



First Impressions: Assessing Your Community for Tourism



First Impressions for Tourism Summary Report Sebewaing, Michigan November 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 Sebawaing, 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 Sebawaing between May 15 and June 30, 2017. Each assessor recorded his or her experiences conducting visitor research, maneuvering through and around Sebawaing, 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 Sebawaing 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 November 9, 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.

Sebawaing's Assets

Sebawaing has some wonderful assets including a marina, historical museum, unique architecture and waterways meandering through a walkable and historical downtown and residential areas. Sebawaing, given its close proximity to more urban areas such as Flint or the Saginaw Bay area, has potential to draw tourists. The assets and experiences identified by the four assessors can serve as a base from which to capitalize and strengthen Sebawaing'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 Sebawaing. This prepared them for the in-person tourist experience by determining highlights in the community they intended to visit or learn more about. Sebawaing assessors found the Village of Sebawaing website (www.sebawaingmi.gov) to be the most helpful as it has information related to history, hunting and fishing, and



parks and recreation. In addition, it had all information in one location and was easily navigable. One assessor noted that listing events a year in advance was a good strategy. Assessors also noted that the Sebewaing Chamber of Commerce (www.sebewaingchamber.com) website and the Pure Michigan (www.michigan.org) website both had positive features regarding Sebewaing, such as listing of businesses, events, lodging options and maps. While the majority of the assessors agreed that the information was useful and webpages were visually appealing, all agreed that more information is needed on the most helpful site they selected. Two assessors later identified the *Thumb Area Vacation Guide* as the most helpful printed resource they were able to acquire while visiting Sebewaing.

The assessors were encouraged to research Sebewaing using social media such as Facebook and YouTube. All four assessors researched Sebewaing using Facebook but only half used YouTube. Facebook didn't provide assessors with anything they had not already discovered by visiting other websites. However, short videos of Sebewaing on YouTube drew their attention because it painted the coastal community as a "ghost town." Two assessors also visited TripAdvisor and Airbnb to locate information on Sebewaing, but discovered very little to shape their experience.

Assessors were asked to visualize Sebewaing prior to visiting. Three assessors anticipated Sebewaing to be a small, quiet town with some downtown vacancy, limited entertainment and water access; however, the fourth assessor "thought it was going to be clean and have some nice restaurants and places to stay and active businesses."

Initial Impression

Upon arriving, assessors were asked to give their initial impression within the first 5 minutes. One assessor stated "...downtown was absolutely dead – a ghost town!" Others assessors had similar comments regarding downtown. One said, "...there was not a lot going on, very quiet and deserted once you turned off M-25 on to Main Street toward the traditional downtown area." One visitor even commented on the number of restaurants located outside of town and suggested moving a couple of them downtown. Other comments made by assessors were more positive, such as Sebewaing has "...a lot of potential for downtown growth. A potentially great place for outdoor recreation," and "...the area has a lot of canals that gives it a southern Alabama or Louisiana feel." Based on their initial impression, 50% of the assessors would feel compelled to stop by if randomly passing by.



Community Information

The majority of assessors noted directions to and around Sebewaing were accurate, but all four disagreed that a visitor center of any kind was easy to locate. A key component to visiting a community is having a map to guide decisions. Three assessors agreed it was easy to find a map, and all four agreed it was easy to find a regional/community tourist brochure. According to qualitative results regarding the location of maps, all four assessors located their maps online. Two assessors also located maps at a local campground and a hotel.

Visitor Motives

Assessors were presented with a list of 14 reasons visitors come to a destination and were asked to select the top three reasons someone might visit Sebewaing. According to all four visitors, Sebewaing attracts visitors to “relax.” The majority noted another reason to visit the area is to “engage in sports activities.” Assessors also selected other motivations to visit the area, such as to “be in nature,” “get away from people,” and “visit friends and family” or “in transit to somewhere else.” The motivations identified by assessors demonstrates areas Sebewaing can explore further to attract future visitors.

Destination/Downtown Attributes

- Accessibility and convenience of location
- Areas of greenspace
- “Good” benches
- Customer service and cleanliness
- Hospitality and friendliness of residents
- Central, secure and reasonable parking
- Safety and security
- Well-maintained sidewalks

“This destination has a solid and somewhat well-developed reputation as a hunting and fishing destination.”

Destination/Downtown Weaknesses

- Lack of or few activities for children
- Disappointing downtown business area
- Lack of or few shopping facilities
- Lack of signs on exterior of businesses
- Few special events
- Lack of variety and quality of restaurants and accommodations
- Lack of variety of activities to do
- Lack of or no walker/biker sign available

“The downtown is nice but until some businesses move in or historical walking tour or interpretive signs come in, it has limited potential as a tourist attraction.”

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. All four assessors stated



the residential area was between “good” and “excellent.” In summary, nearly all assessors noted the residential areas consisted of immaculately cared for lawns and well-kept houses with few people around.

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 visits or after arriving. Given the distance assessors had to travel, overnight stays were required in the immediate area. Two assessors stayed in hotels, one in a personal RV and one in a personal tent. They provided descriptions of each asset they visited. You can find the reviews 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 Sebawaing:

- Large, well-kept residential areas close to downtown
- The kind staff at the campground and overall well-maintained and picturesque site
- Biking around the community, talking to residents
- Playing at the park by the Harbor Marina – great park for kids!



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

- The hotel probably the most negative along with the disappointing downtown and storefronts
- Overall, the restaurant choices very basic and uninteresting
- Having to leave town to find something to see and do
- Not finding a way to get to and see Lake Huron



What are the destinations strengths and challenges?

- Strengths:
 - Close proximity to water, downtown campgrounds and agriculture for (untapped) agritourism
 - Close proximity to large urban areas (Flint, Bay City and other areas)
 - Downtown historical museums, antique shopping and “third spaces” in vacant buildings
 - Great potential for kayakers to visit islands and rivers
- Challenges:
 - Updating accommodation options to meet diverse needs and interests
 - Getting businesses to relocate or open in the downtown



- Utilizing large vacant industrial sites (This can be a strength as well for art murals.)
- Encouraging youth and adult involvement in downtown and area development
- Updating digital information as well as public information on history of Sebewaing

Local Involvement

Assessors were asked if they identified organizations that are involved with tourism development. All assessors identified the local Chamber of Commerce in this role, but the chamber's hours of operations were not consistent. The Village of Sebewaing, Bay Shore Camps, Pioneer Sugar, Airport Motel and Huron County Parks were also identified as either being involved or should be involved if they are not already. Other suggestions were made to include civic clubs, such as Rotary and Sparkettes.

“Involving Michigan Sugar Company with local tourism projects would be helpful. For example, they helped fund Michigan Sugar Trails in Bay City.”

Using Senses and Safety

Some assessors did comment that Sebewaing had scents of manure in the community as well as strong scents from the sugar plant nearby; however, opinions on the latter were neither good nor bad. All four assessors didn't experience any unpleasant sounds, but one assessor commented on the pleasant chimes or bells ringing at certain times of the day.

Regarding the feeling of being welcome in Sebewaing, all four assessors felt welcomed and safe. Interactions with local residents, businesses and their employees as well as customers in shops were all welcoming. When asked if assessors felt safe and secure at all times, all four assessors commented, “Yes.”

III. Suggestions

Art:

- Strengthen local artwork downtown for storefront attraction:
 - Involve youth and adult groups, such as schools, civic clubs or both.
- Add more murals:
 - Explore murals on vacant industrial walls to brighten up the town.
 - Explore murals on industrial concrete slabs.

Business:

- Have an incentive program to drive businesses back downtown:
 - Shop local and buy local.
 - Encourage pop-up retail.



- Develop “third place” culture and business opportunities in vacant stores.
- Include Michigan Sugar/Pioneer Sugar Company in efforts and redevelopment:
 - Relaunch factory tours.
 - Explore community branding.
 - Encourage sponsorship in Sebewaing trail development.
- 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.
- Welcome “peer-to-peer” or “shared economy” business opportunities such as Vayable, TaskRabbit, Spinlister, Airbnb and VRBO. (Some of these resources may not operate in rural settings.)
- Explore Airbnb as an accommodation option and community income generation tool.

Community:

- Tap into the canals and southern bayou feel in town for branding and marketing.
- Take down signs that insinuate many major crimes happen in the city parks (see PowerPoint slides).
- Restore and improve directional signage for access to downtown assets and other locations.
- Expand partnerships with civic organizations such as the Rotary, Sparkettes, Women’s civic club and others.
- Clean up the giant concrete slab downtown and make it more welcoming. (This could be a contamination issue; see suggestions under “Art.”)
- Elicit the local school system in the support of strengthening digital images by involving kids and their smart phones (for example, short videos of “Why I Love My Town” or other similar topics).
- Take a more active role in developing and strengthening social media using people of all ages.
- Use existing YouTube videos:
 - *First 100 Years of Sebewaing*: Use this video to your advantage and link it to the Chamber of Commerce website.
 - *Ghost Towns*: Eliminate the YouTube video or embrace it. Employ the skilled videographer to redo a more positive video.
- Add more information on primary websites in areas related to history, recreation and community.

Recreation:

- Tap into the campgrounds to draw visitors out and into downtown.
- Strengthen understanding of water access to rivers and Lake Huron:
 - Add kiosks that guide people to water.
 - Highlight the water with themed walking trails, adding artwork.
- Improve signage to find water access points and good fishing spots.
- Kayak/Trails/Water:



- Add kayak launches for users of all ability. (Consider launches compliant with the Americans With Disabilities Act.)
- Enhance water trail paddling options and tours.
- Connect to the marsh islands for kayakers and paddle boarders.
- Explore the local agriculture community’s interest in agritourism; seek out leading agritourism examples.
- Include all this information regarding recreation on the Chamber of Commerce and Village of Sebawaing websites.

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).
- 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>.