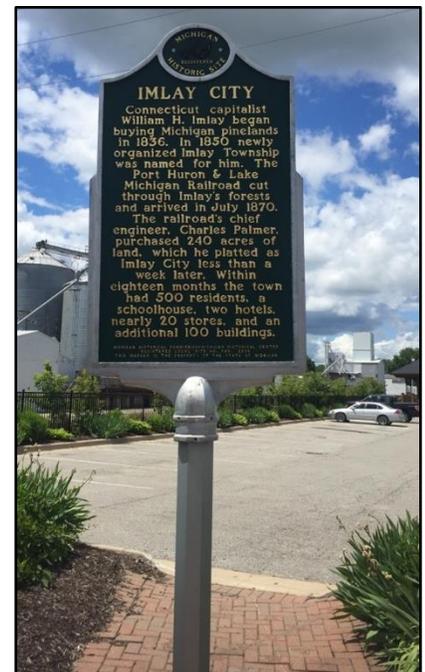




# First Impressions: Assessing Your Community for Tourism



## First Impressions for Tourism Summary Report Imlay City, Michigan October 2017

Compiled by:

Garrett Ziegler and Andy Northrop, Michigan State University Extension



## 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 to cover their travel to and from Imlay City. Before beginning an unannounced visit to Imlay City, 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 Imlay City between May 15 and June 30, 2017. Each assessor recorded his or her experiences driving and walking through Imlay City, 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 Imlay City 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 18, 2017. A copy of the PowerPoint public presentation and Qualtrics data are provided to the Imlay City Community Leadership Team (CLT) 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.

### **Imlay's Assets**

Imlay City has some wonderful assets including a variety of quality eating establishments such as the Mulefoot Gastropub, Lucky's Steakhouse, the Country Smoke House and Jalisco's restaurant; recreation opportunities such as the Polly Ann Trail (PAT) and several local parks; and the historic museum and train depot. The downtown area and surrounding neighborhoods are inviting, well-kept and a pleasure to stroll through. An abundance of antique shops adds to the charm of this small farming-based community. With summertime events such as the downtown concert series and farmers market, there is no shortage of things to do on certain days of



the week. Lastly, the Eastern Michigan State Fairgrounds provides a space for larger events and for showcasing the surrounding agricultural community. Assets surrounding Imlay City include its proximity to I-69, the surrounding agricultural region and the growth of the Thumb as an ecotourism destination. The assets and experiences identified by the four assessors can serve as a base from which to capitalize and strengthen Imlay City'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 Imlay City. This prepared them for the in-person tourist experience by determining highlights in the community they intended to visit to learn more about. The assessors used Google search to find initial information about potential amenities and attractions. This search took assessors to the Imlay City website ([www.imlaycity.org](http://www.imlaycity.org)) along with MapQuest and Wikipedia. Most members of the visiting team found the Imlay City website to be the most helpful website as far as identifying things to do and to plan their visit. However, they found this site to be difficult to navigate and to find information that is more specific. Within the Imlay City website, assessors found the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) portion of the website to be the most useful. However, the calendar for this website was not up-to-date and also did not match the calendar on the Chamber of Commerce portion of the website. The assessors also used social media and found the Facebook page for the city to be useful in identifying potential events and activities. A video featured on YouTube titled *CA Perspective of Imlay City* was also highlighted specifically as something the community should be aware of and how it portrays Imlay City. 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 Imlay City prior to visiting. The assessors anticipated Imlay City to be a small town (“Small Town America”), a little run-down and closer to the M-53/I-69 junction.

### Initial Impression

Upon arriving, assessors were asked to give their initial impression within the first 5 minutes. These impressions varied depending on how visitors arrived in Imlay City (whether via I-69 or M-53) and how far into the downtown district they made it within the first 5 minutes. One assessor commented, “a typically small town nestled just off the highway, felt like a quiet day in town and had a country/farming feel to it.” Another commented on the M-53/I-69 junction as a “well-appointed freeway exit” with “limited hotel options, low-end shopping choices and nothing particularly of interest.” However, once the assessor got further to the downtown area, he or she saw “a few blocks of pure potential.” Another assessor who entered downtown from M-53 commented on the “impressive signage and places the signs highlighted” and was “impressed with the random art placed around the downtown area.” Although impressions varied depending on where the assessors entered the Imlay City area, the overall first impressions with the downtown district were positive.



### Community Information

Overall, the assessors found community information difficult to come by once they were in the city. Three of the four assessors rated the visitor center as hard to find, and one was not sure that a visitor center even existed. This was also evident in assessors' disagreement with the visitor center hours being conducive to visitors. Assessors also found it somewhat difficult to locate a community or regional tourist brochure, but after visiting the municipal building one assessor located information for summer events. However, this summer event information was not seen outside of the municipal building in local businesses or on the web. In addition, the concert series schedule wasn't available on the DDA website during assessors' pre-assessment research.

### 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 Imlay City. The top choices included:

- Visit friends and family (4)
- In transit to somewhere else (3)
- Get away from people (2)
- Visit historic sites (1)
- Engage in business activities (1)
- Visit the Eastern Michigan State Fairgrounds (1)

Other than visiting historic sites, the motives selected represent more day-to-day activities associated with resident living rather than tourist activities, such as “be in nature” “experience the nightlife” and “get entertained.”



### Destination/Downtown Attributes

- Hospitality and friendliness of the residents
- Customer service
- Directional signage
- Cleanliness
- Safety and Security
- Accessibility of destination
- Business information displayed on exterior of buildings
- Well-marked roads and attractions
- Value
- Gateway entrance signs
- Conveniently located

“I felt that the downtown was awesome... Variety of restaurants was a good + to me - many to choose from.”



### Destination/Downtown Weaknesses

- Few pedestrians
- No cup of coffee to be found downtown
- Lack of reasons to be downtown (little variety)
- Lack of open businesses and eateries during visit
- Few lodging options close to downtown
- Lack of variety of tourist activities
- Few activities for children and families
- Few options for shopping
- Lack of nearby nature and adventure-based recreation
- Quiet downtown in the evening

“...there is not information around to promote the downtown and visitors are not told about what a great downtown Imlay City has.”

### 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. Assessors surveyed the neighborhood surrounding downtown and all commented on the cleanliness and well-kept homes. Assessors rated the residential areas as “good” or “very good” with two giving an “excellent” rating. Specific things that stood out included the blocks surrounding Main Street which were said to be “interesting historical homes/architecture” and “well-maintained houses, lawns and gardens.” Overall, one assessor’s comments sum up Imlay City’s residential area as a “great historical community surrounding downtown.”

### 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. 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 Imlay City that were most commonly visited by assessors included the Day’s Inn, Mulefoot Gastropub, Pizza Machine of Imlay City, Country Smoke House, the train depot and historical museum, and the PAT.

### Lasting Impressions

The assessors identified their **most positive experiences** while visiting Imlay City:



- The “surprising” downtown – inviting, historic, expansive and well maintained
- Exploring the surrounding neighborhoods
- Interactions with local businesses and talking about things to do in the area
- Visit to the historical museum
- Quality and abundance of signage pointing out things to do and points of interest



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

- Very quiet downtown – almost too quiet in the evening – lacks vibrancy tourists are looking for
- Sparsely attended downtown farmers market and a lack of businesses and shops open during the day on Saturday
- Lack of breakfast options in the downtown area as well as a lack of outside dining options
- Very little water access in the area
- Pretentious, unwelcoming feel at one downtown eatery

“...there are opportunities for the area that are overlooked, take advantage of them...”

What are the destinations strengths and challenges?

- Strengths:
  - Variety of eating options; Mulefoot a draw for people outside of the community
  - Friendliness of residents and welcoming feel of the downtown
  - Overall cleanliness and effort put into the downtown area (signs, landscaping)
  - The entire Latino/Hispanic community of entrepreneurs downtown and surrounding area
  - Close proximity to I-69
- Challenges:
  - Lack of diversity of things to do in the downtown and surrounding area
  - While located close to I-69, still hard to get to the downtown street without an intention to visit there
  - Similar to other small towns, businesses are closed on Sundays
  - The M-53 business thoroughfare is unappealing, looks run-down and could provide a poor perception to visitors of the downtown

## Local Involvement

Assessors were asked if they identified organizations that are involved with tourism development. All assessors identified the DDA and the Chamber of Commerce as organizations that were involved. This was mainly due to the web presence as well as the signage around town featuring the DDA. Additionally, two of the assessors identified the farmers market, Small Business Entrepreneurs and Economic Development (SEED),



Latino/Hispanic civic organizations and churches. When responding to who “should” be involved, responses included local businesses, Imlay City Historical Society, the Latino/Hispanic population and Farm Bureau.

### Using Senses and Safety

Assessors were asked to identify any smells around the community – both pleasant and unpleasant. Three of the assessors identified smells they experienced including the smell of pickles when using the PAT, and the flowers (particularly lilacs) in Lamb Steele Park. One assessor commented that it “smelled clean in the downtown, which was nice.” In terms of security, a majority of assessors felt welcomed and safe when visiting the community. The only instances of not feeling this way included entering an eating establishment that was clearly a “locals only” type of place and when walking on the PAT, specifically when walking under railroad tracks and past graffiti.

## III. Suggestions

### Art:

- Paint the PAT underpass with decorative art by inviting mural painters or local students and artists to participate:
  - Hold an event around the activity.
- Hold art, art contests, outdoor sculptures, art classes and outdoor concerts more often.
- Continue to showcase local artwork downtown and consider an art trail
- Consider public art displays on or around the grain elevator.

### Business:

- Suggest or organize customer service trainings for restaurants downtown and in the immediate area. Specifically focus trainings on friendliness, knowledge of activities in the area and ways to handle overcapacity situations.
- Link with Pure Michigan on establishing roadside signs that highlight certain businesses that fit their criteria, such as wineries or similar agricultural-tourism ventures.
- Familiarize and connect with the I-69 Thumb Region website ([i-69thumbregion.org](http://i-69thumbregion.org)) to showcase businesses and community profile (see *Recreation* below for agritourism ideas.).
- Develop strong signage from I-69 exits indicating where downtown is located.
- Open business hours for longer hours on Saturdays and Sundays. (Imlay City is a weekend destination.)
- Partner with Vlasic for community branding and history of the Vlasic community. Make this visible to visitors.



### Community:

- Engage Latino/Hispanic communities in the tourism development efforts of Imlay City highlighting various festivals, events and presence at the farmers market. Make intentional invitations to business and other leaders within the Latino/Hispanic community to be a part of current and future plans to help tourism and community development processes in Imlay City.
- Organize events online using one calendar that represents all events in one place.
- Ensure events are listed and promoted in travel guides and online, such as in the *Thumb Area Vacation Guide* and on social media.
- Develop more historical signage downtown and surrounding areas.
- Review Section 8 in the Qualtrics data report and consider graphic/visual logo suggestions.
- Portray Imlay City in an accurate manner in YouTube, TripAdvisor and Facebook with the help of students, community and the CLT from FIT.
  - Adjust *CA Perspective of Imlay City* specifically.

### Recreation:

- Polly Ann Trail:
  - Strengthen the image of the PAT by updating central websites to include information on the type of trail; its structure, length and condition as well as where to access it.
  - Define whether the trail is for horse riding, cycling or both.
  - Market the PAT to specific audiences.
  - Provide easy-to-locate maps of the PAT in town and online.
- Explore the local agriculture community's interest in agritourism; seek out leading agritourism examples. (Visit I-69 Thumb Region website ([i-69thumbregion.org](http://i-69thumbregion.org)) for agritourism operations nearby.)
- Provide outdoor activities and options, like bike rentals and walking tours
- Develop a historical walking tour of the Imlay City downtown area, highlighting assets:
  - Highlights might include the pickle factory, grain elevators, museums, history and contributions of the diverse racial/ethnic populations to the region, trails and other areas.



### 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 as needed.
- Improve marketing by involving downtown businesses, increasing cooperative marketing, utilizing regional guides and Pure Michigan branding, applying for state matching funds via the DDA 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 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>.