



# First Impressions: Assessing Your Community for Tourism



## First Impressions for Tourism Summary Report Elkton, Michigan October 2017

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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: Assessing Your Community for Tourism (FIT) is a unique version of FI for our state.

This summary report is based on the observations of four visitors/assessors, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors." Each was provided a stipend for participating. Before beginning an unannounced visit to Elkton, 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 Elkton between May 15 and June 30, 2017. Each assessor recorded his or her experiences conducting visitor research, maneuvering through and around Elkton, and visiting stores, restaurants, outdoor spaces and additional tourism-related sites. Each 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 Elkton found online. The assessment results and photographs of the community were then downloaded into a data management program called Qualtrics. The compiled results were extrapolated to create this written report and the public presentation.

Key findings were presented at a public forum on October 16, 2017. A copy of the PowerPoint public presentation and Qualtrics data accompany this report for additional information.

## II. 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.

### Elkton's Assets

Elkton has some wonderful assets including Ackerman Park, the historical log cabin museum and the quilt trail, walkable and historical residential areas, and a well-established golf course. Assets surrounding Elkton include agriculture, the Lake Huron coastline, historical places and renewable energy resources that could be leveraged to draw future visitors. In addition, there appears to be an active community group on social media and possibly a growing art community in Elkton. The assets and experiences identified by the four assessors can serve as a base from which to capitalize and strengthen Elkton's image and assets for future visitors.

### Pre-Assessment

To foster a true tourist experience, the assessors were required to conduct online research prior to visiting Elkton. This prepared them for the in-person tourist experience by determining highlights in the community they intended to visit or learn more about. Elkton assessors found it challenging to find appealing webpages



with helpful information about local tourism-related amenities and activities. Search engines, such as Google and MapQuest, seemed to be the most beneficial for visitors. While the Village of Elkton website ([villageofelkton.com](http://villageofelkton.com)) and Facebook provided background on the community and current events taking place, some assessors discovered that hours of operation for some sites and businesses did not match what they found online prior to visiting. More than half of the assessors were able to make additional plans or changes to their agenda by reviewing printed material such as the *Huron County Visitor's Guide* and *Michigan's Thumb Traveler*. Overall, the assessors commented that online research prior to visiting helped them understand the community more and gave them ideas of possible things to do and expect, but there was little information available to create a complete agenda.

Assessors were asked to visualize Elkton prior to visiting. Assessors anticipated Elkton would be a quite small, safe, interesting and historical town with some vacancy downtown and a select few things to do.

### Initial Impression

Upon arriving, assessors were asked to give their initial impression within the first 5 minutes. One assessor stated, “there were some dedicated citizens that were working hard to make the downtown appealing...” A second assessor felt, “...the community didn't have many zoning ordinances or money for local businesses to clean up their storefront images.” However, the same assessor viewed the artist mural and felt a sense of community-driven action to revitalize downtown. Based on their initial impression, the majority of assessors would not feel compelled to stop if randomly passing by.





## Community Information

Assessors felt directions were accurate, but all four agreed a visitor center or central location for visitor information was difficult to locate. A key component to visiting a community is having a map to guide decisions. Three assessors “somewhat agreed” it was easy to find a map. According to qualitative results regarding the location of maps, all four assessors located their maps via web platforms, such as Google or MapQuest. Maps of Elkton were located on the Village of Elkton website but not detailed enough for assessors to use to guide their visits.

## Visitor Motives

Assessors were presented with a list of 14 reasons visitors come to a destination and asked to select the top three reasons someone might visit Elkton. Each assessor identified at least one of the following as possible motivations for visiting Elkton: “in transit to somewhere else,” “engage in sports activities,” “visit historic sites,” “visit friends and family,” “engage in business activities” and “engage in religious activities.” Other than visiting historic sites, the motives selected represent more day-to-day activities associated with resident living rather than tourist activities, such as “seek adventure,” “experience a unique culture” or “get entertained.”

## Destination/Downtown Attributes

- “Good” benches
- Business area accessible to people with disabilities
- Customer service and cleanliness
- Gateway entrance signs
- Grounds landscaped and areas of greenspace
- Hospitality and friendliness of the residents
- Central and secure parking
- Safety and security
- Well-maintained sidewalks
- Waste receptacles considered either “good” or “very good”
- Well-marked roads and attractions

“The gateway signs as you enter from each direction were nice and rare to see.”

## Destination/Downtown Weaknesses

- Lack of or few activities for children
- Disappointing downtown area
- No ethnic groups, homogenous community
- Poor selection of shopping facilities
- Lack of special events
- Lack of variety and quality of restaurants
- Lack of variety of activities to do
- Lack of walker/biker sign available
- Water fountains consider “poor” to “fair”

“Not finding businesses open or signs with an explanation about how to access the business was my most negative experience.”



## 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. Three assessors stated Elkton’s residential area was “very good,” while one assessor said “excellent.” In summary, assessors felt the residential areas were neat, with historic homes, clean, tidy, organized and well maintained, with nice lawns. The areas were walkable with little blight.

## Tourism Assets 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. Given the distance assessors had to travel, overnight stays were required. Assessors were forced to spend time in neighboring locations for overnight accommodation and some meals. Assets in the other locations were noted in the assessment and given a brief review depending on where an assessor visited. However, assets outside of Elkton are not germane to Elkton’s assessment. Each asset visited received a review and is found in Section 7 of the Qualtrics data report. Assessors chose to not share reviews of private businesses during public forums. Community leadership teams are encouraged to notify businesses of their reviews whether negative or positive.

## Lasting Impressions

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

- Welcoming and helpful people
- The signage and the number of trash receptacles around town with the Elkton logo gives the area a positive feel
- Gateway signs as you enter from each direction were nice and rare to see.
- Art mural adds color to the community and projects the feeling that people care



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

- Not finding businesses open or signs with an explanation about how to access them if I have questions
- After biking around the entire town, which took less than an hour, few things to do
- Local businesses suggesting that I “go drink” at the local bar because that was the only thing worth doing in town. Nobody suggested I visit the quilt trail or historical log cabin museum, or play golf at the course that has been there for 72 years.



What are the destination’s strengths and challenges?

- Strengths:



- A developing art community (assumed due to the mural)
- An active Facebook group directly promoting events and “Elkton Happenings”
- Close proximity to agriculture, renewable energy resources and shorelines for tourism
- Charming rural community with great memorials and welcoming people
- Challenges:
  - Vacant storefronts and lack of colorful and inviting places
  - Limitations in variety of activities, such as nature-based recreation and shopping options
  - Limited options for restaurants and accommodation
  - Increasing local knowledge of the resources and assets already in Elkton (that is, quilt trail, grain elevator, historical log cabin, golf course)

### Local Involvement

Assessors were asked if they identified organizations that are involved with tourism development. Two of the assessors said none were, but two of the other assessors noted that the Chamber of Commerce, Village of Elkton, Lions Club and three specific churches were active (Trinity Lutheran, United Methodist and Wesleyan Elkton Missionary). Assessors noted that the Lakeside School System, Tower Automotive, the Hitching Post Inn and the Thumb Area Tourism Council could play a larger role in Elkton’s tourism development, management and marketing.

“I feel Elkton had a time where they had visitors and strong community and now they are in a period where rejuvenation is happening given their interest in FIT...”

### Using Senses and Safety

Assessors didn’t notice any pleasant or unpleasant smells throughout the community other than a highly pungent manure scent in the park noted by one assessor. All four assessors didn’t experience any unpleasant or pleasant sounds.

Regarding safety and security in Elkton, there were mixed feelings. Two assessors noted they felt unsafe while walking around town and inquiring on things to do. Two assessors noted they felt safe and secure due to the regular presence of the police and lack of people around, but comments made later in the assessment noted that police also made an assessor cycling around town feel unwelcome on more than one occasion. Overall, assessors felt customer service was “solid” and that people were friendly and helpful depending on where they were and what they were doing.



### III. Suggestions

#### Art:

- Tap local artists to conduct more downtown artwork.
- Add a mural to the vacant walls downtown and in the area, and specifically at 48 N. Main Street.
- Tap students and teachers from surrounding school system to participate.
- Hold events and competitions for artist of all ages downtown.

#### Business:

- Post signs in business explaining hours of operation or ways to get in touch with owners.
- Hold community events and trainings for businesses and residents to learn of local assets to highlight for visitors
- Encourage businesses to clean up the front of their facilities. For example, paint the windows with a seasonal theme or cover them so visitors do not see the interior deteriorations of closed businesses.
- Welcome “peer-to-peer” or “shared economy” business opportunities such as Vayable, TaskRabbit, Spinlister, Airbnb and VRBO.
- Explore Airbnb as an accommodation option and community income generation tool.
- Refrain from parking on sidewalks.

#### Community:

- Strengthen digital presence with updated websites and things to do.
- Use social media to your advantage:
  - Specifically leverage the active Elkton Facebook group to promote events.
  - Tap into the student populations nearby to promote the area on social media.
- Use the LED sign in the green space downtown to list events, websites, quilt trail directions and other points of interest.
- Hold community events for residents and businesses to highlight assets.
- Strengthen Elkton gateway signs to say “welcome” and “thank you for visiting.”
- Highlight more activities and events in the *Thumb Area Vacation Guide*.
- Develop short promo videos, post on YouTube and link into community websites and social media outlets, and share via the Facebook group.

#### Recreation:

- Seek interpretive signage in areas where assets can be visited by passersby or visitors:
  - Develop an historical walking or cycling tour of the downtown highlighting assets: grain elevators, local businesses, quilt trail, log cabin, museums and other locations.
  - Strengthen the quilt trail with signage and history.
  - Establish self-driving tours of the industrial agriculture industry in and around Elkton: wind turbines, agriculture and farm stays.



- Include all information regarding recreation on the Village of Elkton website.

#### General Suggestions to All FIT communities:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Encourage and support entrepreneurship.
- Consider exploring the “sharing economy” further by scheduling the presentation *Sharing Economy for Entrepreneurs and Tourism* given by MSU Extension educator Andy Northrop ([northro5@anr.msu.edu](mailto:northro5@anr.msu.edu)).
- Explore agritourism as a niche and become involved with the Michigan Agritourism Association (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>).
- 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 additional tourism development programs (see list following) or a facilitated process.



## 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 agritourism, ecotourism and cultural/heritage tourism.

### Learn More

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