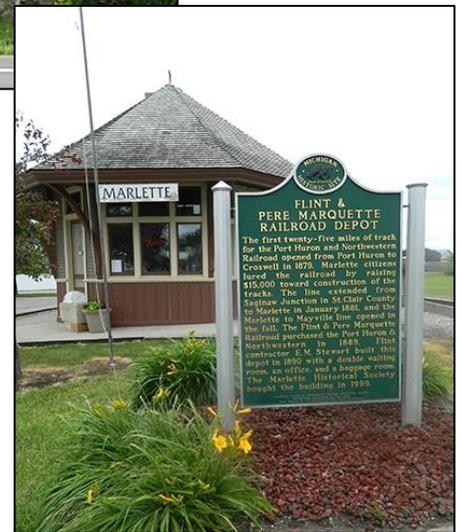




First Impressions

Assessing your Community for Tourism





First Impressions for Tourism Summary Report Marlette, Michigan September 2017

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Introduction/Main Header

I. Introduction

The First Impressions program was developed in 1991 by the University of Wisconsin Extension to help communities learn about their existing strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of first-time visitors. The program's results have been used to inform economic initiatives or further develop community goals to communities across the nation and Canada. Michigan State University Extension has adapted this program to meet the needs of Michigan communities.

This summary report is based on the observations of four visitors/assessors. Before beginning their visit to Marlette, this assessment team was asked to conduct online research to help plan their visit. They then traveled individually to Marlette between May 15 and June 30, 2017. Each team member recorded their experiences driving and walking through the City of Marlette, visiting stores, restaurants, outdoor spaces, and additional tourism-related sites. They evaluated community characteristics including appearance, amenities, access and other criteria by completing a multi-page assessment. Their assessment results and photographs of the community were then downloaded into a Qualtrics data management program. The compiled results were extrapolated to create this written report and the public presentation.

Key findings were presented at a public forum on September 25, 2017. A copy of the PowerPoint public presentation and Qualtrics data are attached to this report.



II. Key Findings

Marlette has assets

Marlette has some wonderful assets including the train depot, historic buildings, peaceful and clean residential areas, close proximity to hunting, fishing and beaches, nearby Metro-Detroit populations, measurable pass-through traffic volumes, as well as a summer outdoor jazz series, festivals and an agricultural character.

Marlette may be a long way from becoming a tourist destination, but these assets serve as a base from which to capitalize and build Marlette's tourism industry.

Pre-Assessment

Online research was conducted by the visitors prior to traveling to Marlette. The purpose was to prepare for the in-person tourist experience. The visiting team found it challenging to find clear, centralized on-line information about local tourism-related amenities and activities. The assessors commented that they worked harder and longer than most visitors would have to find useful tourism information. Websites were geared more toward the resident than the visitor.

Downtown Attributes

- Hospitality and friendliness of the residents
- Safety and security
- Directional signage
- Business information displayed on exterior of buildings
- Sidewalks well-maintained
- Parking charges non-existent
- Customers greeted when walking through the door
- Gateway entrance signs

“My most positive experience was the personal interactions I had with the residents and business owners/operators.”

Downtown Weaknesses

- No bike lanes on roadway
- Few pedestrians
- Lack of reasons to be downtown (little variety)
- Only one lodging option



Lasting Impressions

The visiting team identified these items as their most positive Marlette experiences: Personal interactions, nature (catalpa trees in park), Gayle's Trail, the grain elevator, the ice cream store and the 'hidden' rocks with painted positive messages.

What are the biggest challenges facing Marlette?

There are several challenges that Marlette faces including the drive-through feeling of the downtown, a lack of cohesiveness or identity and limited marketing efforts, all of which made it difficult to identify businesses/sites to visit or reasons to stop and meander (i.e. coffee shop, retail therapy, place to picnic, etc.).

“...there are opportunities for the area that are overlooked, take advantage of them...”

Nevertheless, there are attractions that could be developed (see recommendations). Marlette is also in close proximity to tourist destinations (i.e. beaches) and those tourists could be tapped to visit quality attractions in Marlette, perhaps for a day-trip, if they were aware of and saw value in what was being offered.

III. Recommendations

Create a Plan

- Visit the Heritage website (<http://museum.msu.edu/heritagetourism>) and develop a community-based tourism plan.
- Consider a facilitated process.

Establish an Identity

- Determine your niche and capitalize on it (ex. If the Marlette niche is that of a drive-through city, how can this best be leveraged?).
- Identify authentic and unique experiences – look beyond the obvious.
- Determine your customer, their preferences and what would get them to stop and visit.
- Engage all ages in community involvement – brainstorming, contests, planning, projects, etc. See <http://museum.msu.edu/heritagetourism> for examples of a community planning framework. Although specific to heritage tourism the information can be applied to any type of tourism development efforts.
- Explore Agri-tourism as a niche. Identify farmers, explore what other communities are doing, and become involved with Michigan Agritourism (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>), consider MSUE Agri-Tourism workshop for farmers (walkmich@msu.edu) and review articles (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>).



Create a Stronger and More Cohesive Web-Presence/Social Media

- Develop short promo video(s), post on YouTube and link into community websites.
- Organize existing websites, to make searching easier. Consider consolidating some sites to decrease search time.
- Utilize search engine analytics to better position the primary website(s) and respond to the question, “What is there to do in Marlette?”
- Add relevant attraction and tourist information. Make website manipulation quick and easy for the visitor. Note proximity from other attractions (i.e. Petroglyphs, beaches, etc.).
- Update all sites regularly (daily or weekly), ensuring business hours and other pertinent information is always accurate.

Educate and Involve the Community

- Be a tourist in your own community (ex. Alcona County Bus Tour).
- Encourage and support entrepreneurship. Provide ‘how to start a business’ and other entrepreneur training, such as an online program presented by MSU Extension Educator Andy Northrop - *Shared Economy for Entrepreneurs and Tourism* (northro5@anr.msu.edu).
- Encourage community art projects (ex. Grayling - Paint by number on local buildings).
- Create a game in which those driving by can participate (ex. “Stop and Discover our Community”).
- Develop a geocaching initiative.
- Begin a Marlette *Story Corps*, whose mission is to honor and celebrate the lives of everyday Americans by listening to their stories. Encourage residents to stop at the Marlette Depot on Sunday’s and tell their story. Or initiate something similar on Facebook.
- Use the stories of people who have made Marlette their home to weave a narrative that informs a sense of place and exemplifies what makes Marlette a great place to live, work, and play and *visit*.
- Create downtown gathering places.

Downtown Coordination

- Encourage downtown activities and pedestrian traffic (ex. West Branch Fabulous Fridays)
- Continue downtown improvements (Façade, parking, filling vacant storefronts, visible business signage, creatively using vacant building window space, sandwich boards, etc.).
- Improve marketing by involving downtown businesses, increasing cooperative marketing, utilizing regional guides and Pure Michigan branding, applying for state matching funds via DDA, etc.
- Provide training to business owners/employees (customer service, local event updates/brochures).
- Coordinate among downtown and area businesses an updated list of things to do in Marlette. This could include short activity groupings. For example, “Eat at ___ (list), take a walk in our unique neighborhoods (include map and points of interest), learn about the history of the Marlette Depot, experience dining in our historic restaurant and take a driving break, stop at _____ for a delicious ice cream sundae”.
- Ensure all businesses are aware of and promote what there is to do in Marlette, including information that makes each place special and meaningful to the tourist.
- Encourage monthly or quarterly business after hours at downtown businesses.
- Attend the Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference on Oct. 4 & 5 in Howell, MI- http://msue.anr.msu.edu/events/connecting_entrepreneurial_communities_2017.



- Welcome ‘peer-to-peer’ or ‘shared economy’ business opportunities such as Vayable, TaskRabbit, Spinlister, Airbnb and VRBO.

Make Connections for New Tourism Opportunities

- Connect with local campgrounds, industry and farms to support tourism activities.
- Develop a short walking or driving tour – post online and have hard copies at local businesses.
- Create health/fitness connections (Ex. Detroit Slow Roll or an urban obstacle course)
- Promote the natural resources of the area.
- Investigate rural communities who have a successful tourism industry – what can you do differently?

Walking/Driving Tours

- Quilt Trail – Ensure hardcopy maps always available, create an easy to access website (see alconaquilttrail.com), post quilt trail website on all websites.
- Develop a Historical Trail – Identify 10-15 buildings, obtain permission to include them, create a brochure with map/short descriptions of history/architecture for each building, and provide online access to brochure/QR code.

Lodging

- Encourage more VRBO and/or Airbnb short-term rentals.
- Evaluate need for long-term lodging opportunities.

IV. Additional Next Steps

- Catalog existing funding sources – search-out new funding opportunities.
- Schedule a discussion between the CLT, local government leaders, Chamber of Commerce representatives, library employees and other local entities to review this document and discuss opportunities to work together.
- Search-out low-hanging tourism-related projects, picking one or two items that can be accomplished immediately and ensure its completion.

Summary of MSU Extension tourism development programs:

The following programs are available statewide to guide decision making around tourism development and implementation.

Understanding Tourism for Michigan Communities (UTMC)

This interactive workshop highlights tourism industry statistics and exposes communities to trends and travelers’ interests, as well as a number of niche tourism markets. UTMC is specifically designed to promote regional synergies, leadership and tourism product development.



Planning for Tourism

This workshop walks communities through a planning process and uses life-cycle models to explore where communities may be in establishing themselves as tourism destinations. Additional tools will be employed to determine their readiness, identify next steps for action and explore engagement strategies for coalition building within the community.

First Impressions: Assessing Your Community for Tourism (FIT)

FIT is a comprehensive community assessment conducted by unannounced visitors in a host community positioned to lead development based on the program results. FIT involves developing community leadership, assessing the host community, sharing the results in a community forum open to all, and providing suggestions to drive community action. Overall, FIT helps communities learn about their strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of first-time visitors.

Strengthening Tourism Leadership: Facilitation Tools to Move Community-driven Tourism Forward

This experiential workshop is designed to build and strengthen the skills necessary to lead and facilitate productive community groups. Participants will practice using a variety of facilitation tools and learn techniques and verbal skills necessary to lead group discussions, reach consensus, set outcome-based goals and generate ideas for action.

Custom Tourism Programs

MSU Extension tourism educators are equipped to meet the diverse needs and interests of Michigan communities. Specialized programs are available to communities with a specific interest in agri-tourism, eco-tourism and/or cultural/heritage tourism.

Learn more

Learn more about MSU Extension tourism programs by visiting <http://msue.anr.msu.edu/topic/info/tourism>.

