



First Impressions

Assessing your Community for Tourism



First Impressions for Tourism Summary Report

Ironwood, Michigan

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I. Introduction

The First Impressions 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 program's results have been used to inform economic initiatives or further develop community goals to communities across the USA and Canada. Michigan State University Extension has adapted this program to meet the needs of Michigan communities.

This summary report is based on the observations of five assessors. Before beginning their unannounced visit to Ironwood, each assessor was asked to conduct research of the destination online. This research helped plan and shape their visit based on personal interests, activities in the community, and within a budget allocated to each individual. They then traveled individually to Ironwood between July 13th and September 8th, 2019. Each team member recorded their experiences while conducting their visit, exploring Ironwood and the surrounding area. They visited stores, restaurants, outdoor spaces, and additional tourism-related sites. They evaluated community characteristics by completing a multi-page assessment focused on initial and lasting impressions, community information, visitor motives, the downtown, residential areas, tourism assets, as well as providing input on the quality of information found online of Ironwood. Their assessment results and photographs of the community were then downloaded into a data management program. The compiled results were extrapolated to create this written report and the public presentation.

Key findings were presented at a public forum on October 21th, 2019. A copy of the PowerPoint public presentation and Qualtrics data are attached to this report.

II. Key Findings

This portion of the report is divided into 11 sections reflecting the structure of the assessment tool used by each assessor before, during, and after their visit.

Ironwood has assets

Ironwood has some wonderful assets including Stormy Kromer, Cold Iron Brewing, Depot Park, a compact, walkable downtown, and regional attractions like Copper Peak and the Black River Harbor Recreation Area.

Ironwood may have work to do to grow as a tourist destination, but these assets serve as a foundation to build upon and strengthen Ironwood's image for visitors and possible future residents.

Pre-Assessment

In order to foster a true tourist experience, the visitors conducted online research prior to traveling to Ironwood. The purpose was to prepare for the in-person tourist experience. By requiring visitors to view Ironwood's online presence beforehand assessors were able to determine highlights in the community they intended to visit and/or learn more about. The team rated the City of Ironwood and Chamber of Commerce websites very highly. All of the assessors used at least one of the sites. As one assessor put it: "the City and Chamber websites were both excellent, well laid out and information dense with many useful links. I'd give the edge to the City site as it was



a bit more intuitive and the Chamber site had some dead links, but Ironwood is a case study in doing web presence right for a community.” Another assessor noted “the 'Play' page of the city's website is a great - that's where I found the listing of city parks and determined how I could access the Montreal River.”

Social media research was hit-and-miss, with most assessors turning to big social media sites like TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Google for further research on specific locations and day-of-visit information, including searching for Ironwood Festival event information, which was occurring when one assessor was present. One of the team did sound a note a caution regarding social media: while the “Chamber Facebook page is best with updates, other pages seemed to mainly feature things that had already happened.”

Section 1 and 9 of the Qualtrics data report highlights additional pre and post-assessment of web-based information and assessor experiences.

Visualizing Ironwood:

Assessors were asked to visualize Ironwood prior to visiting. Overall, assessors visualized a small town “with lots of natural resources.” More specially, however, one of the team members had passed through before and only seen Ironwood from US-2, and noted that this created different, somewhat lower, expectations.

Initial Impression

Upon arriving, assessors were asked to give their initial impression within the first 5 minutes. One assessor’s comment: “I would say the entrance was uninspiring” was the overriding theme of the team’s first impressions. Another assessor wrote: “US2 bypasses downtown entirely, looks better than most similar bypasses but that is not saying much. There is signage directing people downtown from US2, but I found it somewhat easy to miss. US2 Business from Hurley is nice, with a welcoming sign, clearly some work has been done to this area. Overall, though, for people passing through on US2 I feel like downtown could be easy to miss.”

However, one assessor noted that once downtown, the initial impressions was far different: “The five-minute impression if a motorist can be attracted to downtown is - a small town with rich mining heritage and diverse immigrant base evolving into a diverse business community with an outdoor recreation flare.”

Finally: “I loved the turnoff to and the location of the downtown. There was an air of quiet prosperity. Everything was clean. There seemed to be a lot going on, for a small town.”





Community Information

Assessors overall felt that it was relatively easy to obtain community information once they arrived in Ironwood. Directions were accurate, it was easy to find an open visitors center with helpful staff, and tourist brochures and maps were readily available.

Visitor Motives

Assessors were presented with a list of 14 reasons visitors come to a destination and asked to select the top three. Assessors were unanimous in feeling that access to nature is a major reason people visit Ironwood, and also many felt that Ironwood sees a great deal of pass-through traffic. There may be an opportunity to capture more of this market.

Be in Nature	5
In transit to somewhere else	3
Seek Adventure	2
Visit Historical Sites	2

Destination Strengths

- Nature-based activities
- Authenticity of attractions
- Value for money in tourism experiences
- Adventure-based activities
- Customer Service
- Dedicated tourism attractions
- Historic/Heritage attractions

“The area is amazing for outdoor rec across the full range of interests and ability levels”

Destination Opportunities for Improvement

- Directional Signage
- Variety and quality of shopping options
- Variety and quality of restaurants
- Shopping facilities
- Special Events
- Directional signage
- Activities for children

“Gateway signage at US 2 must be better than it currently is with emphasis on getting tourists downtown.”

Residential Areas

Assessors were encouraged to visit residential areas either by walking, cycling, and/or driving. By visiting the residential areas, this gives assessors a better understanding of the community at large and also provides communities with a perspective rarely evaluated by outside visitors. Overall, residential areas were rated relatively well by the team, with some caveats. One assessor explained: “[Residential areas are] well-kept and tidy in general. There are some areas that could use attention notably E. Ayer St., if one takes this route to downtown from US2 the area looks almost intimidating in some places. There is a notable mix on the edges of downtown of very tidy homes and some pretty rough (what I assume are) rentals.”



Tourism Assets You Visited

Each asset visited received a review and is found in Section 7 of the Qualtrics data report. In addition, assessors chose not share reviews of private businesses during public forums, but do encourage community leadership teams to notify businesses of their reviews whether negative or positive. Please note, some assessors visited assets in neighboring communities. This is permitted and expected, as assessors are asked to behave as if they are “real tourists.” Thus, if in the course of their research on Ironwood they decided they wished to visit an asset in neighboring communities they did. This should be understood by the Ironwood Community Leadership Team as normal visitor behavior and these neighboring assets should be considered Ironwood’s assets as well.

Lasting Impressions

The visiting team identified various positive experiences while visiting Ironwood.

- Spending time in Depot Park - we walked, talked to several people, enjoyed the fountain, visited the public restroom (thank you), and read all of the historical signs and information. It was unfortunate the buildings were closed on Sunday or we would have spent even more time there.
- The beach at Black River Harbor. I had been out there before but somehow missed the beach. In scope, it is incredible. Gorgeous. My family discovered a place we will go back to for years to come.
- Interacting with local families at two key social condensers - Depot Park and Cold Iron Brewing.
- Watching people having fun & listening to music at the Ironwood Festival.
- I enjoyed talking with the barista in Contrast Coffee, learning a bit more about the area and then following up on some different things to see.



However, the visiting team also identified various negative experience while visiting Ironwood.

- Most of the stores are closed when people are in town. Ironwood is an outdoors town, be open when people come back from the boonies and are looking for something to do. Would have loved to get more time with the arts community, but not open. was
- Trying to access the Montreal River.
- Some neighborhoods in the town were seriously run-down – it is just so sad.
- Cleanliness and customer service at a specific restaurant.



What are the destinations strengths and challenges?

- Strengths:
 - Surrounding natural areas and the green space in downtown. It would be even better if the



downtown spaces were developed in a way that connected them to the larger natural areas, attractions and activities.

- The area is amazing for outdoor rec across the full range of interests and ability levels, I understand in winter it is similar. It is hard to find an all-in-one place like that. Comparatively many hotel rooms it seems as well. Very compact and busy downtown with shops, arts, and the like.
- Depot Park - Invest heavily in this central asset to bring more people downtown, small business (pop-up retail and food?) development should follow. Outdoor recreational assets - trails, ski hills, and waterfalls at the regional scale.
- Community interest in preserving/enhancing the architecture & sense of history, blended with their efforts to promote the arts. Certainly the natural assets are also a tremendous plus!
- Challenges:
 - There does not seem to be a cohesive identity for the downtown area. This can be accomplished with some creative thinking and community involvement...the very thing that has allowed the progress so far. There needs to be an assessment of local restaurants.
 - Need more quality and variety of restaurants, location is hard to overcome, but marketing and branding are key. So many assets to build on, need to give people activities to fill out the day.
 - Downtown's distance off US 2. Strip commercial look and feel along US 2 does not convey a unique community identity to the uninformed motorist passing by.
 - Likely the seasonality of the tourism markets & potential downturns that may threaten consistent visitation. I also overheard a few local folks talking with shopkeepers that hinted at a concern about “crowds” during the Ironwood Festival. I’m wondering if a fear of hordes of outsiders among local residents could be a deterrent to further tourism development. Overall, the lack of steady and well-paying employment for Ironwood’s own residents is the biggest concern in my mind. Hard for businesses to stick around if it’s tough to make a living!
 - The restaurant options were not great - customer service - People will go out of their way to talk with and help you personally. However, on doing things as you say and relatively quickly, customer service was lacking. - there was not a diverse mix of generations or races - Once out of the downtown, there was a lot less to see and do.

Using Senses and Safety

Assessors commented that Ironwood didn’t have any pleasant or unpleasant smells or sounds throughout the community.

Regarding safety and security in Ironwood, there were mixed feelings. Overall, assessors felt welcomed and found residents pleasant, it was particularly noted that at least one business featured a sign on the door welcoming all visitors. However, two assessors did not feel safe and secure at all times due to unpleasant though seemingly minor interactions with locals in public areas.



III. Recommendations

Key Recommendations

- Work with business leaders to evaluate and revise business hours to better match visitor expectations.
 - Consider more evening and weekend hours, especially in-season.
- Highlight regional attractions in marketing.
- Make Depot Park a focus area for updates.
 - Remember the “Rule of 10”
 - Think splash pad, food trucks, playgrounds
- Emphasize its place as the beginning of the Iron Belle Trail
- The Montreal River is seriously underutilized with poor access. Work to activate the river as an asset by acquiring land to create access points and leveraging the river as a tourism and general community asset.
- Ironwood’s authenticity, history and culture are a major asset, focus on telling your story in marketing.
- Focus on building connections and partnerships between growing arts community and the community at large.
- Slow traffic on US2 if at all possible.
 - Consider gateway signage (e.g. Escanaba?).
- There is a sign directing motorists toward downtown, but it is dated, easy to miss, and out of step with Ironwood’s current brand. Refresh or replace with something more modern and in-step with the image the community is trying to create.
- Current US2 business route is unpleasant introduction to Ironwood, with a great deal of blight. If possible consider alternative (perhaps Lowell St.?).
- General refresh and expansion of all signage, both public and private.

Six months from now will be winter. I'll be thinking "Man, I need to get over there to ski some of the hills and trails that abound."



Business:

- Hold tourism and customer service training series so businesses can learn of local tourism assets to be promoted and best practices for doing so while making visitors feel welcome and comfortable.
- Consider programs (e.g. revolving loan fund) to improve facades in downtown and the surrounding area. For vacant properties, paint the windows with a seasonal theme or cover them so visitors do not see the interior condition.
- Explore “Popup Shop” program to fill vacant storefronts during busy tourist seasons. This may help grow permanent downtown businesses as well.
- Encourage businesses to take credit/debit cards and the full line of cards (AmEx) visitors might want to use. Costs should be offset with strategic pricing.
- Encourage business to take ownership of their Yelp, Google, and TripAdvisor pages to properly market themselves in this space and curate the content (e.g. negative reviews) that others post.
- If practical, make attracting restaurant options beyond current offerings a focus area for small business development.

Community:

- Improve pedestrian and especially bicycle infrastructure in the downtown core.
- Existing murals and pocket parks are excellent, continue to develop these assets and add new ones.
- Amendments to and/or better enforcement of property maintenance code and rental code, especially bordering the downtown and on US2 Business.
- Work to incorporate the growing creative community into community and downtown planning and visioning efforts.

Recreation:

- Continue to market Ironwood regionally as an outdoor recreation destination and as a hub for regional attractions.
- With growing variety of “creative class” tourism assets (microbrews, arts, outdoor rec, antiques, unique shops, yoga studio, day spa), consider marketing program as a UP cultural/artistic destination.
- Improve promotion of Mt. Zion as a regional tourism asset (e.g. Presque Isle in Marquette).
- Activate historic downtown buildings as a tourism asset, allow some to be viewed outside of formal tours and/or better market tour availability.
- More infrastructure and positive messaging/signage supporting bicycling throughout the city, especially focusing on Ironwood as terminal of the Iron Belle.
- Even more storytelling about Ironwoods unique history within the broader region.



General Suggestions to All FIT communities:

- Considering developing “Be a tourist in your own community” (e.g. 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, and 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 (Façade, parking, filling vacant storefronts, visible business signage, creatively using vacant building window space, sandwich boards, etc.).
- Improve marketing by involving downtown businesses, increasing cooperative marketing, utilizing regional guides and Pure Michigan branding, applying for state matching funds via DDA, etc.
- Provide training to business owners/employees (customer service, local event updates/brochures). Ensure all businesses are aware of and promote what there is to do 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 – search-out new funding opportunities.
- Search-out low-hanging tourism-related projects, picking one or two items that can be accomplished immediately and ensure its completion.
- Schedule a discussion between the CLT, local leaders, and active/concerned citizens of all ages to review this document and discuss opportunities to work together.
- Encourage and support entrepreneurship. Provide ‘how to start a business’ and other entrepreneur training, such as an online program presented by MSU Extension Educator Andy Northrop - *Shared Economy for Entrepreneurs and Tourism* (northro5@anr.msu.edu).
- Explore Agri-tourism as a niche. Identify farmers, explore what other areas are doing, and become involved with Michigan Agritourism (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>), and review articles (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>).
- Consult “FIT Community Next Steps” manual provided to your CLT.

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.

Contact

As Ironwood continues on its journey in tourism development, please contact MSU Extension as needs arise!

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