

### **Oshkosh versus Osnabruck**

I was in Osnabruck, Germany, last week. Our UWO College of Business has an exchange agreement with their Business School, and they flew me over there for a week to teach a short course on statistics. It was an interesting experience.

The first thing you notice about just about any European city is how much more compact they are than American cities. The houses are more densely packed, much like in our own Irving Church historic district. The residential streets are also narrower, typically 20 feet or so wide, just enough for 2 cars to pass each other.

In Osnabruck, they had an interesting way of providing on-street parking. The edges of the 20 foot wide street would have low, perhaps 3 inch curbs. Between the curb and the sidewalk would be alternating patches of cobblestone (typically 25 feet long by about 6 feet wide) and greenery (generally 10 to 20 feet long by 6 feet wide). Cars would pull off onto the cobblestone patches; the green areas would usually have 1 large tree surrounded by low plants or shrubs. The combination provided parallel parking slots, as well as shade, foliage, and some green space to absorb the runoff from the sidewalk. It's a combination we might want to consider bringing here to Oshkosh.

The other thing that struck me was the complete, total lack of overhead wires. There were none, absolutely zero, anywhere. I would assume all the electric, phone, and cable wires were buried under the street, entering the houses in the same unseen ways as their water, sewer and natural gas lines. It would be costly for us to bury all of our utility lines like that – perhaps as much for the typical household as the cost of a year's cell phone service – but I think the payoff would be worth it. Without all those wires overhead, all of our residential streets could be tree lined, just like theirs. Those trees providing shade for the pedestrians, and somehow freshened and even sweetened the air beneath them.

Generally, the houses had little to no front yards – again, something that you perhaps only see in Oshkosh in the Irving Church area. In reflecting on this on the long flight home, it seemed to me that our required 35 foot setbacks accomplish pretty much nothing. A 35' deep front yard is too large for a garden area – 10 to 15 feet would be all you'd want for that – and too small to do anything else with except mow. When's the last time you actually used your front yard? How often does it get used? Almost never? That's what I thought.

Last month, the city asked us to participate in a "visioning" exercise. I did, online. I'm looking forward to hearing what the results turn out to be. I would hope that many of the other participants are also interested in developing a more livable and more attractive Oshkosh. Certainly not just some clone of Osnabruck – after all, Oshkosh does have its own special attributes that are well worth preserving. But maybe an Oshkosh willing to borrow a little of Osnabruck's charm, using it to enhance our own best features.

I wouldn't mind living in the best of both worlds. How about you?

[Maybe add an editorial comment about whether the online survey is still available.]