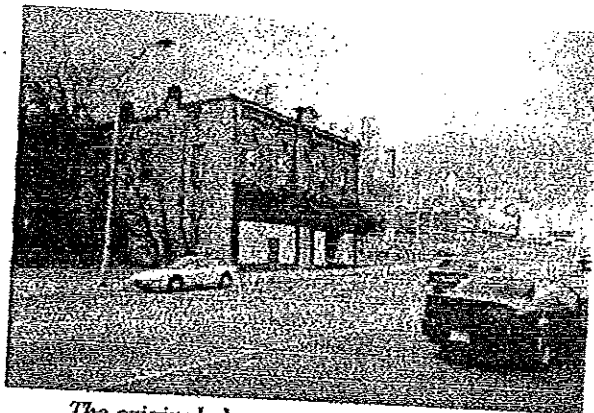


There are many historically significant buildings in downtown Bluefield. Many of them are in need of immediate attention to prevent further deterioration.

"It wasn't until I got out of the car and took the walking tour around downtown that I realized how many empty buildings there are in Bluefield. I picked up a walking tour brochure at the Chamber of Commerce and walked the route on the brochure. There are many buildings of historic significance downtown. Several of these buildings are occupied with businesses and the old city hall is filled with a restaurant, a gallery, a science center, and the Visitor's Center. Some of the other historic buildings are not occupied. One in particular (?), on the corner of Bland and Rt. 52 is really beginning to deteriorate badly. It would be a shame to let this building fall apart. The architecture is very distinctive and if renovated it could be a tourist attraction. Also, a visitor is completely unaware of everything in the old city building. It's called the Arts and Science Center but you'd never guess from the outside that there is also a gift shop and restaurant and the CVB inside. Business signage is good for the most part."



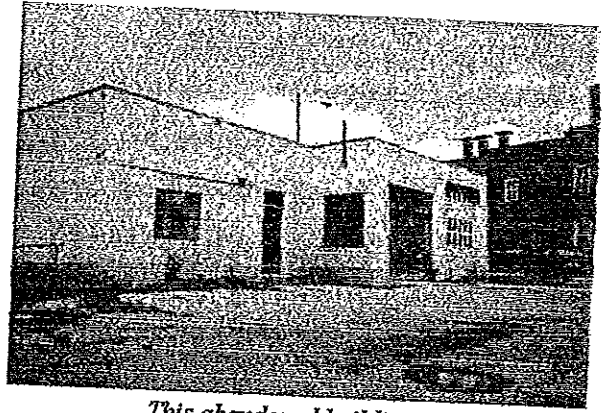
One of many empty buildings downtown.



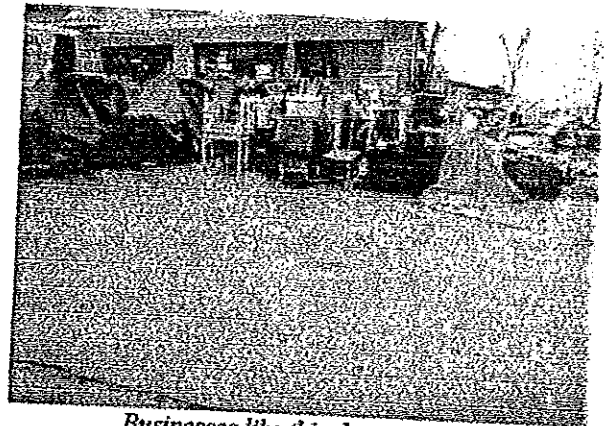
The original character of this building has been greatly reduced by more recent modifications to the building's facade.

"It was a very cold and snowy day in the downtown area and there were very few people compared to the crowd at the Mercer Mall or Wal-Mart, a 30 minute drive in either direction. There is nothing inviting here. It seems that the people that work in the downtown area support the businesses that exist. There are a few empty buildings. In the downtown area there is a conscience that knows that everyone around us is doing ok, therefore we are ok. There seems to be no desire to recruit anything downtown. The downtown area appears to be a very white Caucasian area. It is a very small area, perhaps 20 acres with the town going out for a mile in all directions, divided by the railroad yard that seems to control most of the level land for any kind of expansion or community development."

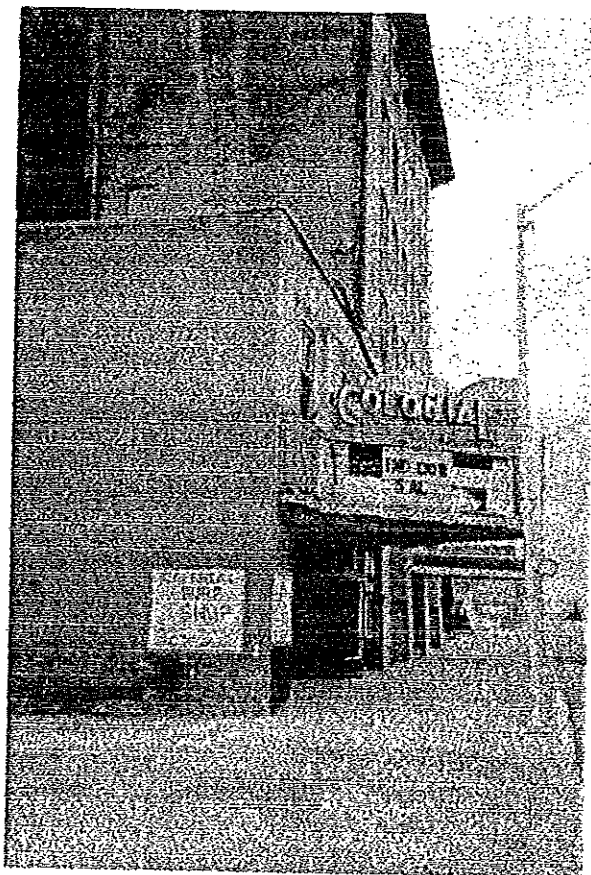
"There are several properties that are either empty and abandoned or cluttered with junk. These properties and businesses seriously detract from the appearance of the area."



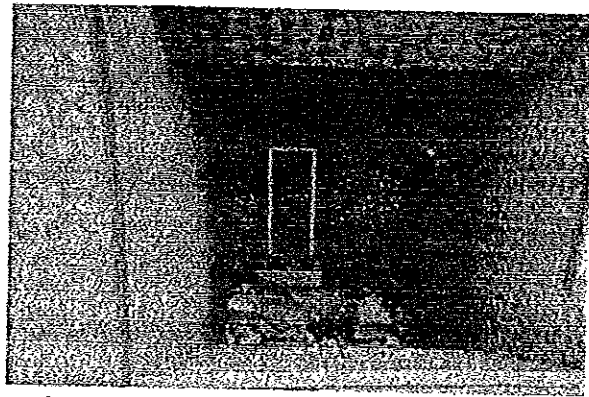
This abandoned building near downtown is an eyesore.



Businesses like this do not create a positive impression of the area.



The Colonial Theater is in need of major renovation.



Trash in this stairwell downtown is an eyesore and conveys an unsafe environment after dark.

People (friendliness, helpfulness, and appearance)

Visitors had extremely favorable impressions of the people they encountered during their time in Bluefield. Visitors commented that people were

well informed, helpful, and good ambassadors for the area.

"Everyone that we talked to was friendly, somewhat informed about what was happening and willing to direct us to the expert of any situation – past, present or future."

"You can't find more friendly people anywhere in the world. Everyone was so nice and polite and very willing to answer questions. Every time I could not find anything, I just would ask someone and they always knew where things were."

"People are extremely friendly here. I turned down a very short dead-end street without realizing it. There were two men standing out near the street talking. One of them waved to me in a friendly manner, with a smile, even though I'm sure he knew I was lost. Many people waved to me and everyone I asked questioned were very friendly and helpful."

"Everyone we spoke with was very open and positive with responses."

"We had lunch at the Arts & Science Center. It was a wonderful small restaurant with friendly folks all around. Everyone at the center was helpful. We commented that there were few Bluefield brochures outside of the downtown area. We were told that there were two main motels that had brochures delivered on a regular basis."

"Everyone was friendly and helpful. Perhaps if it had been a warmer day we could have had more 'street-talk'. We did not have conversations with the afro-American population as we wanted."

"The people were very friendly. I stopped at the library where the staff was very helpful and gave good directions to City Hall. I also ate lunch in town and found the staff and others there to be nice and friendly."

Community information (tourist brochure, business directory, community profile, and maps)

Visitors located community oriented brochures and information about local businesses and attractions at the Chamber of Commerce and the Convention & Visitor's Bureau. Several people commented that there is very little information about local business with the exception of tourism related businesses.

"Brochures were available and seemed adequate."

"Yes, I got one at a couple of different places. The business/attractions brochures were provided by the Chamber of Commerce, but they did not have any business directories."

"I found some interesting and helpful brochures at the Chamber of Commerce. I found similar brochures at the Visitor's Center."

"There were several collected and most of the material had very good information."

"There was very little information on businesses in the area."

"We thought the East River Mountain Overlook would be a favorite attraction. When we asked about area attractions this was not mentioned. There was mention of Tamarack as an attraction. Nothing was mentioned in the Princeton area. All attractions seemed to be in the Virginia area."

Visitors found maps available at the Chamber of Commerce, City Hall, and the Convention and Visitors' Bureau. One visitor paid \$2.00 for a city map at the Chamber of Commerce and thought it was not a good idea to charge visitors for the maps.

"There were no maps to be found at the City Hall but the Chamber of Commerce did have a city map available for \$2.00. I think that is a bad idea to charge \$ for a map."

"I found a map of the Historic Walking Tour of downtown."

"The best selection of maps were available at City Hall and they did have a map service available at very reasonable rates."

One visitor commented that many brochures are available at the Convention and Visitors' Bureau. However, newcomers would have trouble finding this location because there are no signs outside for this office or any of the other businesses located in the Arts & Science Center. This visitor suggested a tasteful sign advertising each business and attraction should be placed outside the building.

"The CVB has a rack of brochures outside their office in the Arts & Science Center. The CVB's presence is not obvious from the outside of the building. The CVB and other businesses that occupy space in this building need to have a sign outside to let people know they are there. This could be done very tastefully so as not to detract from the appearance of the outside of the building."

City Hall (appearance, signing, and helpfulness of staff) and other government buildings and public facilities

Visitors found the City Building to be an attractive facility with ample parking. Several visitors found this building difficult to locate. One visitor had a difficult time finding the city offices from the ground floor entrance to the building.

"Nice looking building. It needs better direction signs to it. It needs a sign on the door beside the parking lot that says "Use Upstairs Door" (I walked in and found a large area with snow plow, salt, and rooms

for storage and no people in them so I walked around the building until I found another entrance). It had many city offices in the building so I recommend changing the generic sign that said something like "city building" to a larger sign that listed "all" the offices located inside."

"City Hall is not obvious when driving through town. I did eventually find it."

"The building had a nice atmosphere, adequate parking and a well trained staff that were more than willing to assist."

"Appearance of facility-excellent, both inside and out."

Visitors also commented on the helpfulness of the staff, who took time out to answer questions and provide information about the area.

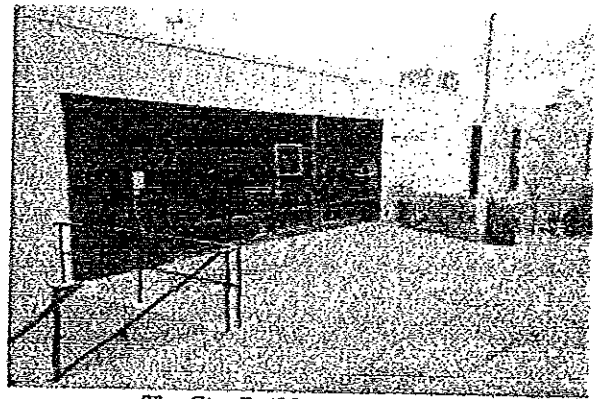
"Very helpful and friendly, they can't give directions around Bluefield though."

"The staff at City Hall were friendly, helpful, and answered my questions."

"The City Manager knew his 'facts' and was a delight to visit."

"This was also a very pleasant part of our visit. Everyone was busy but assisted us with the information we desired. The city manager took time from his schedule to tell us about future plans for development. Again the development involved the greater Bluefield area, especially toward Virginia. We asked if there were any plans being developed for the roads coming into the area. He mentioned the need for directing people toward the downtown and the difficulty for tourists to navigate through the traffic. This was a concern but little planning seemed to be in progress on these problems."

"I visited City Hall and found the staff to be helpful and the facility to be in nice shape."



The City Building is an attractive facility.

Chamber of Commerce (Did people know where it was...Information available, hours, appearance, and location)

When local residents were asked if they knew where the Chamber of Commerce office was, everyone did due to its prominent location downtown. Visitors found the location to be excellent and liked finding 2-hour free parking nearby.

"The people that I talked to on the streets all knew where the Chamber of Commerce was and it had a well-defined sign. I really liked the 2-hour "free" parking lot, that is a great idea."

"Yes, people did know where the Chamber was located and it was very easy to find."

"It's impossible not to know where the chamber office is because it is in a very prominent spot downtown with a very large sign. I did ask at the City Hall and was directed to the chamber."

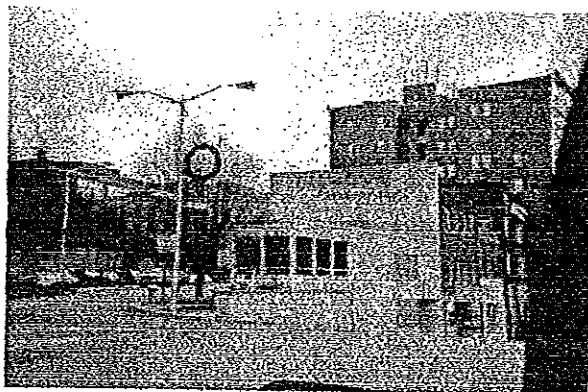
"The location of the chamber is excellent, although it may be hard to see it when the leaves come out. There was especially one tree that probably should be pruned-back. The Chamber was very active and had an excellent director that supplied us with useful information. Again, everyone was very helpful."

Visitors had positive feedback about their visit to the area Chamber of Commerce. Not only did the visitors think the appearance of the office was good and the selection of informational brochures excellent, they also commented very favorably on the helpfulness of the staff.

"There was lots of available information at the Chamber of Commerce. The location is good and the appearance is nice."

"The information inside was great; lots of brochures but I did not like the idea of having to pay \$2 for a map of the city."

"The appearance and location of this office is very good. You can't miss the Chamber because it has a huge sign on the building and is located downtown where the road divides and becomes one-way. The staff person I talked to was very friendly and seemed to sincerely want to be helpful. I told her I was spending the night and next day in the area site seeing. She spent quite a bit of time with me, picking out brochures for local attractions and explaining them."



The Chamber of Commerce has an excellent location and good signage.

Miscellaneous items (public restrooms, pay phones, parking, water fountains, benches, etc.)

Visitors did not identify public restrooms downtown other than those found in restaurants and government buildings. Pay phones in working order were easily located.

"I did not see any public restrooms. But I did go into several business restrooms and they were all clean and in great condition."

"I didn't see any public restrooms other than those in restaurants."

"I visited (4) all were in above average to excellent."

"I stopped at two pay phones and they both had phones that worked with a directory intact!"

The visitors had mixed reactions to the parking opportunities in Bluefield. Visitors found 15 minute parking and 2-hour parking spaces on some downtown streets. As newcomers, several visitors mentioned that there was little parking available for any tourist activity. Another visitor thought the parking garage should be promoted more aggressively.

"There are a couple of parking garages downtown. One of them looks like it is no longer in use. I also found free, 2 hour parking downtown on Bland Street."

"Could use some work."

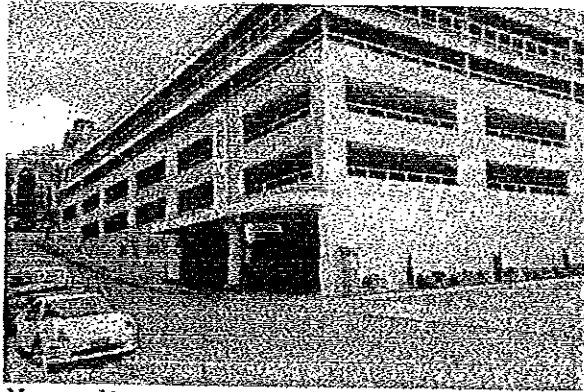
"Free downtown parking, great ideal!"

"Once we got in downtown the parking was very available. But, know where to park because they have a very good ticket force. You can park for 15 minutes on the main streets (most are one way) and 2 hours for a limited # of spots around some places. There are no signs that tell a tourist that you can park here for 15 minutes but go over here and it's a two-hour limit."

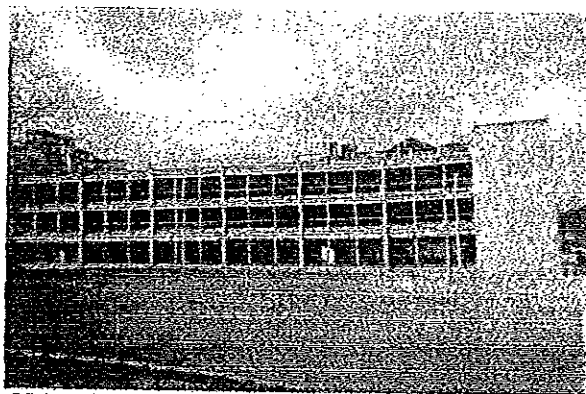
"There is little parking space for any tourism activity around the main part of town. Not one downtown merchant suggested the parking building."

"Most of the downtown parking areas are used as rental property by the downtown businesses. We were told by the Chamber of Commerce that we should not leave our vehicle in the 15 parking section."

"Your choice of parking in the main part of town is the 15 minute slots or the 2-hour slots or the parking building which is not promoted in any way. We went into the city without any awareness that there was a parking building. We did not have time to investigate the parking building. That should be checked on."



New parking garage downtown.



Old parking garage does not create a positive impression and could be an invitation for trouble.

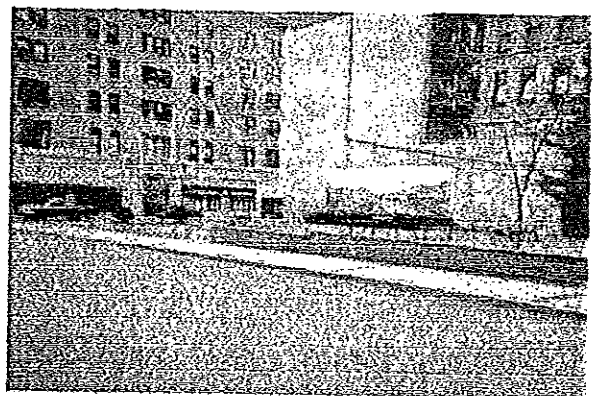
Although visitors spotted an attractive, small green space with benches and a railroad mural painted on a nearby wall, one visitor commented on the lack of benches in town. Another visitor thought the city could be a "great college town" and also suggested connecting tourist attractions in Bluefield and Princeton related to the railroad. This visitor also suggested working with the railroad in developing new industrial park ideas.

"There is a nice little green space downtown with a railroad mural and comfortable benches."

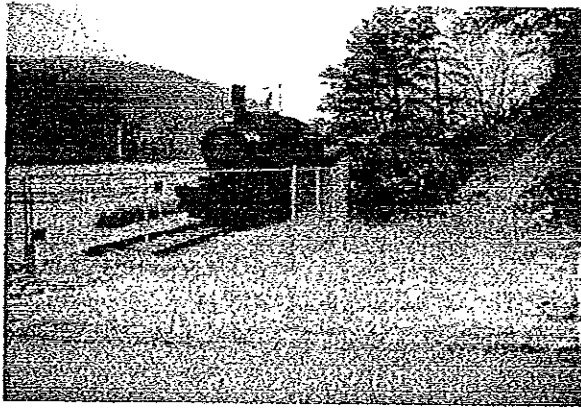
"The benches in the downtown park were in good shape."

"I'm sure that this is a summer-time activity. I did not observe water fountains or benches. Again this will probably be addressed in the master-plan."

"This could be a great 'college-town.' The railroad could also look at the possibility of providing new 'industrial park' ideas. The railroad occupies flat and valuable land going right through the city. There are plans in the works for a Railroad Museum in Princeton and there could probably be an opportunity to connect several attractions with a scenic railroad idea."



This park, with its benches and mural, adds appeal to the downtown streetscape.



Old steam engine adds interest to the area. The proposed railroad museum will develop this theme.

Using your "senses"...what did the community feel like (emotional or physical response)

Overall, the emotional response of the visitors to the city of Bluefield was very positive. Everyone felt secure and generally found the atmosphere in Bluefield to be warm and inviting. One visitor found Bluefield so attractive that he thought it would be a great place to live, raise a family, or retire. Another visitor commented that the city lacks an identity and suggested the city needs to develop and market its identity. This visitor also thought the city is thriving and saw potential in redevelopment geared towards restoring many of the historically significant buildings downtown.

"I give Bluefield an A+. Bluefield was far from deserted while at the same time somewhat busy, but not too busy. I felt 'safe' everywhere I went. Even though Bluefield was a large city (compared to most of rural West Virginia) it still projected a small town atmosphere and personally, I think it would be a great place to live, raise a family or even retire."

"The community lacks an identity. Bluefield needs to chose an identity and market it. The community seems to be thriving but the downtown is in need of redevelopment to save some of the historic buildings."

"Wants to be more than it is but is not hung-up on trying new things."

"I found the community to be generally warm and inviting."

The most positive things you observed, what idea would you steal, and what will you remember most about the community six months from now

According to the visitors, Bluefield has several things going for it. The most common positive aspects mentioned were the scenic, mountainous location; the beautiful historic district; the potential for downtown restoration and revitalization; the beautiful old homes; the educational facilities; the road construction in progress; the use of buildings downtown for service related activities; the health care delivery system; the Holiday Inn and Ramada (both of which are inviting for tourists); the public transit (bus) system; and the friendly workers at every stop.

When asked to describe one idea they would like to steal for use in their own business or community, visitors mentioned the Greater Bluefield Community Center; the little park downtown; the institutions of higher education; and the public transportation system.

Six months from now, visitors indicated they would remember the historic buildings downtown that are in danger of deteriorating to the point of no return; how thriving the area appears to be; the East River Mountain Overlook; the Virginia's tallest town; how busy everyone seemed to be; the beautiful homes near the historic-district; the road construction that will bring in new revenue to the area; and the landscaping downtown and at town entrances.

Visitor's Recommendations

1. Downtown Revitalization

- Inventory and create a downtown economic revival strategy to attract appropriate businesses, compatible in usage and architectural design, to locate downtown. Try to attract businesses that would complement the feel of existing businesses and give the tourist traffic going through town a reason to stay in Bluefield and look around (i.e., antiques and collectibles, bookstores, and galleries).
- With the many historic buildings downtown, tax credits and other incentives could be used for reuse and redevelopment of the buildings. Contact Pamela Brooks, State Historic Preservation Office for information and assistance at 304-558-0220; ext. 720.
- Work with area merchants that need to clean up clutter and litter.
- Consider enforcing a traffic-control plan to slow the speed of traffic through downtown.
- Consider planting trees to buffer the view of the rail yard from downtown.
- Consider submitting an application to have the Community Design Team come to Bluefield to help with revitalization plans and tackle other downtown issues. For more information contact Jeremy Morris, West Virginia University, Department of Landscape Architecture, jmorris5@wvu.edu, (304) 293-2141, ext. 4399.

2. Community Development

- Work with local businesses to clean up and/or buffer industrial areas from view.
- Work with the city and county to enforce an abandoned building ordinance. Contact Peter Marshall, West Virginia University Extension Service, P.O. Box 6031, Morgantown, WV 26506, (304)293-6967 ext. 3427, e-mail: hmarshal@wvu.edu for assistance.

- Consider improving neighborhoods by building small parks and play grounds.
- Cleanup trash along area roadways, particularly on Route 19 South.

3. Marketing And Tourism Development

- Develop and market an identity for the city of Bluefield.
- Consider developing a marketing plan that includes products/services (attractions, services, special events); price (lodging, etc. for visitors); place (unique places, activities); promotion; positioning (mental image, what downtown has to offer that is different); programming (activities); packaging (with other activities/ opportunities to enhance the value); partnership (cooperation between business associations, government agencies, businesses, civic groups); and people (who have a direct or indirect influence on the activities or services).

There are many places of historic significance in the area. If there is local support and commitment, the city of Bluefield should capitalize more on tourism as an alternative strategy for redeveloping the downtown area. The city should consider a carefully planned and managed tourism development program that is coordinated with Mercer County as a whole. Such a program would be focused on locally driven initiatives and goals. For more information contact Alison Hanham, West Virginia University Extension Service, Community Resource Development, achanham@mail.wvu.edu, (304) 293-6967, ext. 3342.

A tourism development program would include determining desired outcomes; researching and collecting data on all aspects of tourism and proposed tourism development; analyzing and synthesizing these findings; developing measurable objectives focused on desired changes based on identified needs; developing and designing proposals and recommendations to

accomplish the objectives (recommendations should be focused on physical development, program development, policies, and priorities); developing action and implementation plans with progress indicators; assessing progress and/or completion; and finally, repeating these steps to insure that the process is continuous, is monitored constantly, and adaptable to revision and change. Local support and commitment are crucial to such a plan.

- Since the East River Overlook is a tourism asset, try to clean up the trash located on the mountainside driving up to the overlook. Also consider removing the old buildings in disrepair near the overlook and fix the two broken observation posts at this location.

4. Signage

- All entrances to the city should be evaluated and redesigned to direct visitors and tourists downtown.
- Consider developing a sign ordinance for all businesses within the city, particularly downtown.
- Consider developing a tastefully designed sign outside the Arts & Science Center that would alert visitors to the location of the Convention & Visitor's Bureau and other businesses located in this building.
- Replace the pillar-style street signs with overhead or pole street signs.
- Replace street signs at sites where none exist. (Some example would be the intersection on Route 19, in front of the Salvation Army & Wendy's and the intersection of the Professional building, Bluefield Cleaners and the Bank of Tazewell.

ONE FINAL THOUGHT FROM A VISITOR...

"There are so many good possibilities and Bluefield has many wonderful features to work with. The citizens are a progressive group and can probably accomplish more than they thought possible."