



First Impressions Tourism Assessment

St. Ignace



Summary of Results

November 2024

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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 20 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 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 small town tourism development across Michigan. For more information on FIT, please visit - https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism_first_impressions/index

II. Summary of Results for

St. Ignace began their participation in the program in early 2024. The key findings summarized in this report were presented to St. Ignace in October 2024.

Visitor/Assessor Profiles:

St. Ignace and surrounding area received six visitors in the Summer 2024, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors". To generate diverse perspectives, a wide range of assessors were recruited across multiple disciplines within MSU Extension. All assessors are currently residents of Michigan and had very minimal knowledge of CLA prior to participating.

Four assessors were male and two female. Two assessors identified as Millennials, three as Gen X, and one as a Baby Boomer. Assessors were non-parents or parents and/or grandparents. Assessors had expertise in local government, community development, regional planning, arts and culture, environment and sustainability, natural resources, tourism development, and community food systems. One assessor visited the area alone, one visited with their spouse/partner, and four visited with their families. To generate diverse experiences, assessors visited area separately during different days of the week in August and September. Assessors visited on assorted days between Tuesday and Saturday, and all spent the night. Five assessors stayed in a local hotel and one camped. All assessors spent between 24 hours or more visiting the area's wide range of assets that contribute to the local visitor/tourism economy. In addition to onsite visits, visitors also



spent between 1-4 hours researching the area using mobile devices and/or personal computers visiting various websites and social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, and TripAdvisor. This report is a general summary of data collected highlighting assessors' experiences captured before, during, and after via survey data.

Results are separated by Pre-Visit, The Visit, and Post-Visit Reflections.

Pre-Visit:

Web Research & Digital First Impressions

Typically, I would use Google Maps to look for information and things to do, and then go deeper via TripAdvisor and Yelp. I use Facebook only when businesses use Facebook as their website.

Extensively used google maps for finding lodging and eating establishments, I base many of my decisions off google maps reviews for restaurants especially.

We searched for unique things to do that we haven't done in St. Ignace or other similar places. some of the YouTube/Tik Tok videos my wife found highlighted some of these things like St. Anthony's Rock

Attractions and/or events this community is known for?

- **Mackinac Island**
- **Mackinac Bridge**
- **Mystery Spot**
- **Clyde's Drive-In**
- **Castle Rock**
- **Ojibwa Museum**
- **Many Events**
 - **Rendezvous at the Straits**
 - **Bridge Walk**
 - **Tractor Parade etc.**





Most Helpful Websites: stignace.com (St. Ignace Visitors Bureau)

- *St Ignace Visitors Bureau website was by far the most helpful that I encountered in my pre-visit research. There was loads of information on things to do, places to stay and eat and i liked how many of the listed activities included a map with driving time from St. Ignace so you knew where and how long it activities might take when planning an itinerary. I found this site most helpful for an overview of where to stay, what to eat, events that occur, and activities that we could select to partake in during our visit.*
- *It is rare for the most helpful website to populate the top for any community. The CVB has done a great job ensuring that happens. It goes without saying this website has everything from day trip info, fun indoors, trails, (updated and current!) events, all types of accommodation, etc. etc. One of the better websites for visitors I have seen to date.*

The Visit:

First 5 Minute Impression(s) – (responses are direct quotes)

- *St. Ignace is interesting because your "first impression" really depends on if you go east or west off of I-75. I think many go west, and when you do that St. Ignace isn't really anything other than a highway exit retail strip and it's pretty hard to figure out there is more to the community. If you go east, however, the first impression is one of a well cared for UP lake town with a vibrant visitor economy primarily built around the community's longstanding role as a gateway to Mackinac Island. What is surprising is that there is more to do than you might expect, and it is unquestionably a more pleasant place to be on foot than the other Island gateway across the Straits.*
- *Coming from the south on I-75, there were several billboards letting us know that Mackinaw Island, Ferries, and other unique attractions were on the way. the only billboard I saw for St. Ignace itself was about 10 minutes south of the bridge, and was worn-out, with paint peeling of the sign. Getting into town, you could tell the area was welcoming and very prepared for lots of tourist/walking traffic. Lots of similar stores for ice-cream/candy, etc., but can imagine they all get busy during peak times.*
- *Coming over the Mackinac Bridge is always dramatic and sets the tone for St. Ignace and all of the U.P. Downtown St. Ignace is a busy traffic area and there was road construction. It isn't easy to look in every direction at once and stay safe. Lake Huron is the draw, so we stopped at the first parking area and took in the view. The downtown was busy and we could see there would be a lot of activities, with various focuses, to choose from.*





- It was easy to find information for visitors –
 - *5 Agreed, 1 Disagreed*
- Info available was useful for visitors –
 - *5 Agreed, 1 Disagreed*
- It was easy to find a community/tourist brochure –
 - *3 Agreed, 2 Neutral, 1 Disagreed*



St. Ignace's Downtown Business Area



Parking is secure	5.75
Parking charges are reasonable	5.75
There is pedestrian traffic (foot and bike)	5.75
The grounds have been landscaped with flowers, trees, shrubs, and bushes	5.5
There are areas of green space	5.5
Additional walking paths are available	5.25
Parking is centrally located	5.25
There is a gateway point to enter/leave town (piece of art, mural, sign, etc.)	4.75
This is a welcoming downtown	4.75
There is a mix of ages	4.75
Inviting signs are displayed on the exterior of businesses	4.5
Business information is displayed on the exterior of businesses	4.5
Walking sidewalks are well maintained	4.5
There are walker/biker friendly signs	4.5
Vehicle traffic is managed to encourage pedestrian movement, via foot or bike	4.5
The downtown business area is handicapped accessible	4.5
There is a mix of ethnic groups	4.25
The main downtown business area feels distinct or special	3.75
The main downtown business area is a major tourists draw for the area	3.75
Bike lanes exist on roadways	3.25



Comments:

Didn't notice any recycling receptacles in town, but I might have missed them, also didn't try to access public wifi. I do think there could be more benches and water fountains in the downtown area.

I didn't see water fountains, but often don't with people using single-use bottles that can be sold. We had trouble locating waste receptacles and didn't see any recycling.

I don't recall seeing recycling containers or trying to connect to public wifi, but there was fine cell service. As mentioned the city park restrooms were awful, the pocket park ones were ok, but had no soap and needed tending. There was also no hand sanitizer.



Destination Attributes (Rankings: Best = 6, Worst = 0)

Cleanliness	5.25
Conveniently located	5.25
Road conditions	5.25
Historic/heritage attractions	5.25
Hospitality and friendliness of residents	5
Safety and security	5
Accessibility of destination	5
Well marked roads/attractions	5
Communication infrastructure	5
Pedestrian travel infrastructure	5
Customer service	4.75
Dedicated tourism attractions	4.75
Variety and quality of accommodations	4.75
Well known landmarks	4.75
Community involvement	4.75
Visitor accessibility to attractions	4.5
Activities for children	4.5
Shopping facilities	4.5
Authenticity of attractions	4.5
Directional signage	4.25
Variety and quality of shopping options	4.25
Nature-based activities	4.25
Cultural attractions	4.25
Special events	4.25
Variety of activities to do	4
Value for money in tourism experiences	4
Adventure-based activities	4
Variety and quality of restaurants	3.5
Interesting architecture	3.25

**Build on your
strengths and
leverage them at
address areas for
improvement!**



Sense and Safety -

Did you feel welcomed in the community at all times ?

4/5 said yes

*Everyone was nice,
place was clean and felt
safe.*

*I certainly was
recognized as a visitor
and treated as so.*

*Greeted warmly in local
businesses and had a
nice check-in
experience at my hotel.*





Post-Visit Reflections: What will you remember most about St. Ignace six months from now?

How enchanted my daughter was at the Mystery Spot!

The views from Castle Rock.

Chocolate covered strawberries!

The cultural experiences we enjoyed and access to Lake Huron.

The Museum of Ojibwa Culture.

The views, smoked fish, history, number of mom/pop hotels, pasties, no brewery nearby or was there one?

Reflections...

Question	Definitely	Maybe	Probably Not
I would feel compelled to stop in this community if randomly passing by?	3	3	0
I would recommend the destination to my friends and family?	3	2	1
I would visit the destination on a pleasure trip in the future?	3	1	2





Key Recommendations

- **Lean into what makes St. Ignace different and distinct from its neighbors. Emphasize Native American, industrial, and maritime history by collaborating with local tribal communities and historians to create, update, and expand interpretive displays, tours, and events.**
- **Leverage vintage and nostalgia trends by focusing on the “American open road” theme, with Clyde’s, The Mystery Spot, Castle Rock, and many old-fashioned gift shops.**
- **Prepare visitors to “turn right” off I-75. Use advertising (billboards?) to attract visitors into downtown St. Ignace with calls to experience the waterfront, arts, and local cultural sites like the Ojibwa Museum and waterfront walking tour.**
- **Encourage businesses along the waterfront to make better use of their lakeside locations by offering outdoor dining and drinking areas.**
- **Stretch goal: Prioritize the redevelopment of waterfront properties into higher and better uses over time.**
- **Enhance Partnerships with Tribal Communities: Collaborate closely with local tribal communities to deepen the interpretation of Native American and indigenous history in the Mackinac Straits region, building on the existing museum and cultural assets. “Really make St. Ignace the place to connect with indigenous culture and history.”**
- **Better pedestrian crossings on the main road through town would help encourage older visitors and families with small children to walk across the road to either the water or retail sites while being safer.**
- **Find opportunities for alternative transportation, for example more shuttles around town. This will also reduce traffic.**



Key Recommendations

- Broaden shopping and dining choices by prioritizing local artisans, unique eateries, and cultural shops that offer non-touristy products and authentic regional cuisine. Highlight St. Ignace's local flavors and history through unique dining experiences (e.g., fish, indigenous foods) to create memorable and regionally distinct offerings.
- Continue to offer clean, accessible public restrooms and maintain pet-friendly spaces to enhance convenience and comfort for all visitors. The St. Anthony's Rock Pocket Park is an excellent example of this!
- Encourage local businesses to consider training that emphasizes the importance of hospitality. A positive, friendly atmosphere will make visitors feel more welcome and may increase repeat visits and word-of-mouth recommendations.





Key Recommendations



Revitalize and Unify Downtown Appearance

Standardize Visual Elements : Unify downtown through cohesive elements like standardized flowers, flags, and storefront aesthetics to create a distinct image for St. Ignace and a welcoming ambiance.

Repurpose Vacant Buildings : Utilize empty buildings downtown, possibly by partnering with local artists or vendors, to enhance vibrancy and attract more foot traffic.

Improve and Update Street Signage : Update old or weathered street signs to make public access points and walking trails clearer and more inviting for pedestrians.



Recommendations: Outdoor Recreation

- Continue to focus on the expansion of outdoor recreation options in the area. Encourage rentals and guide services.
- Expand and enhance family-friendly lake access in town with updated and accessible facilities.
- Update and enhance existing walking trail infrastructure, e.g. expand the splash pad at Chief Wawatam Park.

Recommendations: Art, Culture, and History

- **Encourage Indigenous Arts:** Support indigenous artists and cultural workers in creating displays, participating in local events, and adding authentic cultural experiences throughout downtown.
- Install public art, historical markers, and interactive experiences (e.g., distance signs, murals) in high-traffic areas to create photo-friendly spots and engage visitors in the town's story. These visual elements can be both informational and Instagrammable, enhancing the town's identity and appeal.
- Continue to expand offerings of waterfront events year-round to generate foot traffic in the downtown area.



Recommendations: Community Business & Marketing

- Prepare drivers coming to the area to visit downtown St. Ignace rather than simply the US-2 commercial strip.
- Focus on marketing things that make St. Ignace distinct from Mackinac Island and neighboring communities in the northern LP and western UP.
- Increase focus on the Indigenous story of the area in partnership with local Tribes.

Recommendations: Community Development

- Introduce more family-friendly dining options, food trucks, and expanded restaurant offerings with better menu variety and pricing. Focus especially on indigenous cuisine and native fish.
- Conduct a thorough examination/inventory of existing tourism interpretation assets in the community and a plan for re-painting, re-doing, improving, updating, etc. those assets to ensure the community is presenting its best first impression to visitors.
- Increase public parking options and make signage more noticeable and intuitive to improve access and convenience.

Recommendations: Websites and Social Media

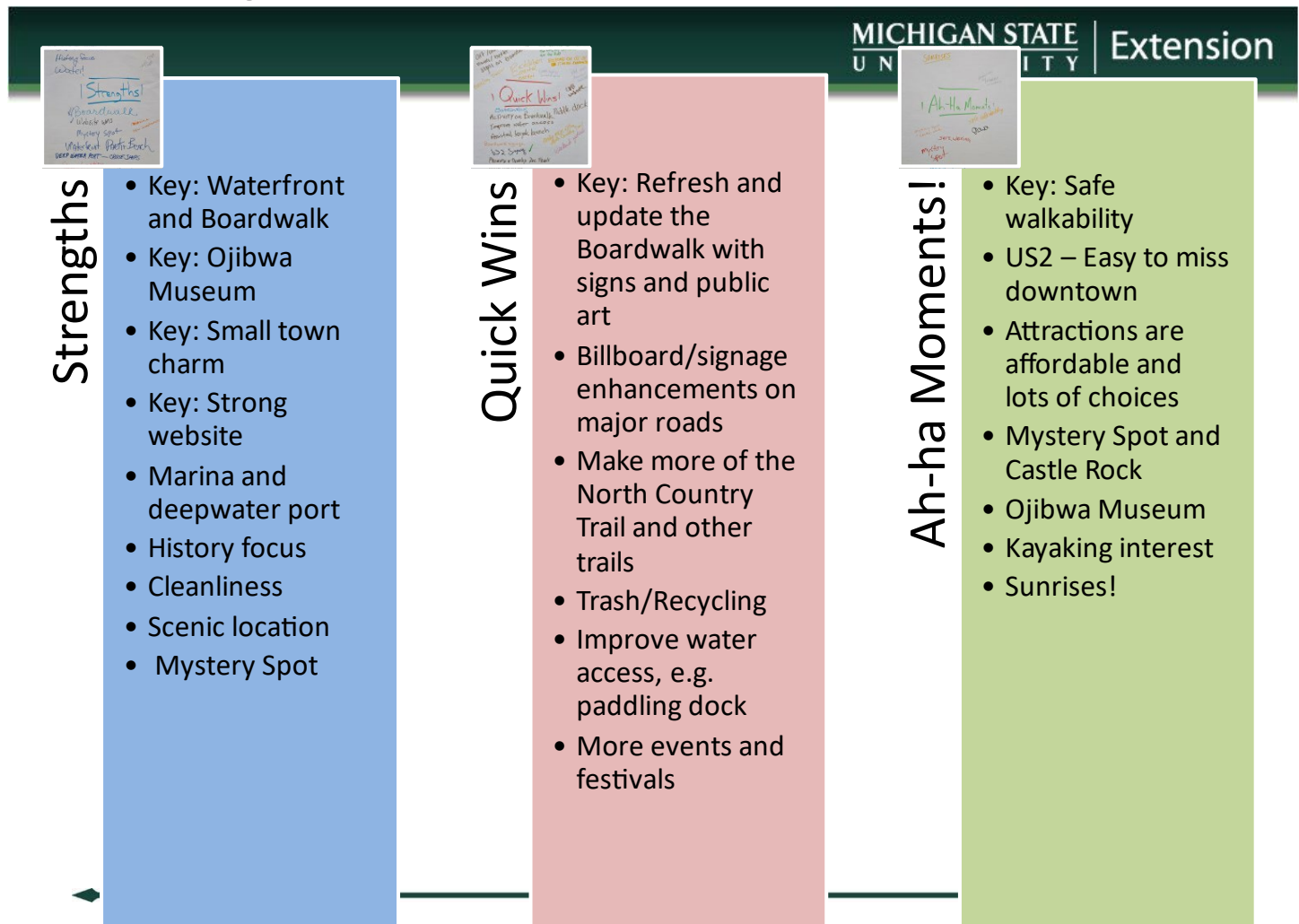
- Every organization and business with a website should take some time to work on Search Engine Optimization.
- Please don't use Facebook as a primary business website.
 - Not everyone has Facebook, and for those that don't getting access to a page is a barrier.
- Make sure your website includes *up to date*
 - Location
 - Hours Menu/Products/Services (as appropriate)



- **Double-check your website hosting is working properly and the site displays well on both computers, phones, and tablets.**
- **Try it on multiple browsers (Chrome, Firefox, Edge, Safari) on both desktop and mobile.**
- **Consider a general brushing up if time allows**
 - **Better, higher-resolution photos inside and out**
 - **Consider how readable your site is**
 - **Text color on background, etc.**
- **If your website includes a directory, give it a once-over for correct links and listings that are no longer relevant. Try to include as much info as possible, more than just a phone number. Hours and a live link of some kind would be ideal.**
- **If you have a social media presence, make sure your basic information is shared and *up to date*.**
- **If you have not, claim your listings on Google, TripAdvisor and/or Yelp!**
 - **Offers another venue to tell your story and get correct info out there.**
 - **Respond to negative reviews.**



Community Comments





Assets Visited in St. Ignace and The Region



29 - Tourism Attractions (lodging, activities, festivals, museums, parks, etc.)

19 - Eating and Drinking Places

19 - Shopping Places

Sixty-seven total tourism assets evaluated!



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.

- <https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism/programs/understanding-tourism-for-michigan-communities>

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.

- <https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism/programs/planning-for-tourism>

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.

- https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism_first_impressions/index

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>.