



# First Impressions: Tourism Assessment



## First Impressions Tourism Summary Report Village of Dundee, Michigan November 2018

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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. Michigan State University (MSU) Extension has adapted this program, adding a tourism focus to meet the needs of Michigan communities. MSU Extension's First Impressions: Tourism Assessments (FIT) is a unique version of FI for our state.

This summary report is based on the observations of five visitors, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors." Each was provided a stipend for participating. Before beginning an unannounced visit to Dundee, each assessor conducted online research of the destination. This research helped plan and shape the visit based on personal interests and activities in the community. Each then traveled individually to Dundee between July 15<sup>th</sup> and August 31<sup>st</sup> 2018. Assessors recorded their experiences conducting visitor research, maneuvering through and around Dundee, and visiting stores, restaurants, outdoor spaces and additional tourism-related sites. Each assessor evaluated community characteristics by completing a multi-page assessment focused on initial and lasting impressions, community information, visitor motives, the destination and its downtown, the residential area and tourism assets. They also provided input on the quality of information relative to Dundee found online. The assessment results and photographs of the community were downloaded into a data management program called Qualtrics. The compiled results were extrapolated to create this written report and public presentation.

Key findings were presented at a public forum on November 7<sup>th</sup> 2018. For additional information, a copy of the PowerPoint public presentation and Qualtrics data accompany this report.

## II. Visitor Profile

Of the five assessors who visited Dundee, 60% identified male and 40% female. Prior to their visit, all five assessors noted they spent between two and four hours doing online research about the community. Two of the five assessors visited Dundee on a Friday, one on a Monday, one on a Sunday and one on a Saturday. Two of the assessors belonged to Generation X, Y, or Z, two identified as Millennials and one as a Baby Boomer. Three of the five assessors stayed overnight in a Dundee area hotel and two did not spend the night. Three visited the village with their family (3 or more people), one visited alone and one brought their spouse/partner with them. A majority of the assessors identified community/economic development as their professional background with specific expertise in planning, tourism, food systems and arts.

### Key Findings

The key findings outlined below reflect the general structure of the assessment tool used by each assessor before, during and after the visit.



## The Village of Dundee has assets

Many of the assessors were surprised by the quaint yet busy downtown area of Dundee. The downtown has a variety of shops, restaurants and eateries and cultural attractions to attract and entertain tourists of all types. The River Raisin that runs through downtown provides a great opportunity for outdoor recreation activities like kayaking and canoeing, fishing, and bird watching. The Old Mill offers a unique historical and cultural attraction for visitors and provides a look back into the history of the village and the indigenous peoples who originally settled this region.

Dundee is also fortunate to lie near a major highway (US-23) and have a large retailer like Cabela's that can draw people to the village. The growth of tourism services like hotels, restaurants, shops, and service stations near the US-23 exit provide opportunities to pull in travelers to the downtown community to visit local shops and restaurants.

## Pre-Assessment

To foster a true tourist experience, the assessors were required to conduct online research prior to visiting Dundee. This prepared them for the in-person tourist experience by determining highlights in the community they intended to visit or learn more about. Some assessors found it easier than others to navigate and find information about Dundee online. All the assessors identified the Village of Dundee website ([www.dundeevillage.net](http://www.dundeevillage.net)) as a site that they visited and that came up first on their web search, however only two of the assessors identified this site as the most helpful for finding information. Some assessors identified that TripAdvisor and Google maps were the most useful in finding interesting places to visit, with another assessor identifying the Dundee Wikipedia website as the most helpful. Lastly, one of the assessors identified the Monroe County website as most helpful and placed Dundee into context with the rest of the County. Both assessors who identified the village website as most helpful, noted that while the website has some useful information, the overall website was difficult to navigate and they had to "dig" to find information on specific things to do, with one assessor calling the overall web presence "terrible". Most the assessors also identified Google Maps as a site used to access a map of the area. One assessor found a map on the Village site, but noted this was a zoning map and not useful for visitors. In addition to traditional websites all five assessors mentioned they utilized social media sites for information prior to their visit. This included Facebook (used by all five), Pinterest and Youtube. The most common use of social media was to check the DDA/Village of Dundee Facebook page to get up-to-date information about events and things to do when visiting.

Section 1 of The Qualtrics data report highlights additional pre and post-assessment of web-based information and assessor experiences.

## Visualizing Dundee:

Assessors were asked to visualize Dundee prior to visiting. One assessor anticipated Dundee to be small town with one main street and no town square. Two of the assessors pictured it as a small downtown with some potential history and industry just off the busy highway with a Cabela's nearby. Another assessor was anticipating finding a boring, unattractive and dry town. Similar thoughts were shared by another assessor based



on the lack of information on the website, even saying the website painted the picture of a “dead town” struggling with rural challenges. However, this assessor’s viewpoint changed after watching a YouTube video that highlighted the river views and parks in the downtown area.

### **Initial Impression**

Upon arriving, assessors were asked to give their initial impression within the first five minutes.

Positive comments included, “Favorable impression, interested in the town square and interesting layout of downtown”, “Entering the downtown area was a pleasant experience, and looked interesting”, “Very attractive downtown area, saw the Historic Dundee sign which was appealing and gave a good first impression.” “Very impressed upon entering when compared to the website, entrance from 23 was well organized and inviting, impressed with the vibrant downtown and signage highlighting historic downtown.”

Some of the negative comments included, “Busy highway exit is the first thing that you see...”, “Large, overwhelming sporting goods store looked like it provided the majority of traffic to the area.”, “Attractive entrance to the town from highway 23, the entrance from the East and South, not so much.”

Most assessors viewed the downtown of the Village of Dundee as a surprisingly nice and vibrant place. They indicated that they specifically found the layout of downtown unique and interesting and left them wanting to explore and investigate further. Many assessors also appreciated the little touches that made the downtown extra appealing, including the signage indicating “historic Downtown Dundee”, the overall upkeep and cleanliness of the downtown, banners on lamp posts highlighting the downtown and local businesses, the farmers market and other local businesses. All the assessors came away pleasantly surprised by their initial visit to the Village of Dundee.



Photo: Jamaluddin (2018)



## Community Information

Overall, assessors found community directions accurate, however all assessors found it difficult to find a visitor center for the area. They also indicated information booths and/or kiosks to help tourists locate attractions were lacking. All the assessors agreed that it was easy to find a map of the community, however they indicated that they were commonly using google maps, rather than a paper map provided by the community. Half of the assessors indicated that it was easy to find a community/regional tourist brochure and 50% indicated they found the local newspaper to be informative.

## Visitor Motives

Assessors were presented with a list of 15 reasons visitors come to a destination and asked to select the top three reasons someone might visit Dundee. The top choices included:

- Visit Historical Sites (3\*)
- In transit to somewhere else (3\*)
- Visit Friends and Family (2\*)
- Relax (1\*)
- Get away from people (1\*)
- Be in nature (1\*)
- Shop (3\*)
- Other (Cabela's specifically mentioned\*)

\* indicates number of times that motive was selected

Assessors did identify several activities that are in line with tourist activities as well as day-to-day residential activities. Most identified visiting historical sites, specifically the Old Mill as a motivation for visiting. Also shopping was identified as a key motivating factor for visiting which included the draw of Cabela's as well as the numerous shops in the downtown area. Many of the assessors also identified Dundee as a stop while in transit to somewhere else due to its proximity to highway 23 and the numerous services that are available right off the exit. While only one assessor identified being in nature as a motivator, there may be untapped potential to enhance this visitor motive through marketing and access to the Raisin River.

## Destination/Downtown Attributes

- Hospitality and friendliness of residents
- Historic/heritage attractions
- Cleanliness
- Conveniently Located
- Accessibility of destination
- Safety and security
- Well marked roads/attractions
- Directional signage

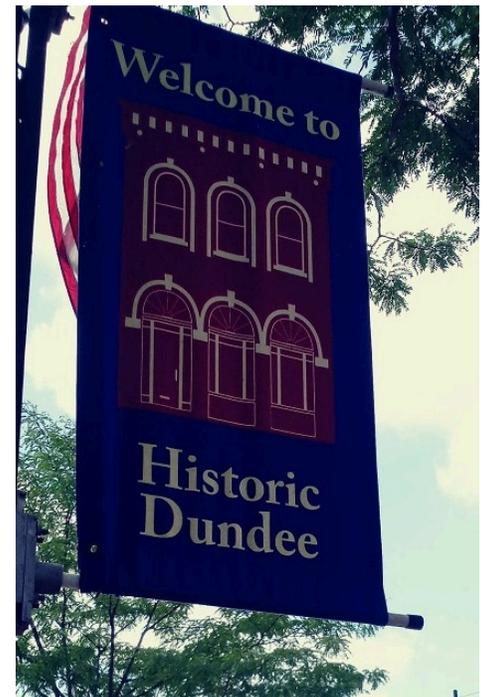


Photo: Gmazel (2018)



- Value for money in tourism experiences
- Authenticity of attractions
- Road conditions
- Customer service

### Destination/Downtown Weaknesses

- Few dedicated tourism attractions
- Lack of communication infrastructure
- Few variety and quality dining options
- Lack of variety and quality in lodging options
- Lack of nearby adventure-based activities
- Lack of nature-based activities
- Lack of tourism specific management practices
- Few well-known landmarks

### Residential Areas

Assessors were encouraged to visit residential areas to give them a better understanding of the community at large and provide communities with a perspective rarely evaluated by outside visitors. Four assessors rated the residential areas as “good” with one assessor rating them “fair”. In summary, assessors felt the residential areas were generally tidy, specifically the school area north of town was well maintained and welcoming. However several assessors noted a lack of interesting architecture or gardens in the residential areas. All the assessors noted the cleanliness and feeling of safety and security while exploring the residential areas.

### Tourism Assets You Visited

During their visit assessors were asked to visit tourist attractions and assets that were of interest to them either from researching prior to their visit or after arriving. These assets included lodging, eateries and restaurants, shops, parks, trails and other locations or businesses. Each tourism asset visited by an assessor received a review with comments and is included in Section 7 of the Qualtrics data report. Assessors chose to not share reviews of private businesses during community report public forums. CLTs are encouraged to notify businesses of their reviews whether positive or negative. A few of the tourism assets in Dundee that were most commonly visited by assessors included Cool Beanz Coffee, Old Mill Museum, Country Inn and Suites, Wolverine Park, Cabela’s, Bricktown Coney Island, Swan Creek Candle Outlet, local antique stores, Dundee Library, Splash Universe Indoor Waterpark, Divine Delights, and Silver Bells.



Photo: Gmazel (2018)

### Waterfront Community Assessment

Assessors were asked to give their first impressions of Dundee’s waterfront. When asked to rate the overall quality of the waterfront infrastructure of Dundee, the responses were mixed. Two rated the waterfront infrastructure as “good,” and three assessors rated it as “fair”. Comments from assessors included, “It was



beautiful to look at and there was green space, but there were no trails or activity at the waterfront”, “When I was walking over the bridge and along the concrete paths, I felt very near and very far from the river all at once.”

The best assets of Dundee's waterfront areas according to the assessors included the public pathways along the river's edge and the park infrastructure by the Old Mill. Assessor's comments included “The view is fantastic and there is one gazebo”, “Clean and great park "Wolverine Park" backing up to the river. Boat launch looks new and clean as well. Seems to be more potential on that river” and “I really like the parks and green space along the river in Downtown area. the walking paths, while short provide nice access to the river's edge.”

Areas of improvement from the assessors' perspectives included continuing to expand access to the river from both sides of the downtown. Many assessors commented that there is great untapped potential for the river and its development as a focal point for downtown. Assessors felt many of the buildings backed up to the river and could benefit from access to the river views from back porches or patios. Assessor's comments included, “More business engagement along the river. Back patios or outdoor seating that overlooks the river”, “Put signage there for people to know it's there and direct them to the river”, “A boat rental would be nice; a walking trail along the river; some kind of cafe or coffee shop at the river edge with outdoor seating.”

## Lasting Impressions

The assessors identified their **most positive experiences** while visiting Dundee:

- Being able to walk everywhere.
- Paddling on the River Raisin
- The Old Mill Museum
- “Splash Universe was a fun attraction. Lots of young visitors with their kids. The place was a bit small but it was sufficient to unwind with family.”
- “Driving into town and being pleasantly surprised how vibrant the downtown is and surrounding shops. I was so surprised because the website was the opposite.”



Photo: Jamaluddin (2018)

However, the assessors also identified their **most negative experiences** while visiting Dundee:

- The unsafe traffic patterns/driver behavior in the downtown.
- “Wouldn't say that I had any negative experiences.”
- “I ran out of things to do pretty quickly. There are limited options for tourists. I also wanted to look for a shopping center that had a Walmart, target, or something similar. Couldn't find any that is less than a 20-minute drive. Some of the businesses in the area were not particularly welcoming or accommodating to visitors (see raw data for more information).”
- Bricktown Coney Island
- The website for Dundee not accurately portraying their community like it really is.

## What are the destinations strengths and challenges?

Strengths:



- The vibrant downtown with unique “town square” layout and plethora of local businesses.
- Close proximity to highway 23 with resorts/stores (Cabela’s) to draw people off the highway.
- The River Raisin flowing through downtown and Old Mill Museum on its banks.
- Walkability of the downtown and nearness to residential areas and local schools

#### Challenges:

- General downtown infrastructure: façade issues, sidewalk maintenance issues
- Specific activities and opportunities for youth and young visitors (more energy)
- Bringing people who stop at Cabela’s or get off the highway exit into downtown.
- Getting local buy-in on promoting the River Raisin as a place for more recreation and as an asset to the downtown community. Placing the river as a focal point for future downtown development.
- Improving web presence to better reflect and attract specific tourists who are interested in heritage/cultural and nature-based tourism.



Photo: Ziegler (2018)

### Local Involvement

Assessors were asked if they identified organizations that are involved with tourism development. Two Assessors were unable to identify any organizations that were involved with tourism development, however the other assessors listed the Downtown Development Authority (DDA), the Village of Dundee, the Dundee Area Business Association, and one assessor included the Old Mill. Assessors were also asked to include organizations that should be involved with local tourism development. The following were identified: Cabela’s, Friends of the Old Mill, paranormal tour groups, River Raisin/Monroe County Water Trail Group, local school district and veteran’s groups.

### Community Branding

After visiting the destination and reflecting on their assessment, assessors provided single-sentence statements best describing the Village of Dundee destination (found in text box above).

Assessors were also asked about what two items should appear on a graphic or visual logo for Dundee. All the assessors mentioned the river and three out of the five said to include the Old Mill and dam in that graphic. One assessor mentioned including the memorial gazebo that is in the town square as well. Overall the branding

1. “Surprising” and “Quaint”
2. “Historical small town on the banks of the River Raisin.”
3. “A hidden gem off 23!”
4. “Tranquil Destination to unwind”



suggestions from assessors focused on the natural (River Raisin), historical (Old Mill and Macon Reservation) and relaxing (quaintness, shopping, walkability) qualities of Dundee.

### Using Senses and Safety

Most assessors didn't note any unpleasant smells or sounds while in Dundee. Of the five assessors, one noted the smell of truck exhaust when walking around downtown, and a second mentioned a strange smell after it rained on a Friday morning. Two assessors also mentioned that there were some unpleasant sounds from the amount of traffic moving through the downtown area.

Regarding safety and security, the assessors were divided. While 3/5 felt safe and secure at all times, 2/5 did not. The two assessors who mentioned not feeling safe at all times were due to security concerns when crossing busy intersections in the downtown area. One assessor mentioned a member of their group was almost hit by a car when crossing on a "walk" signal and a second assessor mentioned the intersection on the east side of downtown near the Mexican restaurant as particularly unsafe.

### III. Suggestions

#### Art:

- Opportunity for a public art installation in the "desolate" empty lot next to the Bricktown Coney Island (see photo right).
- Utilize some of the blank wall space around town for mural painting and art that represents the Village of Dundee.
- In general, invest in more public art, music and events to draw people to the area.

#### Business(es):

- Consider exploring pop-up retail options along riverfront or expanding farmer market.
- Share Section 7 of the raw data in an organized meeting with local businesses visited by assessors.
- Downtown business district could benefit from some "sprucing up", with a power washing and freshening.
- Development of some downtown lodging options rather than chain establishments right off the highway (bed and breakfasts, AirBnB, etc). This could help encourage visitors to eat and shop in the downtown area.
- Consider establishing a stronger connection to Cabela's to promote outdoor recreation opportunities in the area.



Photo: Northrop (2018)



### Community:

- Work on web presence for Dundee:
  - Village website needs a lot of work and needs to be designed with a tourist in mind.
  - Make local events and attractions front and center on websites.
  - “Things to do” section of website that draws people in.
- Promote regional activities as well as local ones by working together with surrounding communities, ex. River Raisin water trail.
- Focus on better community branding and consider specific niche tourism marketing techniques that attract specific segments of the population (nature-based, cultural/historical, adventure/recreation based).
- Continue to improve signage in the downtown and at highway exit, pointing out activities, attractions and local businesses. Specifically focus on signage at bridge and river, pointing out river activities like walking paths, kayaking/canoeing, fishing and relaxing.
- Embrace the riverfront as the “face of downtown”. It feels like the downtown businesses have their “back turned” to the river.
- Encourage continued development of the space between the highway exit and downtown to link the two together.
- To a greater extent acknowledge the Native American heritage and indigenous peoples’ history of the area.
- Work to make Dundee more bike friendly.
  - Install more bike lanes or signage to “share the road”.
  - Install bike racks and repair stations and promote biking in the Dundee area.
- Consider a redesign of the downtown streetscape in a way that will change driver behavior and make it more pedestrian friendly, including: elevated pedestrian crossings, pedestrian islands, bike lanes and other ‘complete street’ designs.
- Review Section 8 in the Qualtrics data report and consider graphic/visual logo suggestions.
- Consider surveying visitors using portions of the FIT Visitors Manual that you would like a larger sample of opinions on (i.e. customer service, downtown, etc.).

### Recreation:

- Develop and promote more outdoor recreational experiences.
  - Improve River Raisin access for kayaking and canoeing both above and below the dam, this could include better signage for portaging around the dam.
  - Provide pathways along the river that welcome visitors to the river in a more intimate way
  - Connect with other communities along the Raisin to provide more collaborative promotion of the river trail and specific access points.
- Connect both sides of the river through thematic signage, banners, streetscape treatments, etc.

### Additional Suggestions:

- Consider developing a “Be a Tourist in Your Own Community” event or activity (for example, the Alcona County Bus Tour).
- Use the stories of people who have made your community their home to weave a narrative that informs a sense of place and exemplifies what makes the community a great place to live, work, play and visit.



- Update all websites regularly (daily or weekly), ensuring business hours and other pertinent information is always accurate, such as links to “things to do.”
- Use social media to your advantage by engaging already active groups (students and adults) that are promoting your community already.
- Encourage monthly or quarterly business “after hours” at downtown businesses, and create downtown as a gathering place.
- Continue downtown improvements including sprucing up façades, making parking easy and available, filling vacant storefronts, creating visible business signage, creatively using vacant building window space, using sandwich boards and making other changes where needed.
- Improve marketing by involving downtown businesses, increasing cooperative marketing, utilizing regional guides and Pure Michigan branding, applying for state matching funds via the Downtown Development Authority and using other methods.
- Provide training to business owners and employees on customer service skills and local event and community happenings.
- Explore agritourism as a niche and become involved with the Michigan Agritourism Association (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>).
- Ensure all businesses are aware of and promote events and attractions in your community, including information that makes each place special and meaningful to the tourist.

#### IV. Additional Next Steps for All FIT Communities:

- Catalog existing funding sources, and search out new funding opportunities.
- Search out low-hanging tourism-related projects, picking one or two items that can be accomplished immediately and ensure their completion.
- Schedule a discussion between the community leadership team (CLT), local leaders, and active and concerned citizens of all ages to review this document and discuss opportunities to work together.
- Consult the FIT Community Next Steps manual provided to your CLT.
- Consider exploring the raw data further and identifying parts of the results to take action with; tap into MSU Extension Leadership and Tourism educators to facilitate your next steps.



Gmazel (2018)



## 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>.