



A View of Gilman

COMMUNITY SWAP REPORT

Gilman, Illinois

Presented By:

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Community Entrances

The “Welcome to Gilman” signs were very appealing with nice landscaping. The first glance at Gilman after exiting the interstate is a slightly discouraging one. When first exiting off the interstate, some of the lots appeared vacant and unkempt. However, if one travels a little further down this exit, one can find restaurants and stores that appear to be doing quite well. Cleaning up those lots and trying to attract new businesses into these vacant buildings such as starting a truck wash or Pilot station would go a long way towards improving that initial feeling and attracting new residents and businesses

Housing

There did not appear to be many houses on the market in Gilman and few under construction besides the apartment complexes. However for the most part, the existing homes seemed to be well maintained. The houses close to the park were beautiful. The concrete or asphalt driveways, landscaping, and beautiful green lawns were positive features to these houses that seemed to blend in with the well-kept park. The older homes were also kept up with a lot of character. There were some homes, for example the ones located next to the Napa Store, that could use some repairs. Considering many of these homes were along the highway, they did not represent the town well. All neighborhoods appeared to be a very safe place to live with friendly neighbors. The lots seemed to be spacious, even big enough to raise a garden. These can be strong selling points for those seeking to live the small town life.

School System

The high school was not easy to find. There were no clear signs indicating where it was located. When our group members found the school, they had an even more difficult time locating the office which as one student directed us towards was located on the second floor. We found it rather odd that there was no sign indicating where to find the office for visitors. The school halls were mazelike, resulting in confusion for the group members who had never set foot in the building. The high school has a nice, updated brochure detailing the various course offerings and opportunities that the school provides. The extensive bi-lingual program offered by the school was very impressive and definitely necessary for a 23.5% Hispanic population in the school. Does the School enter any Spanish contests? Winning such contests could be a moral booster for the student body. Students seemed to take pride in their sports teams, especially the rifle club and football team. It appears as if the co-op between the four local towns works quite well. Overall, however, the students did not seem really excited about their school. When asked, “What school would you recommend someone to attend in Iroquois County,” students always replied a different school’s name. The belief that things are better elsewhere seemed to be a usual thought of the typical IWHS student. The addition of a Volunteens Program would boost school and town pride as well as improve areas of concern in the community.

The first through third grade elementary school was a very nice facility. The staff was very helpful. Students seemed happy and had a very nice playground in the back. The ball field appeared to be in need of maintenance and repair to the scoreboard.

Churches

Churches in Gilman were very impressive. The outside of the new Catholic Church was beautiful but was locked during the day. We were touched by the kindness of members of the clergy who we met at the different locations and came to find out that the ministers hold regular meetings to discuss different issues in the community. The use of the old Lutheran church's bell with the new church was a fantastic idea. Overall the people and clergy appeared very pleased with the churches in Gilman. Adding a sign along the highway that highlights the variety of churches Gilman has to offer is a possible idea to improve this area of your community.

Central Business District and Other Retail Shopping

The grocery store was very nice, clean, and uncluttered. They had a very large selection of items in the store ranging from deli products to produce. A sign or mural painted on the front of the building would be nice to see and a great project idea for a school or community organization. The businesses in town have a lot of potential. Some of the business fronts have beautiful designs but could use a little renovation. Many have large glass window displays with little merchandise in them. At noon the town seemed like it came alive. People had come to town for various reasons which could be capitalized on to draw these customers into other businesses. We believe the many closed buildings can be seen as a great opportunity for future business with fantastic locations.

General Observations on Local Commerce

The biggest problem, as we see it, is the numerous stores that are empty. These empty stores start a chain reaction that causes other businesses to close and eventually the entire town to dry up. Gilman has a need for a number of retail businesses. At the same time, in order to support these businesses the town must grow. Since 1980, the town has shrunk by 120 people, over 6%. Perhaps the best approach is to try to encourage small business that can piggyback with existing larger business in Gilman or perhaps Champaign or Kankakee. A small business that would employ 10-20 people would also bring permanent people to town. This would increase housing as well as support existing and new retail ventures. Their close proximity to the interstate offers many opportunities. Trucking firms or distribution centers would be a viable option. There are many prime locations downtown that could possibly house new businesses.

Local Industry

The soy crushing plant, Imbraso, owned by a Brazilian company, is one of the biggest employers and is a relatively new facility. The little signage that was there was not friendly to the community. Overall, the buildings and storage bins looked in great condition, while the driveway could use some improvements. This facility has huge from what you already have is the key.potential to draw more businesses to the area such as a bio-diesel plant or distribution center. The Cargill facility is another major employer with the potential to entice new businesses such as an ethanol plant, feed processing, food processing and additional trucking services. The sewer treatment plant built in the 1980's looked like a modern facility. Along with a new water treatment facility, a zoned Industrial Park, interstate access, and two railroads that cross, it should entice new business opportunities. Drawing

Infrastructure

We loved the brick roads, planters, lampposts, and signs. They really dressed up the town. Some sidewalks were in need of repair but few roads really needed improvement. Certain parts of the town did not have sidewalks and this should be addressed.

Health Care Services

There are two medical clinics and one pharmacy in Gilman and appear to handle most of the medical needs of the community. The addition of a dentist in Gilman would be a great plus. The closest dentist was in Onarga and according to different sources he is very hard to get in for an appointment. The nursing home was well kept and appeared to be a nice place to live. We thought it was impressive that Gilman had an ambulance service.

Other

The war memorials and firefighter memorial were fantastic additions along the highway. They are in great location along the highway and in fine condition. We were told by a patron that he is fixing up the old library and turning it into a reception hall. Having somewhere to hold weddings and larger parties is definitely a plus as well as a great use of an older building. It is nice to see the American Legion building in a small community. We understand that, that is where receptions and after funeral dinners are held.

Recreation

The park is very nice, if you are able to find it. The absence of signs leading to the park created some confusion for the group members and potentially some frustrations for those visiting Gilman's park for family gatherings or baseball games. The group found it hard to believe that all of the baseball games were played on one diamond. The fact that this is even possible indicates the lack of involvement in the local park district. The park's pavilion is beautiful and could really be a fantastic place for family gatherings. The duck pond and nice play equipment is also a positive. The tennis court was an eyesore and is in need of renovation. The addition of a sidewalk or some sort of walkway around the park would be a great addition to the park area and nice for residents to walk throughout the year.

When discussing what teenagers do on the weekends, the group was met with the typical answer, "nothing." When this topic was further explored we found that if they stay in town for the weekend, they will typically stay at a friend's house all night. Most travel to Kankakee or Champaign on the weekends to hang out at their malls, go to their bowling alleys, or catch a movie. These teens feel that Gilman has nothing to offer them as far as entertainment goes and produces the thought pattern that they must leave Gilman to get what they want. Possibly this is why the young people are not returning to Gilman as adults, because they feel it has little to offer its young people? The addition of a skate park or rink, bowling alley, movie theater, coffee shop, or ice cream shop would keep the teens in town on the weekends and allow them to spend their money in Gilman. Your teenagers deserve a place to hang out.

Tourism

The only tourism listed for Gilman was the old Antique Store but we discovered it is only open from 9-12 on Saturday morning. This was a bit of a let down.

Turning the closed church into a tourist stop is an idea for another attraction.

Visitor/Community Information

Information can be found on the internet and in brochures at the Historical Society of Gilman. Could more information be distributed to other places in the community?

General Observations drawn from Community Residents

The people in the town of Gilman should be very proud of their community. Many appeared to be farmers that were in town the day we visited. Everyone we spoke to had nothing but positive comments about their town. The town seemed very peaceful and everyone knew each other. We found it interesting to hear how the second generation of Hispanic families is starting to blend with the rest of the community. People on the west side of town seemed a little upset about the train situation and rightfully so. The trains are getting to be 200 cars long and can cause long waits for those who need to cross the

tracks. The addition of an overpass or underpass would reduce these frustrations as well improve safety for these residents.

Final Thoughts

Small towns cannot compete with the larger cities for large employers because they cannot offer the same financial incentives. Perhaps it is necessary to educate people on the big advantage of living in a small town versus living in a large city. The following are but a few of the advantages:

- Friendly neighbors—everybody knows everybody
- Safer environment---less crime
- Better school systems
- Slower paced life
- More economical living environment
- Much better quality of life.

This list can go on and on. Small towns have so much to offer. It is YOUR job to make others aware of this.

What Now

- Self-Evaluation is the first step for improvement
- Set Measurable and Achievable goals
- Capitalize on what you already have
- Keep Talking...
- Re-Evaluate and Re-Evaluate

Thank you for the opportunity to enter your community! We all truly enjoyed it.