

## Welcoming Communities: It's the Little Things That Matter

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Summer is here! School is out so it is now time to think about summer fun and vacations. That often means travel and I suspect this year we will see a lot of travel, even with higher-than-normal fuel prices.

As a person focused on community development, travel to me translates into people coming into our communities, for maybe the first time, and our need to make a good first impression. I want them to think, “this is a great community – I need to come back here and spend more time.” Sometimes that sentiment even goes to the next level, and they might even think about relocating. I bet some of you are saying to yourself, “that never happens in Nebraska,” but I can tell you it does. I don’t have any firm facts to share but informally I have had many people make that comment to me. People visit a community and decide to move there — and it happens more often than you think in our state!

So, first impressions of a community are important. They can be created in many ways, and you might think of them as a package of images and experiences. Nebraska gives us a kaleidoscope of natural images with our expansive fields and rolling hills, sky (think of sunrises and sunsets) and our lakes and rivers. If you are driving through Nebraska these images are front and center. First impressions are also created through our community entrances and streetscapes and even down to how we interact with travelers and tourists when they do business with our quick stops, cafes and retail businesses. It is not one thing but a collection of little things that contribute to a great community first impression.

So, what does this mean to an everyday Nebraskan? As I see it, we all have a role to play! Here are two very different ways each of us can contribute:

- Our state got slammed by high winds this year – not for just a few days but for week after week. Clean ups are needed at all levels. It could be as simple as helping your neighbor down the street clean up tree limbs or picking up some items that have blown in their yard. It could also be partnering with a local community group and the local parks and rec staff to help out in a park or public area. There is always something that needs to be done. It takes some coordination but the community pride it generates can be worth it.
- Have you ever started a conversation with a person *you did not know* while waiting in line at a store or perhaps seated near you in a cafe? When I have been a part of one of these conversations, they just seem to happen spontaneously. You quickly find out if the person wants to continue and if they do, the conversation can be a lot of fun. Give it a try. For someone visiting our state, it could be a way for them to find out something new and at the very least, you probably helped them feel at ease and welcomed to your community and our state. In the tourism world there is a term for this – it is called being “assertively friendly”. It was coined by the Disney organization many years ago to encourage their staff to reach out to their customers. I like to think of it a just being *Nebraska friendly*.

These may seem like small things in the larger picture of a community first impression, they are important. As Nebraskans we have a collective responsibility to our neighborhoods, communities, and our state. We need to build and reinforce that great first impression as a wonderful place to live, work and play.

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