



First Impressions: Assessing Your Community for Tourism



First Impressions Tourism Summary Report St. Clair, Michigan September 2019

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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 St. Clair, 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 St. Clair between May 11th and June 23rd, 2019. Assessors recorded their experiences conducting visitor research, maneuvering through and around St. Clair, and visiting stores, restaurants, trails, museums, 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 St. Clair 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 presentation in September 2019. 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 St. Clair, three identified female and two male. Prior to their visit, all five assessors noted they spent anywhere from two to more than four hours doing online research about the community. Two of the five assessors visited St. Clair on a Saturday, one on a Tuesday, one on a Wednesday and one on a Friday. Two of the assessors belonged to Generation X, two visitors identified as Millennials, and one as a Baby Boomer. All five assessors stayed overnight. Two stayed in a hotel/motel. Two stayed in a bed and breakfast, and one camped. Four visited the city alone and one visited with their spouse/partner. Three assessors gave their professional background as a Community Food Systems and Tourism Educator, Michigan State University Professor, and a Michigan State University student intern for the FIT program.

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.



St. Clair has assets

St. Clair has wonderful assets including waterfront access to the St. Clair River for viewing freighters and boating traffic, access to the Pine River, the City Harbor, clean and inviting green space in their downtown, a beautiful riverside boardwalk, many public parks, rich maritime and salt mining history, and a welcoming culture to visitors. The variety of opportunities for day-trip and/or overnight stays gives visitors a unique Michigan experience in a coastal community within a one-hour drive from Detroit not typically found on the traditional tourism path to Michigan's Thumb.

Assets surrounding St. Clair include its proximity to I-94, border crossing(s) to Canada, local parks, golf courses, allowing access to water-based activities (e.g., kayaking trails) and cycling routes, such as the Bay-to-Bridge Trail. The assets and experiences identified by the five assessors can serve as a base from which to capitalize and strengthen St. Clair's image and assets for future visitors and potential residents.

Pre-Assessment

To foster a true tourist experience, the assessors were required to conduct online research prior to visiting St. Clair. This prepared them for the in-person tourist experience by determining highlights in the community they intended to visit or learn more about. Overall, the majority of assessors found web pages to be helpful about local tourism-related amenities and activities. Some assessors discovered within the first page of searching online for the City of St. Clair that St. Clair Shores would populate, or Google would auto-fill St. Clair as St. Clair Shores.

When asked what website was most helpful and why, two assessors found the Discover the Blue website (bluewater.org/) to be the most helpful, and two other assessors noted St. Clair on the River (stclairontheriver.com/) to be the most helpful. These sites had information on dining, lodging, events, as well as maps and contact info. One assessor noted the St. Clair on the River website was particularly useful because it listed "Insider Tips", which "was a very nice list of activities and tips". Assessors stated that both of these websites were not within the top four websites when doing a basic search online for St. Clair, and discovered access to them after they had to "dig-for-it" in the City of St. Clair website through community news. Through social media and searching the web, Facebook was visited the most, and other social sites like YouTube, Trip Advisor, and Google Maps were also used. Two assessors stated that Trip Advisor did not contain much helpful or new information, and one assessor pointed out that Facebook did not have many current postings.

Overall, 80% of assessors agreed that the information was well-presented and web pages were visually appealing, 100% of assessors agreed the information was useful, but 80% of assessors did state that more information is needed on the most helpful websites. Assessors found that between: Insider Tips from the St. Clair on the River; the Recreation Department of St. Clair website with events, park information and maps; and Blue Water's page with information from events, stay, play, and dine, it was necessary to look at multiple different websites to see all of the information. All assessors found maps of St. Clair via web using Google, MapQuest, St. Clair on the River, and through a facility link from the Recreation Department on the City of St. Clair website. One assessor who found a map through the Recreation Department said, "even though probably not intended for tourists, some of the most specific info was found on this page, though it took me a long time to find it." Overall, assessors found their pre-assessment helpful, and were ready to go into the community.



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

Visualizing St. Clair

Assessors were asked to visualize St. Clair prior to visiting. Assessors anticipated the destination to be a “small town” with access to an interesting waterfront and views. One assessor visualized the town to have maritime history/heritage connected to the St. Clair River/Blue Water region, as well as history relating to “logging/sawmill, boat-building, brick-making, salt mining”. One assessor visualized a “small rural, safe community with many shops, restaurants, and things to do especially around the river.” Another assessor noted they visualized St. Clair as a harbor town “similar to Holland, Michigan.” Overall, assessors were excited and looked forward to their visit after doing their pre-assessment.

Initial Impression

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

Positive comments included, “immaculate water front views,” “well-kept and very well landscaped,” and “seems to have many hidden treasures tucked away off the main drag, such as trails, parks, and even designated walks throughout the community.” Assessors commented on the community feeling small and quaint, large and beautiful homes along the river, and the waterfront being the “focal point” of the community.

Negative comments about St. Clair included, “there needed to be more of a welcome into the town by signage,” and “south of the bridge though doesn't seem to be very inviting.” One assessor noted that the downtown felt fragmented saying “there isn't exactly a downtown with a main street that was full of shops or restaurants.” Others noticed there was an abrupt change from rural to the downtown area with little signage. Another assessor noticed there was not a lot of pedestrian traffic.

Overall, assessors viewed St. Clair as a small town with a focus on its waterfront access and views, with a well-maintained and attractive boardwalk, beautiful homes, and green spaces. Based on their initial impression, all assessors would feel compelled to stop if randomly passing by.





Community Information

Overall, 100% of assessors found community directions accurate; however, 60% did not find it easy to locate a visitor center or something comparable. 80% of assessors found hours were not conducive to visitors when they did discover a business suitable for visitor information. 80% of assessors found it easy to find a community/regional tourist brochure, and to find a map of the town. 60% of assessors found local/regional newspapers informative, as well as info booths/kiosks to help find attractions and services.

Visitor Motives

Assessors were presented with a list of 15 reasons visitors would come to a destination. They were asked to select the top three reasons someone might visit St. Clair. The top choices included the following with a * indicating number of times that motive was selected:

1. Relax (5*)
2. Be in nature (3*)
3. Enjoy the weather (1*)
4. Engage in sports activities (1*)
5. Get away from people (1*)
6. Visit friends and family (1*)
7. Shop (1*)
8. In transit to somewhere else (1*)
9. Seek adventure
10. Visit historical sites
11. Experience a unique culture
12. Experience night life
13. Get entertained/for entertainment
14. Engage in business activities
15. Engage in religious activities
16. Other: boating/fishing, pickle ball (1*)



All assessors identified *relax*, with *being in nature* the second most popular with three votes. Assessors were then divided on other visitor motivations to the destination. However, those motivations selected are in line with activities available for tourists and residents, such as *shop*, *engage in sports activities*, and *boating/fishing*.

Generational Appeal

All five assessors noted St. Clair's attributes would be most attractive to Generation X. Four assessors agreed it would be attractive to the Baby Boomer Generation. Two assessors selected the Silent Generation as likely to find St. Clair attractive, while only one assessor selected the Millennial Generation. All assessors agreed that the destination was not attractive to the Post-Millennial Generation.



Destination & Downtown Attributes

- Safety and security
- Cleanliness
- Shopping facilities
- Hospitality and friendliness of residents
- Authenticity of attractions
- Nature based activities
- Quality of restaurants
- Waterfront boardwalk and park
- City Harbor
- Statues and landscaping



Photo: Vander Stoep (2019)

Destination & Downtown Weaknesses

- Variety and quality of accommodations
- Cultural attractions
- Historic/heritage attractions
- Lack of directional signage into town
- Illegible signage (ex. St. Clair Boat Harbor sign)
- Lack of distinct downtown feel
- Lack of diversity
- Residents and/or wait staff lacked knowledge of and directions to visitor assets, such as Bay-to-Bridge trail.
- Lack of promotion for events to outsiders/new visitors



Photo: Northrop (2019)

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. Two assessors stated St. Clair's residential area was "excellent," while three said the surrounding area was "good." In summary, assessors felt the residential areas were "clean and well-kept," and included a "variety of architecture" that was considered "lovely." One assessor said "I walked all around the community by the churches and pool and found everything to be well cared for" and "It was almost story-book like and very picturesque." Another even said they "would love to live here." One assessor noted the residential areas further away from the water were well-kept, but not as nice as homes closer to or on the water. Other comments from assessors include ADA assists curbs could be replaced in some areas, and some roads could be redone. Overall, assessors found the residential areas attractive.

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 and/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. These results are included in the Raw Data and Photo report provided to the FIT St.



Clair Community Leadership Team (CLT). CLTs are encouraged to notify local businesses of their reviews whether positive or negative. Tourism assets in St. Clair visited by assessors included the Art Association, the Bridge-to-Bay trail, The Chocolate Harbor, Drifters, Greig Park, Her clothing shop, the Historical Museum, Murphy’s Inn, Palmer Park, Pepper Joes, the Pine River, River Crab, the Riverview Plaza, Simply Fresh Café, St. Clair City Harbor, and War Water Brewing Co.

Waterfront Community Assessment

Assessors were asked to give their first impressions of St. Clair’s waterfront. When asked to rate the overall quality of the waterfront infrastructure of St. Clair, the responses were positive. Three rated the waterfront infrastructure as “good,” and two said “excellent.”

Strengths

- Riverside walking/biking trails
- Boat launch
- Kayak launch
- Marina
- Shore-based restaurants
- Public art displays
- Accessibility of attractions
- Inviting and beautiful riverside green spaces

Assessors were asked to identify one area of the waterfront they deemed excellent. Responses included, “I thought the kayak launch at the harbor was really nice. Especially for people who might be inexperienced kayakers,” and “the boardwalk itself was beautiful and well maintained with great seating.” Assessors pointed out how clean the boardwalk was, how beautiful the flowers and statues in the park were, and how accessible the marina and boardwalk were too. One assessor called the boardwalk an “excellent asset for the community” commenting on the “great grassy area, boardwalk, benches, trash cans, trees, streetlights with banners and hanging flower baskets and soft music playing from loudspeakers on light poles.”

Areas of improvement from the assessors’ perspectives included more legible and visible signage for the Marina, elevated walk over from town to Palmer Park or a safer crossing with “SLOW” signs for drivers, visible access to the St. Clair River and distance markers along the Pine Rivers. Majority of assessors also noted having a negative experience at the City Harbor. For example, assessors found it difficult to locate where exactly to rent kayaks, securing an available kayak during a public event, and one assessor experienced a sinking kayak after renting from the City Harbor. Harbor staff customer service and knowledge lacked in areas related to Pine River distances, directions, things to see, and safety protocol along the Pine River.

Weaknesses

- Lack of information about kayak trails
- Lack of water-trail signage
- Marina customer service, safety protocol, and knowledge of natural resources
- Lack of public beach
- Lack of activities in Palmer Park



Photo: Vander Stoep (2019)



Lasting Impressions

The assessors identified their **most positive experiences** while visiting St. Clair:

- “Kayaking in the Pine River. The weather was beautiful and I was able to spot some local wildlife.”
- “Being in Simply Fresh Café and talking with the owner
- “Being next to the St. Clair River on the boardwalk.”
- “Walkability of the community, especially along the waterfront (both on Clinton Ave and especially along the boardwalk in Palmer Park.”
- “The community strength and sense of character and support for outdoor activities for residents/visitors. Seeing the park, trails, kid’s park, were very impressive.”
- “The ambiance, service, and quality of food at the River Crab restaurant.”



Photo: Ziegler (2019)

The assessors also identified their **most negative experiences** while visiting St. Clair:

- “The fact that the local brewery was not open when I was in town.”
- “Camping at the Marina, only because I had no access to a bathroom. It had a key code lock and I was not given the code to enter, and the Marina was closed by the time I realized.”
- ” Had problems finding things - no community-specific map found anywhere.”
- “Having my rented kayak sink forty minutes into paddling the Pine River on account of the Harbor staff not having the drain plug inserted before I departed was very bothersome for a first-time visitor.”
- “Limited way-finding signs; even when I found the one sign at the junction of Riverside and Trumbull/Cass (had to be told where it was), turned to find the "museum" and then there were no more signs.”
- “Direction boards and community event calendars not being updated with current year activities and not cared for properly. Those are useful directories for newcomers.”



Photo: Jamieson (2019)



Photo: Northrop (2019)

Strengths:

- “A great waterfront area/park with several established businesses to build off of.”
- “Having the marina in town as an entry point for people to access the St. Clair River and Great Lakes brings a lot of people to the town.”
- “The river, water access, and the special boutiques.”
- “Free parking, walkability, community gathering and green space between mall and Palmer Park”



- “Positive efforts regarding special events.”
- “Bike trails, proximity to Detroit and Canada and other coastal towns.”
- “Supportive of entrepreneurship in the plaza.”
- “The boardwalk, the river, Palmer Park, the restaurant quality and small town feel and friendliness.”
- “The value for the dollar was very affordable.”

Challenges:

- “A lack of a defined ‘Main Street’ or traditional downtown area. The area along the waterfront seems disjointed with large gaps between buildings and businesses.”
- “The mall area has an interesting layout and makes it a little bit difficult to find businesses.”
- “Poor roads/infrastructure”
- “High water levels currently.”
- “Potential for traffic problems (and conflicts between cars/pedestrians along Riverside Ave).”
- “Very ‘white’ and wealthy-feeling area. May make those of minority groups and lower economic status feel unwelcome or uncomfortable.”
- “Lack of accommodation for visitors.”
- “Attracting visitors south of the bridge.”
- “Attracting youth and ethnic diversity.”
- “Digital challenges, such as four different website representing St. Clair.”
- “The most useful websites are buried in other websites.”
- “St. Clair Shores auto filling issue when googling St. Clair.”

Art and Culture

After assessors visited St. Clair, they were asked a series of questions designed to evaluate specifically the arts and culture of the destination. All assessors said they observed and/or experienced something memorable relative to arts and culture. Assessors said the “wonderful bronze sculptures,” “the large fish” and “historic ships/scenes on tiles” from the historical walking trail were very memorable. The assessors enjoyed events such as the Farmers Market, outdoor yoga in the Plaza, Maritime Mart, and Summer Concerts during their visits to St. Clair. Promoted events that stood out to assessors but were not attended during their visits included the Arts Festival, Wine/Beer Festival, and the St. Clair Riverfest.

Overall, assessors found the art and culture within St. Clair memorable, but areas of improvement stood out for the majority of assessors. For example, two assessors agreed that there needed to be better promotion of arts and culture events via web and while visiting in-person. One assessor specifically stated that they “stumbled into” the Maritime Mart after learning about it in passing conversation with local residents, and another did not know about the summer concerts taking place until the stage was being prepared on the day of their visit. Two assessors agreed more public art is needed, “especially in the parks and along the river.”



Majority of assessors commented on the historic walking trail QR codes being ineffective. The codes did not route specifically to each vessel when scanned, but went directly to a website requiring visitors to look further for information. Several assessors noted that once they were directed to the website they were not willing to then continue searching for vessel information due to the process being quite cumbersome. One assessor with a professional background in maritime history noted she was unable to learn of each vessel because she does not use a smart phone. This affected her ability to learn more about this aspect of St. Clair culture. One assessor noted there are several heritage buildings labeled in the community and “having a map with a tour route, explanatory information about the architecture/history and links within the community could provide another opportunity for visitors.” Lastly, assessors commented that incorporating “more of the heritage information into art” and expanding the Native American history of the area would strengthen St. Clair’s arts and culture.



Photo: Ziegler (2019)

Local Involvement

Assessors were asked if they identified organizations that are involved with tourism development, management, and/or marketing of the destination. Assessors identified Blue Water Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, City of Ct. Clair, St. Clair Chamber of Commerce, St. Clair Recreation Department, and the St. Clair Downtown Development Authority as being involved. Organizations that were not identified as being involved with tourism by the assessors but could be are civic clubs, local restaurants, St. Clair Art Association, War Water Brewing Company, St. Clair Historical Museum, and local small businesses in the mall and surrounding area.

Community Branding

After visiting the destination and reflecting on their assessment, assessors provided single statements best describing the destination. One assessor specifically described St. Clair as, “A friendly riverfront maritime community having a rich heritage that links the past through the present.” Assessors also provided responses regarding what they will remember most about St. Clair after six-months:

- “How blue the St. Clair river was, and how nice Greig park was”
- “The sense of serenity I feel when I was there”
- “Relaxed, welcoming riverfront community with a variety of things to do - Waterfront Park and community gathering spaces, as well as passionate residents wanting to improve their community - all contribute to an exciting, welcoming place to visit”
- “The variety of activities in the immediate areas like bike and walking trails, kayaking, golfing, and shoreline. I also will remember that there are limited options for ethnic food as well”
- “My kayaking experience”

- “A coastal hidden gem worth a long stroll or bike ride through”
- “Unique small town on the Bluewater”



All five assessors stated they either would “likely” or “definitely” visit St. Clair on a pleasure trip in the future, but only four of them were likely to recommend the destination to friends and/or family.

Using Senses and Safety

A series of questions designed to gauge assessors’ senses and safety while visiting the destination. While in St. Clair, one assessor found the scent of dead fish unpleasant, and one assessor found the loudness of the Murphy’s Pub late at night unpleasant. However, an assessor noted music playing in Palmer Park as pleasant. All five assessors stated they always felt welcomed in the community. One assessor stated, “On many occasions, residents/business owners displayed small acts of kindness.” Some of those small acts included offering water and treats to their dog, calling the boat harbor to see if kayaks were available, offering samples, providing directions, and giving advice on what to see and do, etc.”

Regarding safety and security, four of the five assessors noted they felt safe and secure while in St. Clair. One assessor did note that “near the old middle school I didn’t [feel safe] for a while. I also think the short walk in Greig Park seems a bit unsafe because the trail lacks directional arrows and distance markers”. They expanded further on their experience by saying, new visitors to the trail will have no idea the length of their walk(s) or which direction to take should they need to exit the trail at any point.”

Trip Reflections

All assessors conducted pre-trip online research prior to visiting. They were later asked a series of questions after their assessment was complete regarding how St. Clair’s online presence affected their assessment/experience. All five assessors found the information online to match what they found when they arrived, and all found the information helpful with their visit. Assessors stated “it helped us prioritize what to visit and where to go and where we stayed” and “just helped orient me mentally to the community.” Assessors noted that if it were not for the pre-trip research they would not have brought their bike because they did not know about the Bridge-to-Bay trail, other general trails, or that kayak/canoe rental was an option.

Four of the five assessors used printed materials to help decide where to visit. Assessors found the Bluewater Visitors Guide and St. Clair on the River brochures helpful, but the former was said to have limited information and the latter was not available online for download due to the link being inactive. While in the community, two assessors used Google Maps to navigate around St. Clair and three assessors used Facebook to look for events and view business information, such as restaurant menus and customer reviews. Assessors commented that some websites had inactive links and lacked good information. One assessor commented useful information was discovered on the second page while googling the destination or buried within other websites. Overall, assessors found the online presence of St. Clair to have been helpful.

III. Suggestions

As part of the FIT program, assessors provide suggestions for improvements to FIT communities. These suggestions typically group into four categories: art, business, community, and recreation. The suggestions provided in this report are usually direct quotes from assessors. Some information presented in the suggestions may be inaccurate due to the assessors’ lack of historical knowledge and/or familiarity of the community’s entire assets.



Art and Culture:

- More color on buildings downtown, like a mural. The St. Clair Harbor has a beautiful mural. Add something like this to the Riverview Plaza
- A visible and colorful sign painted that says St. Clair somewhere entering and leaving from all directions
- Provide more history of the shipping in the area as well as the Native American communities in the area
- Open the historical museum for longer hours during the week
- Update the QR codes to link directly to vessel information rather than directing visitors to a website that forces them to research even further. Make it easy for them to learn the historical vessel information and move along on the trail.
- There are several heritage buildings labeled in the community. Develop a map with tour route, explanatory information about the architecture, and/or history of the buildings and their links with the community
- More promotion for the events and festivals online and at the community. Especially for lesser known events like the Maritime Mart



Business:

- Add descriptive signage to the Marina for kayaking and camping because it is confusing when entering the parking-lot and main office
- Be sure the Harbor staff are trained in customer service, knowledge of the natural resources (i.e. Pine River Trail) and ensure (new) kayakers have what they need before departing the Harbor on their own
- Provide clear instructions on accessing and understanding the ADA kayak launch ramp at the Marina, and that drain plugs are inserted before issuing kayaks to users. Furthermore, be better prepared on how to respond to emergency issues, such as a sinking kayak up river
- Educate local business owners and their staff on the "Insiders Tip" page or things to do in St. Clair rather than directing visitors to other communities like several assessors experienced
- Hotels need sufficient websites so customers can view availability, book online, and correspond via emails. As an example, one assessor noted they had difficulties in all three of these areas when trying to reserve a room at a local hotel
- Try to encourage business development for young adults and kids, such as mini-golf, bowling, rock-climbing, and a movie theater
- Anyway to connect the different buildings/businesses in the downtown area would be encouraged
- One or two additional restaurants for the area, especially one with a farm/lake to table focus





- Provide or encourage the opportunity to rent a jet ski or boat from the Harbor
- Re-open The Riverview Cinema with updated amenities, such as reclining seats
- Zone for food truck events and services along the St. Clair River

Community:

- Redo and update parking lots, roads, and sidewalks where it is needed
- Adding a bike route on Main Street, if it doesn't exist already
- Add a recycling garbage bins throughout the City of St. Clair to demonstrate to the “green” generation that you care about their environment
- Light or signs (Slow, Pedestrian crossing) at crosswalks between Palmar Park and Mall
- Add the local supermarket to your St. Clair community map
- There are four websites (Chamber, CVB, City, and DDA) promoting St. Clair. Very few of them have all the same info and, in some cases, conflicting information and events. Consolidate these or link them together better
- Do not bury the most helpful websites into other websites that are full of links not many people visit/read. Highlight those websites and make them accessible
- Have a clear branding of the town-Trail Town vs Getaway from the Everyday-was confusing. With that said, community image needs to be consistent and incorporated into the entrance/exit signs of the community
- Adding a visibly and up-to-date directory at Palmer Park with map, upcoming events, city attractions, etc.



Recreation:

- Adding eclectic lawn games to Palmar Park, (i.e. giant chess, giant Jenga) to attract more traffic
- Add a volleyball court in Palmar Park
- More signage to other attractions not on the main Street (i.e., Historical Museum, Greig Park, BMX/skate park)
- Put mile markers on the Pine River Trail for kayakers or something that educates kayakers on distance, landmarks, etc.
- Add trail markers to all nature paths so users know how to exit their trail should they need to or so they can understand the length of their walk. This is a safety issue and courtesy to anyone new to this trail
- Map of the Bridge-to-Bay trail along the path. Every mile or in heavily trafficked areas
- Add signage to direct pedestrians where the Bridge-to-Bay trail is and how to access it
- Parking for the Alice-Moore Woods Nature Sanctuary/signage on how to get there, as the only entrance





is buried in a residential area

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.



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>.