



First Impressions Tourism Assessment West Branch, MI



Summary of Results September 2025

Compiled by:
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I. Introduction

The First Impressions (FI) 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 FI program has been used to help communities across the U.S. and Canada inform economic initiatives or further develop community goals and has been modified over the years by various Extension services based on different needs. Michigan State University (MSU) Extension adapted this program via a multi-state grant provided by the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development in 2014. MSU Extension's First Impressions Tourism Assessments (FIT) is a unique version of FI for our state and, since inception in 2016, has seen approximately 25 Michigan communities participate in the program.

What is FIT?

FIT is a comprehensive community assessment conducted by unannounced visitors in a host community. FIT involves developing leaders, assessing the host community, sharing results in a forum open to all, and providing suggestions to advance community-driven tourism. Overall, FIT helps participating communities learn about their strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of first-time visitors. Since inception, FIT has empowered leaders and stakeholders to develop action plans to improve their communities based on new perspectives and suggestions from first-time visitors. These action plans are proven to be the catalysts needed to launch and expand a wide-range of initiatives to support community-driven tourism development across Michigan.

II. Summary of Results for West Branch, MI

Building from existing synergies, The City of West Branch and West Branch Township joined together for a FIT assessment focused on both communities. As part of their Redevelopment Ready Certifications, The Michigan Economic Development Corporation provided financial support for the communities to participate in MSU Extension's FIT program. Throughout this report, West Branch will represent both communities. The key findings summarized in this report were presented to the West Branch community in October 2025.

Visitor/Assessor Profiles:

The West Branch communities and surrounding area (WBSA) received five visitors in the Summer 2025, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors". All five assessors had minimal-to-no knowledge of WBSA tourism industry and assets prior to participating as first-time visitors. To generate diverse perspectives, assessors from different professional backgrounds were recruited within MSU Extension across Upper and Lower Michigan communities. Three assessors visited WBSA alone, and the remaining two assessors brought their spouse/partner resulting in a total of seven visitors.

Data generated in this report reflect the five assessors selected to participate. Of the five assessors, there were three males and two females. Two assessors identified as Millennials and three as Generation X. More than half the assessors are parents of young children. Assessors identified interests in their personal lives as artists, bicyclists (or mountain bikers), crafter, foodies, extensive traveler, fisher, gardener, hikers, historian, and/or outdoor enthusiast. To generate diverse experiences, assessors visited WBSA separately from one another and during different days of the week between late May and early July. Wednesday, Thursday, and Sunday were the days most visited. While in the WBSA, four assessors stayed in a hotel or motel and one camped. Four of the



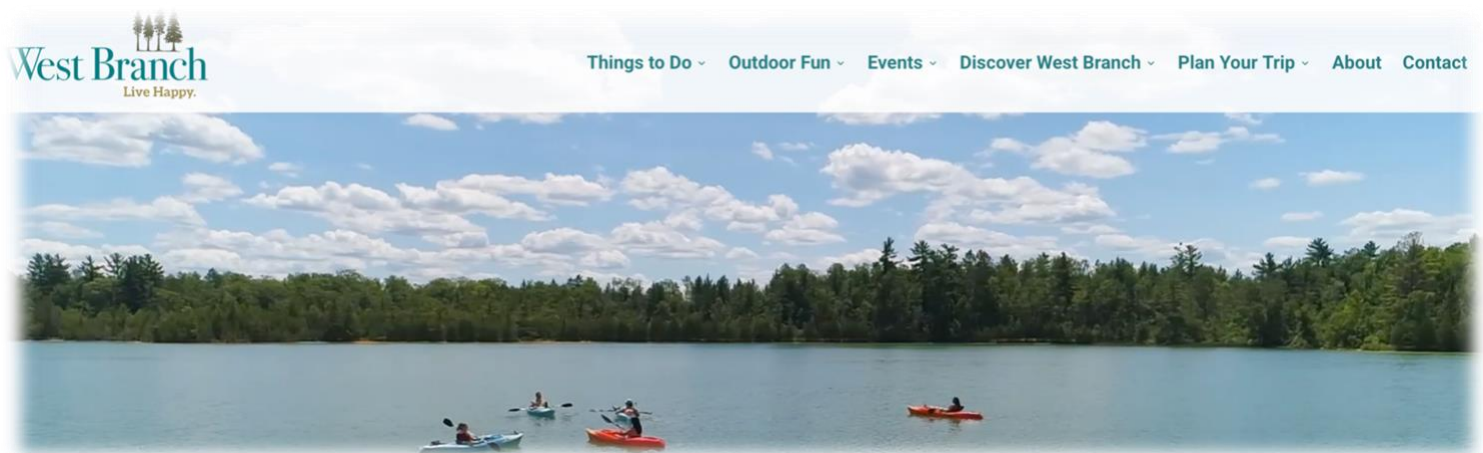
five assessors spent between 24-36 hours while one assessor stayed slightly less than 24 hours visiting WBSA's wide range of tourism.

In addition to onsite visits, assessors also spent between 1-4 hours researching WBSA (prior to assessments) using mobile devices and/or personal computers to gain a deeper understanding of West Branch community's assets, services, and things to do. Various West Branch related websites and social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, and/or TripAdvisor were explored along with other resources like Pure Michigan, too.

This report is a general summary of data collected highlighting assessors' experiences captured before, during, and after via FIT survey data. Results are separated by **Pre-Visit**, **The Visit**, and **Post-Visit**. FIT results also include Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities identified by assessors and are provided at the end of the report.

Pre-Visit: Web Research & Digital First Impressions

Most Helpful Website for Visitors 🖱️ [VisitWestBranch.com](https://www.visitwestbranch.com)



Why It Was Helpful?

- **Comprehensive & Tourism-Focused**
 - Specifically designed for visitors.
 - Centralized listings of things to do, places to stay, shopping, dining, and recreation.
 - Helped travelers figure out:
 - Where to spend time.
 - Lodging options.
 - Proximity of attractions to accommodations.



- **Engaging Media Content**
 - Expansive use of videos and YouTube links provided a better sense of the area.
 - Made research more interactive and engaging.
- **Promotion of Key Attractions**
 - Rifle River and nearby recreation areas prominently featured, reinforcing outdoor opportunities.
- **Good Starting Point**
 - Visitors described it as a strong foundation for building an itinerary.
 - Provided direction for digging deeper into specific assets.

Were there other “helpful” websites for trip planning?

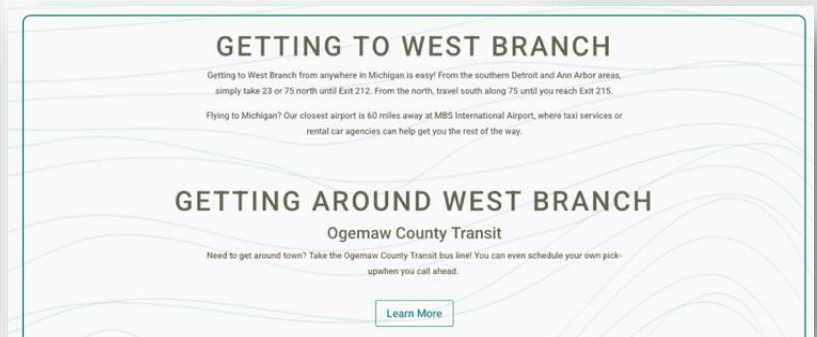
West Branch Events - provided a few local event listings that helped round out the picture of what’s happening in the area.

Google Maps –helpful for:

- Gauging distances and travel times between recreational sites
- Locating dining and shopping options around downtown West Branch
- Mapping out routes for outdoor activities

Tripadvisor - overview helped in:

- Creating a master list of attractions
- Identifying indoor activities for rainy days
- Comparing user reviews to prioritize stops





Based on pre-visit research, the destination is known for these attractions and/or events?

- Downtown West Branch
- Golfing
- Ogemaw Hills
- ORV Trails
- Outlet Mall
- Rifle River Recreation (x2)
- Victorian Festival



What impression did pre-visit research give you of the destination?

Visitor Impressions Prior to Visiting (Based on Research)

- **Tourism Potential:** West Branch has the key ingredients of a great travel destination.
- **Downtown Appeal:** Photos and descriptions showed a charming downtown with highlights like Irons Park and the Riverwalk.
- **Events & Activities:** Local event calendars helped visitors plan and created a sense of energy and community.
- **Outdoor & Shopping Hub:** The town was seen as a center for shopping, golfing, and outdoor fun—similar to other popular Michigan spots.
- **Gateway Location:** Many visitors viewed West Branch as a convenient stop for food, lodging, and supplies before heading out for activities like hunting, fishing, or ORV riding in nearby areas.





The Visit:

Upon arriving to the destination, assessors are asked to capture their “first five-minute impression”. Responses from four assessors has been provided. The fifth assessor’s response shared during West Branch’s FIT forum in the form of a personalized video.

First 5-Minute Impression(s)

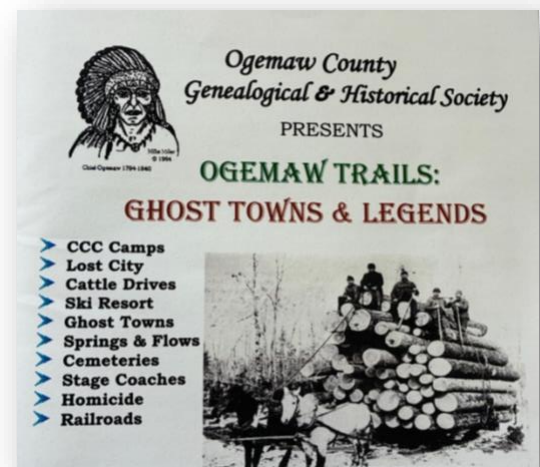
- *While exiting the highway I was immediately impressed at the signage pointing to downtown. Surrounded by the typical fast-food restaurants, one could simply stop at McDonalds and keep going. But with the signage, large sidewalks, and streetlights with "West Branch" banners -- it was a welcoming invitation to drive 3 miles off the highway. Upon entering downtown, I was excited to check out the small shops and restaurants lining the main road. The planters overflowing with flowers and the music made me want to hop out of my car and check it out. I got the clear impression the city prides itself on maintenance - the sidewalks were clear, there was no visible litter, and the building facades all were well maintained. I got the impression of a welcoming small town that wanted visitors.*
- *I found the drive in from 75 to be standard for a well-visited tourism community of MI. Once I got past the exit and further into downtown, I was pleasantly surprised to see the active and healthy looking downtown being well cared for.*
- *We came into town heading north on M-130 and saw many billboards and typical commercial development then turned Right on Court Street and saw the downtown from a slight hill. The young trees, planters, American flags, and new sidewalks were all very attractive. I parked on a side street in front of a mural depicting the town's history, it was a colorful mural and kind of humorous. The visitor center was a short distance away, clearly marked and inviting.*
- *I purposely entered the community from the north, and not off I-75 at either exit. When I first encountered the downtown, I was impressed at how new and clean the streetscaping was, and by the variety of businesses and restaurants that were there. I had never thought of West Branch beyond the outlet mall exit honestly so it was very pleasing and surprising. I did think that all the new concrete made things feel a bit "sterile" and the area could benefit from some placemaking. Outside of the downtown, I was a little overwhelmed by the traffic on I-75BL from end to end, this feels like a busy place.*





Visitor Motives – Assessors were presented with a list of 15 visitor motives and then asked to select the top three motives someone might have to visit this community and surrounding area.

• Outdoor recreation (MTB, Hiking, etc.)	5
• Shop	4
• In transit to somewhere else	2
• Relax	2
• Other Dining	1
• Engage in business activities	1
• Get entertained/for entertainment	1
• Visit friends and family	1
• Visit historical sites	1
• Other	0
• Engage in religious activities	0
• Agritourism	0
• Experience a unique culture	0
• Get away from people	0
• Be in nature	0





West Branch's Downtown Business Area - Rankings are generated from individual assessor scores then aggregated and sorted from highest to lowest with the highest possible score of 15. These scores identify, from first-time visitor perspectives, West Branch's strengths and weaknesses in their historic downtown business area.

Parking charges are reasonable	15
Walking sidewalks are well maintained	15
Parking is centrally located	14
Parking is secure	14
Additional walking paths are available	13
Business information is displayed on the exterior of businesses	13
Inviting signs are displayed on the exterior of businesses	13
The downtown business area is handicapped accessible	13
The main downtown business area feels distinct or special	13
There are areas of green space	13
This is a welcoming downtown	13
The grounds have been landscaped with flowers, trees, shrubs, and bushes	12
The main downtown business area is a major tourists draw for the area	12
There is pedestrian traffic (foot and bike)	11
There is a mix of ages	10
There are walker/biker friendly signs	9
There is a gateway point to enter/leave town (piece of art, mural, sign, etc.)	9
Bike lanes exist on roadways	6
Vehicle traffic is managed to encourage pedestrian movement, via foot or bike	5
There is a mix of ethnic groups	3



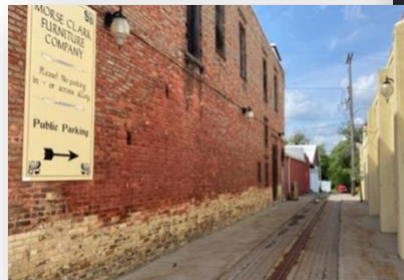
Downtown Impression and Ideas:

- *As someone who likes to bike - I was impressed by the bike path/large sidewalk going from my hotel all the way downtown. Bike access on the multi-use path is excellent!*
- *I liked seeing businesses promote public restrooms on their storefronts.*





- *Traffic seems to go about 35 mph through there which feels too fast to anticipate that a vehicle will slow down for pedestrians. An “on demand” traffic signal at this intersection would be helpful.*
- *This alley seems ripe for a little placemaking with murals (modern or historical), string lights, etc.*



Art, Cultural & Heritage Impressions:

• Downtown

- Water trail appeared fragmented and hard to find
- Buildings could serve as canvases for art or maps

• Unique Stories:

- Bigfoot folklore and Native American history are present but underdeveloped or fading?

• Accessibility and Information Issues:

- Farmers' market *handout* information lacked details like time and day.
- Historical trails and driving tours exist but are difficult for typical visitors to access
 - Info only available through books.
 - GPS coordinates are not useful





Destination Attributes - Rankings are generated from individual assessor scores then aggregated and sorted from highest to lowest. These scores identify strengths and weaknesses as a destination.

Customer service	13	Variety of activities to do	10
Variety and quality of shopping options	13	Value for money in tourism experiences	10
Cleanliness	12	Nature-based activities	10
Conveniently located	12	Historic/heritage attractions	10
Accessibility of destination	12	Pedestrian travel infrastructure	10
Special events	12	Activities for children	9
Community involvement	12	Variety and quality of accommodations	9
Hospitality and friendliness of residents	11	Adventure-based activities	9
Safety and security	11	Interesting architecture	9
Visitor accessibility to attractions	11	Cultural attractions	9
Road conditions	11	Communication infrastructure	9
Shopping facilities	11	Dedicated tourism attractions	8
Variety and quality of restaurants	11	Directional signage	7
Authenticity of attractions	11	Well-marked roads/attractions	7
		Well known landmarks	7

Destination Attribute Thoughts and Ideas-



Irons Park concert on a beautiful evening and seeing so many people there, young and old.



I was completely enchanted by the Children's Garden on the River Trail. This is the essence of placemaking...



Senses, Safety, and Feeling Welcomed –

Assessors are asked a series of questions regarding whether they experienced (un)pleasant smells, sounds, and whether they always felt safe.

- Three assessors experienced unpleasant sounds, such as “*loud traffic roaring through town*” and “*racist language at a local restaurant*”.
- All five assessors noted they did not experience (un)pleasant smells while in West Branch.
- When it came to safety, one assessor noted their sense of safety changed significantly when walking one block North and South of downtown.



“Did you feel welcomed in the community at all times?”

- All five assessors stated they felt welcomed in the community. Two assessors provided direct feedback when it came to feeling welcomed in West Branch.

1. The culture and friendly nature of everyone I interacted with was highly memorable.

2. Everyone was so welcoming when I entered stores and there was no shortage of advice on other places to visit, including a suggestion to visit East Tawas! I found the downtown shopping area very welcoming with a historical flare.





Post-Visit Reflections:

What will you remember most six months from now?



Natural & Recreational Assets

- Outdoor activities outside of town
 - (e.g., hiking, exploring nature)
- Kayaking opportunities
- Inland lakes and Rifle River
- (Hard-to-follow) WB River Trail
- Irons Park



Cultural & Heritage Assets

- Friendly and welcoming local culture
- Sesquicentennial Celebration
- Historical museum
- Time capsule event/Efforts to preserve and salvage historical items
- All the history tours confined to books



Built Environment & Infrastructure

- Downtown area and community engagement
- Dining options
- Proximity to I-75



Visitor Impressions of West Branch – Key Takeaways

- **Tourism Momentum & History**
 - West Branch has a long history as a tourism destination, ebbed and flowed over time
- **Downtown Investment & Appeal**
 - Downtown appeared updated and welcoming, giving visitors the impression the community **values tourism**.
- **Shift in Attractions**
 - Outlet mall is no longer a central attraction like it was.
 - WB is repositioning itself around **regional recreation** and local experiences instead.
- **Community & Events**
 - Reinforces a sense of authenticity but also shows a balance between serving locals and visitors.
- **Positioning as a Hub**
 - Location in the middle of Michigan makes West Branch a natural **regional hub** for recreation and travel.



Question	Definitely	Maybe	Unlikely
I would feel compelled to stop in if passing by?	3	2	0
I would recommend the destination to my friends and family?	2	3	0
I would visit the destination on a pleasure trip in the future?	0	3	2





FIT Assessor Identified **Strengths**, **Challenges**, and **Opportunities** –

As part of a FIT assessment, participating communities receive insights to their Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities (SCOs) from assessors. These insights are gathered directly from specific survey data questions designed to elicit results to support SCOs. Opportunities, as they are presented here, serve only as suggestions to foster and support, where and when feasible, further dialogue once a community has completed the FIT program. Strengths, challenges, and/or opportunities should not be viewed a single or all-encompassing solution(s) to a community's ecological, economic, and/or social challenges.

Strengths

1. Outdoor & Natural Assets

- Proximity to lakes and Rifle River
- Surrounded by public lands and outdoor recreation appeal
 - (golf, trails, riverwalk, hunting, hiking, etc.)

2. Downtown Appeal

- Historical charm and welcoming feel
- Cohesive design and revitalization

3. Location & Accessibility

- Convenient access via I-75
- Strong positioning as a hub for exploration of the wider region

4. Business & Economic Assets

- Thriving local businesses
- Opportunity for new ventures @ mall
- Variety of restaurants, shops, and services

5. Heritage & Cultural Assets

- Well-documented local history with trails and resources
- Historical architecture and facades add character

6. Organizational Support

- Active Convention & Visitors Bureau and partners
- Transportation system (strength and weakness)



Weaknesses

Confusing Visitor Experiences

- Restrictive historical tours
- Lack of QR code use
- Geocaching challenges
- Transportation system unresponsive

Highway/Downtown Disconnect

- Easy for travelers to stop at I-75 exits and bypass downtown
- Business district near highway less inviting than downtown
- Difficult to draw visitors past the mall/Meijer into downtown

Traffic & Accessibility Issues

- Fast traffic through downtown
- Four-lane road encourages driving straight through

Unclear Community Identity

- Competing themes:
 - Victorian, Nature, Bigfoot
- Limited public emphasis on local history

Destination Limitations

- Locals suggesting “Tawas”
- Distances between assets unclear
- Fragmented water trail

Opportunities

1. Modernize Visitor Experience(s)
2. Boost Authenticity in Marketing
3. Enhance Natural Assets
4. Expand Infrastructure, Accessibility, & Community Spaces
5. Placemaking and Public Art



Modernize Visitor Experiences

Revamp/Refresh historic driving tours:

- Offer free web-based access to tours info to increase engagement
- Replace GPS coordinates with QR codes linking to digital content/web
- Consider phasing out “paid” booklets and/or making free at hotels and local biz
- Can funding for booklets be offset by CVB or other partners?

Improve River Trail navigation:

- Add clear signage and maps along the trail, especially downtown
- Consider painting a visual trail path through parking lots and town



Clarify ORV access:

- Update signage and online info to clearly state where ORVs are allowed
- Remove misleading signs or add QR codes linking to ordinance details



Boost Authenticity in Marketing

Decide how to

- Leverage or retire the “Bigfoot” identity – is it part of WB brand?
- Where does the Victorian identity fit into WB identity?



Improve social media presence:

- Replace stock images with photos of real people and businesses
- Highlight unique local shops, events, and personalities
- Use platforms like Instagram and Facebook to showcase daily life and charm
- Consider refreshing tours with new stories or visuals and color (for web too)





Enhance Natural Assets

Showcase the river as a community asset through signage, interpretation

- Host family-friendly races or creek-based activities (e.g. duck races)

Reimagine Iron's Park landscaping:

- Reduce mowing near the riverbank to prevent erosion and improve water quality
- Replace landscape fabric with rain gardens in wet areas
- Partner with local garden clubs for maintenance and education
- Add interpretive signage or kiosks about river ecology and stormwater



Expand Infrastructure, Accessibility, and Community Spaces

Install on-demand traffic signals at key pedestrian crossings

- (e.g., 4th & Houghton)

Activate alleyways and underused spaces:

- Add string lights, murals, and directional signage to enhance walkability

Promote bike-ability:

- Market West Branch as a bike-friendly town with suggested routes, events,
- Place maps in town to assets and joint community rides



Expand Infrastructure, Accessibility, & Community Spaces

Repurpose vacant downtown parcels:

- Explore acquisition of auctioned buildings or closed gas stations near City Hall
- Convert into event venues, community centers, or pop-up markets

Leverage outlet mall potential:

- Encourage continued development of lifestyle-focused businesses
 - Golf, Asian store/wrestling, etc.
- Explore options for
 - children's museum,
 - community art spaces,
 - or indoor recreation



Placemaking & Public Art

Use new streetscaping as a canvas for creativity:

- Paint benches, trash cans, and crosswalks
- Add interactive sidewalk games, murals, and public art installations
 - Coincide with/Connect to WB Water Trail

Collaborate/Engage with local artists and schools for public artwork/displays

- Rotating displays/murals, events





Assets Visited

Assessors intentionally experience a variety of public and private assets during FIT assessments. Along with a qualitative review, each asset is given a rating of poor, good, very good, and excellent. Some assets are visited multiple times by assessors separately resulting in several reviews. Reviews of assets are available. Contact the City of West Branch for more information. Orange stars indicate which assets would inspire assessors to return to West Branch and surrounding area.

Visited Assets

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

Asset List

- Children's Garden
- Christie's Cat Cafe
- City Hall
- Downtown Public Bathrooms
- ★ Downtown
- ★ Irons Park
- Lost Valley Campground
- ★ Lumber Jack Lodge
- Ogemaw County Historical Museum
- Ogemaw Hills Pathway
- ★ Ogemaw Hills Recreation
- Ogemaw Springs
- Ogemaw Trail: First People – An Ancient Journey
- Peach Lake

★ Rifle River Recreation

- River Trail
- Riverwalk Park /
- Tri-Terrace Motel
- Troll Landing
- Victorian Park
- Visitors Bureau / CVB
- Welcome Center
- ★ West Branch Disc Golf / Disc Golf Course
- ★ West Branch Outlet
- West Branch Secret Campground



Visited Assets

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

Eating and Drinking Places

- Buck's Country Cookin
- Compass Nutrition
- ★ G's Pizzeria
- The Harvest Grill
- ★ The Highway Brewing Company
- Loggers Depot
- Lumber Jack's Food and Spirits
- Rancheros
- Topsy Bear Bistro
- Walmart

G's Pizzeria came highly recommended and it did not disappoint. Pizza was great and the ambiance/decor was entertaining to look at.

Shopping Places

- 313 Designs
- Rifle Creek Archery Range
- ★ Christie's Cat Cafe
- Cuzins Cycle
- ★ The Dirty Mitten
- Downtown Antiques
- Fourth Street Artists Gallery
- Kit's
- Northern Thrifter
- ★ Outlet Mall
- ★ Pointer Hill
- Dragon Den Productions
- The Silver Lining



West Branch FIT Community Leadership Team

➤ Scott Bell	Lapham and Associates
➤ Jason Stroebe	WB City Council Member
➤ Emil Rousseau	WB Lumber Jack Lodge Hotel and Visitor Bureau
➤ Carol Adair	WB City Council Member
➤ Heather Neuhaus	Director-WB Chamber and Visitors Bureau
➤ John Dantzer	City Manager-City of WB
➤ Jeremy R. Hickmott	West Branch Township Clerk

Support for this FIT assessment was provided by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation as a benefit of West Branch's status as certified Redevelopment Ready Communities.



Next Steps for FIT Communities:

- Consult the FIT Community Next Steps manual provided to your Community Leadership Team (CLT).
- Learn from other FIT communities as to what is achievable by reviewing “FIT Successes Report-April 2021 Edition” - <https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/fit-successes-report-april-2021-edition>
- Consider exploring the raw data further and identifying parts of the results to act.
 - Facilitate discussions with private sector assets visited during the assessment and share asset reviews with each stakeholder and/or department.
- Schedule a public discussion meeting between the CLT, local leaders, and active citizens of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds.
- Review your community’s result and discuss strategies to work together.
- Search out low-hanging tourism-related projects from list of results, picking one or two items that can be accomplished immediately and ensure their completion.
- Schedule a follow-up discussion with MSU Extension Government and Community Vitality/Tourism educators to facilitate your next steps if you need assistance.
 - Contact MSU Extension Statewide Tourism Educator, Andy Northrop – northro5@msu.edu

Available Funding and Grants

- MI Economic Development Corporation – Public Spaces Community Places - <https://www.miplace.org/programs/public-spaces-community-places/>
- Match on Main - <https://www.miplace.org/small-business/match-on-main/>
- United States Department of Agriculture-Rural Development Grants <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs>
- Michigan Arts and Humanities, Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs (MCACA)
- Arts Midwest (Touring Gig Fund), National Endowment for the Arts
- Community Foundations and/or individual Foundation funds (example: Dow in Midland)
- Business/Corporate sponsorships (example: MI Sugar Trails - <http://www.sblc-mi.org/michigan-sugar-trails.html>)
- Crowd Funding, Individual donations / sponsorships (Lions Club, Rotary Club, etc.)



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-Preventing Destination Decline

- 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 Tourism (FIT) Assessments

- 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.

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>. Scan the QR code for easier access.





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