



RURAL TOURISM ASSESSMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FOR ROSCOMMON COUNTY

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Michigan State University Extension Rural Tourism Assessment

Phase 1: Planning and Asset Identification Workshop

Phase 1 serves as the foundational stage of the Rural Tourism Assessment (RTA) process. During this initial phase, held in workshop format facilitated by Michigan State University Extension, stakeholders identify assets and key metrics central to their tourism economy. Identified assets are prioritized by stakeholders which serve to support subsequent Phases. Additional steps are taken to generate specific questions stakeholders would like answered from First Impressions Tourism (FIT) assessment(s) conducted during and central to Phase 2.

Phase 2: (Data Collection and Analysis)

Phase 2 centers on gathering data generated through surveys and site visits using MSU Extensions FIT program. FIT provides valuable insights into the tourism experience from both first-time visitors and community perspectives generated in Phase 1. The collected data is then thoroughly analyzed to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities related to rural tourism development in participating communities. Presentations are then generated for the purpose of sharing with community stakeholders offered a community forum setting as part of Phase 3.

Phase 3: Results Dissemination and Community Engagement

Approximately six months after completing Phase 2, Phase 3 commences. Results obtained from Phases 1 and 2 are merged and shared with stakeholders participating in the Rural Tourism Assessment. This phase also provides an opportunity for residents and community members to engage in discussions and provide feedback on the first-time visitor perspective, findings, fostering collaboration and shared decision-making.

Phase 4: Implementation Strategy Development and Visioning (Optional)

Although optional, Phase 4 consists of facilitated discussions with stakeholders around next steps and implementation strategies for communities participating in the entire Rural Tourism Assessment process. These discussions heavily focus on insights gathered directly from FIT assessments conducted during Phase 2 and shared during Phase 3. Tourism development models are applied, where and when necessary, to help guide discussions. Tailored strategies are developed to enhance the tourism experience based on visitor feedback and community priorities.

Rural Tourism Assessment – Roscommon County Summary

The [Roscommon County Economic Development Corporation](#) and [Michigan State University Extension](#) (MSUE) established a partnership in early 2023 to strengthen rural tourism across the county and three communities by capitalizing on stakeholder knowledge, input, and first-time visitor perspectives to the area.

- Following MSUE’s Rural Tourism Assessment format, Roscommon County along with Prudenville/Houghton Lake, St. Helen, and Village of Roscommon participated in the multi-phase effort.
- Phase 1 was conducted April 2023.
- Phase 2 was conducted September – October 2023.
- Phase 3 was completed May 2024.
- At the time of drafting this summary, Phase 4 is being planned for Fall 2024.

As part of RTA, Phase 2 consists of a comprehensive FIT assessment in and with participating partners. In this effort, Roscommon County and the three identified communities received five first-time visitors at separate times between September and October 2023.

All five visitors spent three nights, four days visiting various stakeholder identified tourism assets from Phase 1, as well as a wide range of self-identified tourism assets while on site. A total of 15 nights were spent in the county: eight nights in hotels, four nights in motels, two nights camping, and one night in a bed & breakfast.

Visitor Profiles:

- 1 Female from Generation X visited with her spouse between Friday–Monday.
- 1 Male from Generation X visited alone between Tues–Friday.
- 3 Males from Millennial Generation visited alone between Thurs–Sunday.
- All visitors are married residents of either Upper or Lower Peninsula, MI, and are employees of Michigan State University Extension with various expertise.

Visitor Diverse Personal Interests:

- Artists, (Mountain) Bike Rider(s), Birder(s), Camper(s), Foodie, Hiker(s), Paddler(s), Nature and Outdoor Enthusiast(s), Trail Enthusiast(s), Water Lover, Trip Planners, and Avid/World Travelers.

Countywide Recommendations

General Recommendations:

- Increase public access to lakes
- Foster more unique food options
- Farm to table/Local food
- Brew pub and/or distillery
- Increase county marketing
- Better maps and way-finding signage to help navigate
- Split County into 4 specific hubs
- Increase outdoor recreation options
- Engage mountain biking trail and other users
- Expand offerings of new modes for outdoor rec, e.g. standup paddle-boarding
- Develop multi-use community nodes/spaces where possible. Be creative!
- Create more continuity via planning and zoning
- Ordinance for Pedestrian Center in Prudenville
- Decreasing parking lot sizes and yard setbacks (redevelopment)
- Create welcoming campaigns in less visited areas
- Elevate "The Loop" concept as advertised on I-75N
- Get communities to buy into it as a regional county effort
- Use concept to develop itineraries, new ideas, themes, cuisines.

Arts Recommendations

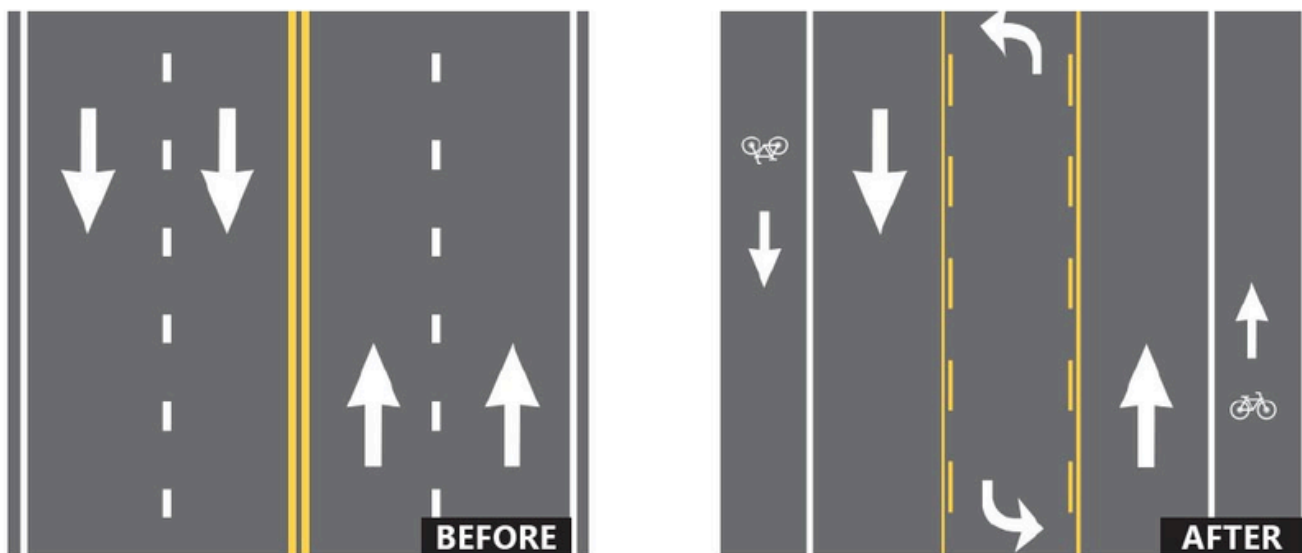
- Public art installations (permanent or not) that celebrate the uniqueness/history of the community and region
- Arts center for plays/shows
- Perhaps engage local artists and artisans. Expand art presence at farmers markets.
- Continue to support local art through Farm Markets and coffee shop/gift co-op models.
- Could art themes/murals be used across RC for the "The Loop"?

Business Recommendations

- More local food options and variety, maybe a local restaurant pop-up to provide access to kitchen space and clientele for restaurant start-ups and to attract entrepreneurs
- Construct a more coherent county wide chamber
- Encourage more hotels to get onto major travel websites (Bookings, Expedia) because it looks like there are very few hotels in the area on those websites. There are many, many short-term rentals on those websites so it is enticing to do the STR route rather than a hotel/motel.

Houghton Lake-Prudenville, Community-Specific Recommendations

- Upgrade the M55 corridor. Work with other stakeholders to envision a different structure and traffic patterns.
- Anything they could do to slow down traffic on M-55 and create more pedestrian and bike traffic is welcome.”
- Improve lake access wherever possible. “I think going forward it is imperative that the local government and nonprofit sector do anything possible to expand lake access for new audiences. Unless you have a rental in the community or brought a boat you have a very hard time getting on the lake and enjoying it and that’s very unfortunate particularly because many of Houghton Lake’s competing communities don’t have that problem.”
 - Focus on enhancing shore-based public access, beaches, fishing, non-motorized launches, and the like.
- Further development of public gathering places to host events, food truck rallies, and so on.
- Create a more visually appealing community. Create a Blight Squad dedicated to cleaning up run down or abandoned areas and helping to beautify public assets.
- Improve navigation overall, be it maps, websites, or signs. It’s so dispersed and road is busy so it’s hard to get a sense of where to go.



US Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration

St. Helen Community-Specific Recommendations

- A new website and marketing materials highlighting the community’s assets.
- A designated and clearly visible visitor information center.
- More eating and drinking options, for example a brewery or brewpub.
- A more visible community space.
- Improve and add signage directing visitors to Cove Park and expand and improve signage at the park itself.
- Expand and improve sidewalk infrastructure to make the community more pedestrian friendly and accessible.
- A non-motorized trail system to connect St. Helen with neighboring communities, especially the Village of Roscommon to the north.
- Expanded lodging options.
- Watercraft rentals.
- Opportunities for clinics, for example learn-to-fish or learn-to-ORV.



Roscommon Community-Specific Recommendations

- More eating and drinking options, for example a brewery or brewpub.
- More lodging options
 - Possibly a boutique hotel or similar in the downtown area to leverage walkable assets.
 - Glamping options (wall tents, yurts, vintage campers, etc.) in the surrounding area.
- Expand non-motorized trail options.
- Build on existing events to draw more visitors in and leverage downtown assets.
- A dedicated visitor’s center.
- Develop visitor itineraries centered on the Village of Roscommon to encourage use of community as a “home base” for exploring the area.
- More easily-available information about rentals and guiding services.

Community Reflections from Assessment

The chart below show reflections from community members in attendance at the May 3rd, 2024 County-wide Report Forum. Participants were asked to provide thoughts on four flip charts:

- **Quick Wins:** Reflections/Suggestions described by assessors that may provide the opportunity for immediate changes or improvements.
- **Assets:** The current community assets that can be leveraged in future tourism marketing and infrastructure development.
- **Needs:** Things don't exist within the community, but must be developed to improve Roscommon County first impressions.
- **“Ah-ha Moments”:** The information from the assessment that really made participants stop and think and/or showed opportunities for the County.

Key points from these responses are **bolded** in the chart. These represent responses that were provided by multiple respondents and should be priorities for the County as they work toward a more regional tourism marketing and development strategy.

Quick Wins	Assets	Needs	“Ah-ha moments”
Chamber and County website improvements	Public Libraries	Completion of Iron Belle	The Loop
Better signs for lake access	Local food, not chains	Funding	Lack of online marketing information
Public Art	Short driving distance to Metro Detroit, highway access	Improve web presence and tech support to do it	Expand Trestle District
Develop “The Loop”	Lakes	Slow traffic down	Expand food options, especially farm-to-table
Expand use of social media	Community Organizations	Grow agritourism	Surprising most would return
Update Google Maps, TripAdvisor, Yelp, etc.	Trail system	Invest in lodging	Expand bike paths
Printed and web maps of all public parks and beaches	Natural areas and gathering spaces	Develop food truck areas and hire coordinator	

Introduction to First Impression Tourism Assessments (FIT)

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,

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

Additional FIT Resources

Please visit the FIT Resources Below to learn more about the program

FIT - [How it Works](#)

FIT - [Frequently Asked Questions](#)

FIT - [Building a Community Leadership Team for FIT](#)

A Summary of Community Actions

and Success from FIT - [Downloadable Report](#)



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-sugartrails.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, ecotourism and/or cultural/heritage tourism.

Learn more Learn more about MSU Extension tourism programs by visiting:

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism/>