April 2021 Edition

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

FIRST IMPRESSIONS:

Assessing your community for tourism (FIT)

msue.anr.msu.edu

A Summary

of

Community Actions

&

Successes

in

FIT

2017-2019

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CONTENT:

What is FIT?

FIT is a comprehensive community assessment conducted by unannounced visitors in a host community. Overall, FIT helps communities learn about their strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of first-time visitors. It empowers leaders and stakeholders to develop an action plan to improve their communities based on new perspectives from first-time visitors. These action plans strengthen the quality of life for residents and visitors alike. The results of FIT also spawn local leadership; strengthen community vitality; and form the basis for future development.

Purpose of this report:

FIT has proven to be the catalyst needed to launch and expand small town tourism across Michigan. Launched in 2017 as a solution to drive community-driven tourism, FIT has provided rural leaders and their stakeholders opportunities to collaborate around suggestions and strategies from first-time visiting tourists to their community. This document will focus on the actions and successes implemented by several small town Michigan communities that engaged in the FIT program between 2017-2019.

Report Objectives:

1. To give a general overview of the FIT program.
2. To provide a comprehensive overview of the FIT program successes since 2017.
3. To identify specific actions and impacts taken by communities after capturing first-time visitor perspectives via FIT.
4. To serve as a resource for communities interested in learning more about FIT.

FIT Program Community History:
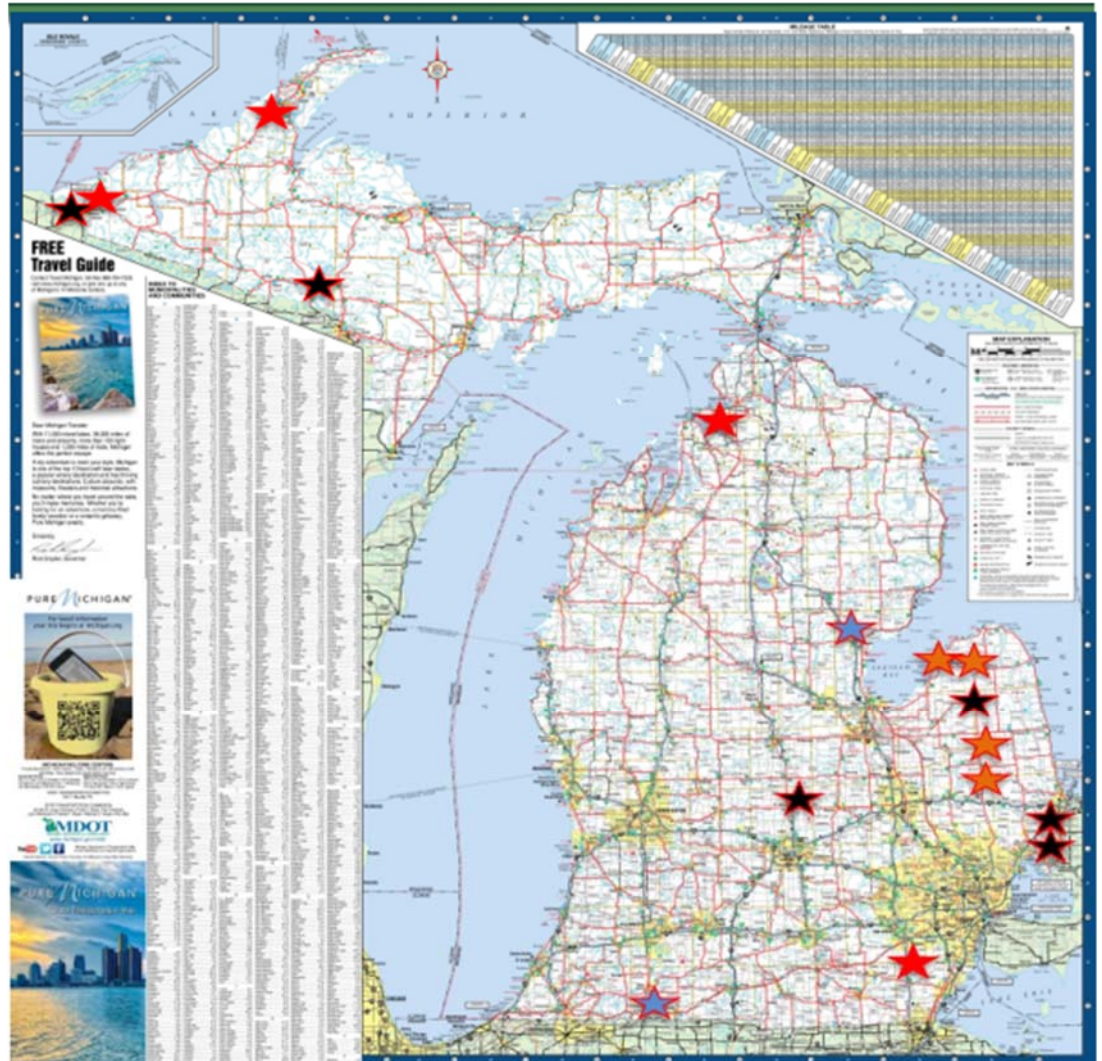
2016-Pilots

- Sturgis
- Standish

2017

- Elkton
- Imlay City
- Marlette
- Sebewaing

2018

- East Jordan
- Village of Dundee
- Bessemer
- Houghton

2019

- Cass City
- Marine City
- Laingsburg
- St. Clair
- Ironwood
- Crystal Falls & Area

2016-Blue Stars, 2017-Orange Stars, 2018-Red Stars, and 2019-Black Stars

FIT ACTIONS, IMPACTS & SUCCESSES:

PROGRAM YEAR 2017

VILLAGE OF ELKTON, Huron County, population 810

- Downtown Development Authority re-engaged and launching projects after 4 years

- Artists engaged for mural paintings

- Websites redesigned

- Businesses engaged for better service

- Youth/business entrepreneurship program

- Park signage, kiosk, and brochure created

Photo: Northrop 2020

IMLAY CITY, Lapeer County, population 3,600

- Volunteers beautification committee created (awarding beauty vs. penalizing blight)

- Historical walking trails developed

- Cycling and kayak trail signage installed

- Public / private partnership for agritourism

- Hispanic entrepreneurship community representation in public sector

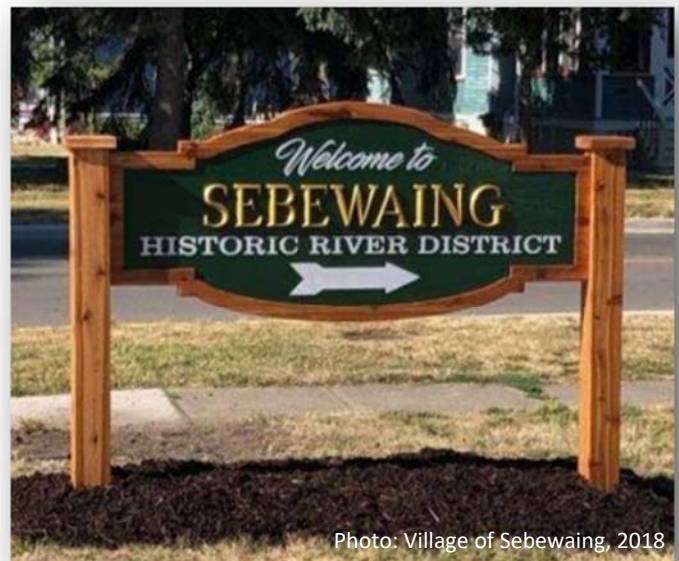- $3,000 grant dollars secured for future projects from Community Foundation

Photo: Northrop 2020

FIT ACTIONS, IMPACTS & SUCCESSES:

PROGRAM YEAR 2017

CITY OF MARLETTE, Sanilac County, population 1,800

- Downtown Development Authority re-engaged with all new members

- $3,000 grant dollars secured for future projects

- Launching new projects after 9 years

- Launched their first farmers market

- Businesses engaged for better service

MARLETTE *Heart of the Thumb* WELCOMES YOU A Great Place to Live, Shop and Dine.

Photo: Zoia 2018

VILLAGE OF SEBEWAING, Huron County, population 1,700

- Established "Historic River District"

- Launched new farmer's market

- Master plan updated after 20 years

- Recreation plan updated after 5 years

- Kayak trail signage installed

- Grant dollars secured for future projects

- Coastal Zone Management grant for new zoning ordinances

Welcome to SEBEWAING HISTORIC RIVER DISTRICT

Photo: Village of Sebewaing, 2018

FIT ACTIONS, IMPACTS & SUCCESSES:

PROGRAM YEAR 2018

EAST JORDAN, Charlevoix County, population 2,351

- Monthly community leadership team meetings

- Adventure sports marketing

- YouTube and visitor social media campaigns

- Business improvement programs

- Residential Improvements programs

- Pedestrian friendly connections

- Downtown historical walking tour

- Wayfinding Sign

- Water & nature trail signs

- "Breezeway" signs

Photo: Northrop, 2018

DUNDEE, Monroe County, population 4,252

- Provided validation for Downtown Development Authorities continued work

- Improvement of digital/web presence

- Multi-organization committee formed to integrate websites and build business directory

- FIT program results integrated into new Parks and Recreation plan

- Installation of ADA swing at Wolverine Park

Photo: Ziegler 2018

FIT ACTIONS, IMPACTS & SUCCESSES:

PROGRAM YEAR 2019

CASS CITY, Tuscola County, population, 2,298

- Youth-driven environmental committee identifying flora and fauna in the area

- Expanding 9-hole disc golf course to 18 holes

- Targeting national disc-golf competitions

- Walking trails marked with distance markers

- Downtown Development Authority (DDA) installed a kiosk to showcase events and community information

- DDA façade improvement program for local businesses.

- Long-term community economic development strategy with the Hills and Dales Hospital

- Developed and funded a gateway and wayfinding signage to strengthen visitor and resident knowledge of existing assets

- $3,000 dollars was raised from a service club

- $15,000 raised to install updated free-standing playground equipment from local foundation.

Photo: Cass City 2020

MARINE CITY, St. Clair County, population 4,102

- Launched an Economic Development Board

- Chamber of Commerce expanded hours and moved locations

- Unveiled eight public art mosaics in the downtown

- Downtown business owners made donations to support lighting for the Marine City Lighthouse area.

- Approved an ADA accessible kayak launch at a City riverfront park

- Funded a Downtown "Business Loop" marketing effort with signage.

- Received $4,000 dollars from the St. Clair County Economic Development Alliance (EDA) for project implementation.

Photo: Northrop 2020

FIT ACTIONS, IMPACTS & SUCCESSES:

PROGRAM YEAR 2019

CITY OF LAINGSBURG, Shiawassee County, population 1,264

- Updated zoning ordinances based on visitor suggestions to provide outdoor dining in downtown

- Created a visitor section on their website that highlights events, businesses, and recreation

- Installed detailed signage to compliment a robust set of thorough signs depicting the community's historical identify

Photo: City of Laingsburg

CITY OF ST. CLAIR, St. Clair County, population 5,327

- Increased community engagement via social media strengthened community activism

- MI Arts and Humanities grant secured to highlight freighters and replace boardwalk

- Raised awareness of Bay-to-Bridge Trail within local businesses

- Revamped DDA website

- Results shaped 5-year Master Plan

- $10K secured in grants from donors and Community Foundation
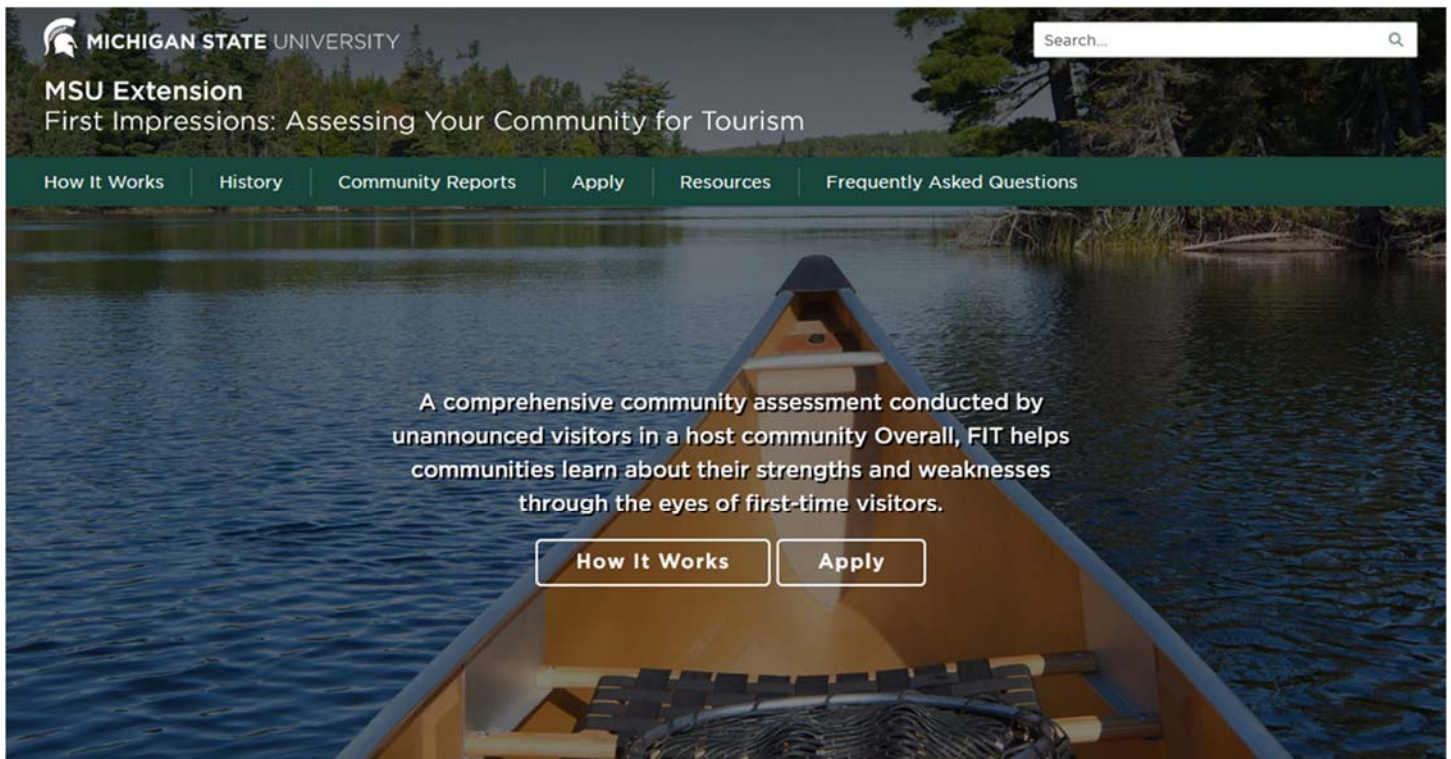

Jamieson, 2020

FIT Program Testimonials:

2017-2019 Program Testimonials:

◊ *Great ideas to help develop the future*

◊ *Many opportunities identified for quick success.*

◊ *It brought attention to assets we 'forgot' we had!*

◊ *Identified several pathways to organize around*

◊ *Identified spaces I see as liability that are seen as assets by others*

◊ *Fresh eyes give credibility to assessments –*

◊ *This program highlighted recreational assets we didn't realize we had.*

◊ *This brought items to the forefront from an unbiased source*

◊ *Many recreation sites were mentioned that I was unaware of, and I moved here in 1973!*

FIT Program Summary:

Communities are engaging in FIT to:

• Build capacity within their community

• Strengthen their image, assets, and tourism/recreation opportunities

• Update master and/or recreation plans

• Spawn new ideas and leadership

• Increased grant applications to:

      - Arts and Humanities

      - Department of Natural Resources,

      - Community Foundations

      - USDA Rural Development

• Organizing and applying for state agency programs, such as

      - Redevelopment Ready Certification (RRC)

      - Main Street Programs

A comprehensive community assessment conducted by unannounced visitors in a host community Overall, FIT helps communities learn about their strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of first-time visitors.

How It Works   Apply

Our website houses multiple resources to guide communities through the next steps.

Website resources include:

- How it Works
- Community Reports
- Application and Resources
- FAQs

To learn more about FIT please visit -

- *www.canr.msu.edu/tourism/programs/*

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All community results highlighted in this report were captured directly via interviews with each participating community leadership team within one year of completing the FIT program.

Photo Credits:

- Page 6, Village of Sebewaing Historical District—Courtesy of Village of Sebewaing and Huron County Economic Development Corporation

- Page 9, City of Laingsburg outdoor seating—Courtesy of City of Laingsburg, Downtown Development Authority

- All remaining photos are property of Michigan State University

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