



First Impressions: Assessing Your Community for Tourism



Photo: Abraham (2019)

First Impressions Tourism Summary Report Laingsburg, Michigan November 2019

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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: Tourism Assessments (FIT) is a unique version of FI for our state.

This summary report is based on the observations of five visitors, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors." Each was provided a stipend for participating. Before beginning an unannounced visit to Laingsburg, 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 Laingsburg between May 11th and June 23rd, 2019. Assessors recorded their experiences conducting visitor research, maneuvering through and around Laingsburg, and visiting stores, restaurants, trails, museums, outdoor spaces and additional tourism-related sites. Each assessor 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 Laingsburg found online. The assessment results and photographs of the community were downloaded into a data management program called Qualtrics. The compiled results were extrapolated to create this written report and public presentation.

Key findings were presented at a public presentation in November 2019. For additional information, a copy of the PowerPoint public presentation and Qualtrics data accompany this report.

II. Visitor Profile

Of the five assessors who visited Laingsburg, three identified male and two female. Prior to the visit, one assessor spent one to two hours doing research about the community. Three assessors spent between two to four hours researching, and one assessor spent over four hours researching the community. Two of the five assessors visited Laingsburg on a Friday, two on a Wednesday, and one on a Thursday. Two of the assessors belonged to Generation X, two visitors identified as Millennials, and one as a Baby Boomer. Four assessors stayed overnight. Three camped, and one stayed at a hotel/motel. Three visited the city alone and two visited with their friend or relative. All assessors gave their professional background, they are listed as a Community Food Systems and Tourism Educator, Michigan State University Professor, Community Vitality and Tourism Educator, Executive Director for Arts and Culture Non-Profit Organization; and Michigan State University Student Intern working on the FIT program.

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.



Laingsburg has assets

Laingsburg has wonderful assets including the serene drive in from Woodbury Road, the unique feel from downtown, the inviting greenspaces and parks, and its many waterfronts for residents at Scenic Lake, Lake Victoria, Round Lake, and the Looking Glass River. The Laingsburg area is also in close proximity to Michigan's Sleepy Hollow State Park, a significant asset that also encompasses Lake Ovid. There is opportunity for horseback riding, hiking, kayaking, and fishing. Laingsburg's proximity to Lansing, Michigan State University, and two major highways, US 127 and I69, holds an opportunity for visitors to make day trips to the area. There are many natural and built assets that Laingsburg can utilize to further attract visitors, such as Rose Lake Wildlife Center and neighboring towns. This report intends to highlight additional assets FIT assessors identified as integral to Laingsburg's future should they continue developing their community for visitors.

Pre-Assessment

To foster a true tourist experience, the assessors were required to conduct online research prior to visiting Laingsburg. This prepared them for the in-person tourist experience by determining highlights in the community in advance of their visit. Three out of the five assessors found the Laingsburg City website (www.laingsburg.us) the most helpful. One assessor found TripAdvisor to be the most helpful when researching restaurants and events. Another assessor found Google Maps the most helpful when deciding where to go and what to do. One assessor noted the city website was good "because it provided a good overview of what the city and surrounding area has to offer." Another assessor commented on the resources from the city website saying, "it had upcoming events on the front page, the local government plans and a map of the city," and "cool historical photos." However, one assessor noted while the website does have a calendar, it does not include the events such as the Farms Market, Movies & Music in McClintock Park, or the Springtime Festival. While the city website was a good way for assessors to understand the community, the lack of information required assessors to explore Trip Advisor, Google Maps, and Facebook more so when looking for restaurants and fun places to go.

Of the most helpful websites, all assessors agreed that the information was well-presented, and 80% believed web pages were visually appealing. Four assessors found information useful, but four also identified more information is needed on the most helpful website. One assessor on the Laingsburg City website also found typographical errors. Overall, assessors found their research on Laingsburg helpful and informative, but felt there was a lack of information for first-time visitors.

The Qualtrics data report highlights additional pre-and post-assessment of web-based information and assessor experiences.

Visualizing Laingsburg

Prior to visiting Laingsburg, assessors were asked to visualize the community in writing. Assessors anticipated the destination to be a "small town" surrounded by lots of farmland. One assessor visualized the town with "a few things to do tucked away on a small hidden country farm road with nice views." One assessor was familiar with nearby towns and expected Laingsburg to be similar, but was unsure what to expect with the downtown. Another assessor said they visualized Laingsburg as "beautiful and natural." Assessors had mixed opinions about visiting Laingsburg after conducting the pre-assessment. While some assessors viewed Laingsburg as a



beautiful and natural town, others did not find many attractions or places to visit while researching online. This lack of information in Laingsburg’s digital representation left a minority of assessors feeling disinterested when preparing for their visit.

Initial Impression

Upon arriving, assessors were asked to give their initial impression within the first five minutes.

Positive comments included, “beautiful ride into town,” “the downtown area is clean and inviting,” and “the historical representation was impressive.” One assessor commented on the community having “a Vermont/New England feel to it with the rolling hills and abundance of old barns and winding roads coming in from 127.” Most assessors noted that the directional signage coming into from the south and west off I-69 into Laingsburg was well marked and easy to read.

Negative comments about Laingsburg included, “there wasn't much activity or people walking around,” and “part of the downtown looked abandoned.” Most assessors commented on the empty storefronts as a negative first impression, with one assessor pointing out the empty downtown did not match the residential areas. One assessor said the open storefronts are “clearly for local residents or a specific customer.”

Overall, assessors viewed Laingsburg as a small town with beautiful landscapes, rolling hills, attractive “residential areas with nice flowers and bushes, and a comforting downtown feel with lots of history. However, even though it was an inviting atmosphere overall, the empty storefronts in the downtown did give a negative impact on some assessors. Based on their initial impression, three assessors agreed they would feel compelled to stop if they were randomly passing by, and two disagreed.



Community Information

Overall, all assessors found community directions accurate however, no assessor found it easy to locate a visitor center or something comparable. Four out of the five assessors agreed it was not easy locating a community/regional tourist brochure, or locating a map of the community. Most assessors did not find the local/regional newspaper informative, and most assessors disagreed that information booths exist to help tourists locate attractions or services.



Visitor Motives

Assessors were presented with a list of 15 reasons visitors would come to a destination. They were asked to select the top three reasons someone might visit Laingsburg. The top choices included the following with a * indicating number of times that motive was selected:

1. Visit friends and family (5*)
2. Be in nature (4*)
3. Engage in sports activities (2*)
4. Get away from people (2*)
5. In transit to somewhere else (1*)
6. Relax
7. Enjoy the weather
8. Shop
9. Seek adventure
10. Visit historical sites
11. Experience a unique culture
12. Experience nightlife
13. Get entertained/for entertainment
14. Engage in business activities
15. Engage in religious activities
16. Other: Visit the State Park (1*)



All assessors identified *visit friends and family* with *be in nature* as the second most popular with four votes. Assessors then chose other options as *engage in sports activities*, *get away from people*, *in transit to somewhere else* and *visiting the State Park*.

Generational Appeal

All five assessors noted Laingsburg's attributes would be most attractive to Generation X. One assessor commented on Laingsburg's appeal to Generation X is because it is "close enough to Lansing to commute for work if they don't want to live in a city." Two assessors selected the Post-Millennial Generation as likely to find Laingsburg attractive, while only one assessor selected the Silent Generation. Three assessors agreed Laingsburg would be attractive to the Baby Boomer Generation and the Millennial Generation. Assessors commented on this being a good and quiet place for retired Baby Boomers who treasure the outdoors. For the Millennial Generation, comments included, "this is a great place to start a family or move to for a good school district."



Destination & Downtown Attributes

- Directional signage
- Road conditions
- Safety and security
- Hospitality and friendliness of residents
- Activities for children
- McClintock Park
- Distinct downtown feel
- Picturesque drive into town
- Landscaping of downtown area
- Summer and seasonal events



Destination & Downtown Weaknesses

- Variety and quality of accommodations
- Variety and quality of shopping options
- Historic/heritage attractions
- Variety of activities to do
- Lack of a thriving downtown
- Lack of diversity
- Variety and quality of restaurants
- Lack of visitor center



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. One assessor stated the Laingsburg residential area was “excellent,” three said the surrounding area was “good,” and one assessor selected the residential area was “fair.”

Assessors noted the houses in the neighborhoods near Scenic Lake and Lake Victoria were “incredible.” Other neighborhoods and newer subdivisions on the edge of town were found to be attractive by assessors. One assessor also stated, “Several historic homes in the downtown were well-kept.”

Residential areas in the downtown were also found to be “cleaned up well for the most part and have nice lawns”, according to one assessor. However, some assessors were divided on the downtown residential areas visual appeal. Assessors commented on some areas being “run-down,” “in despair,” and having “cluttered yards.” One assessor stated some houses near downtown “stood out as in need of repair and a good cleaning up.” Assessors found the overall residential areas attractive, but there are a few homes in close proximity to the downtown that could be taken care of better.





Tourism Assets You Visited

During assessments assessors were asked to visit tourist attractions and assets that were of interest to them either from researching prior to their visit and/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. These results are included in the Raw Data and Photo report provided to the FIT Laingsburg Community Leadership Team (CLT). CLTs are encouraged to notify local businesses of their reviews whether positive or negative. Tourism assets in Laingsburg visited by assessors included the Bates Scout Park, Boondocks Saloon & Grill, Dairy Den, McClintock Park, PDP's Pizza, Rose Lake Wildlife Area, Sleepy Hollow, and Tammy's Bakery & Café.

Water Access Assessment

This section, normally labeled as *Waterfront Community Assessment*, is for communities with public access to a large body of water, such as a major river, shoreline, inland lake, or the Great Lakes. From all assessors perspectives they did not see Laingsburg as a waterfront community per se, but two assessors did acknowledge some public access to water. Therefore, a small number of assessors collected data after visiting the Looking Glass River, Round Lake, Scenic Lake, Lake Victoria, and/or Lake Ovid. This data will be beneficial for the Laingsburg community as it relates to outdoor recreation and tourism.

One assessor noted that the sign for Laingsburg included imagery of water and, because of this, expected there to be public access points to either the lakes or the river they learned of in their pre-assessment. The assessor stated they found almost no public access points to any body of water except Babcock's Landing on the Looking Glass River. While researching Laingsburg prior to the assessment, the assessor discovered Don's Country Store as a kayak rental, however Google Maps showed the business as closed. After the assessment was completed, the same assessor learned there is in fact a store open in the same location, but was not indicated anywhere online prior to their visit.

Assessors were asked what area of waterfront access could be improved, and two assessors gave responses. One assessor noted more trees planted near the beach at Sleepy Hollow for shade would improve the waterfront. Another assessor suggested public access points to the Looking Glass River, river side trails, and to have correct information on the Round Lake resources. Other than these assets, none of the other three assessors commented on additional public water access or resources in Laingsburg.





Lasting Impressions

The assessors identified their **most positive experiences** while visiting Laingsburg:

- “A beautiful drive to get there and the fair was very lively and upbeat. Lots of kids running around and playing.”
- “Sitting at the campsite, listening to the birds.”
- “The parks, they were impressive even though weather kept me from enjoying them.”
- “Camping at Sleepy Hollow State Park and exploring some of the trails by bike.”
- “Bike lanes on some roads, building restoration taking place, historical signage and credit to their past, and initiative/signage to entice State Park visitors to their town once you exit the park itself.”



Photo: Abraham (2019)

The assessors also identified their **most negative experiences** while visiting Laingsburg:

- “None of the restaurants had outdoor seating other than PDPs.”
- “Seeing half painted building/garages in town.”
- “There seemed to be a large volume of buildings in and around town with their back or garage doors facing the downtown; this is also a strength.”
- “Walking around the downtown area and feeling like I was the only out of town person there.”
- “The fault of weather; I was rained out of golfing and there was flooding at Bates Scout Park.”
- “The meals I had were decent enough, but nothing special.”
- “Seeing a man vomiting in his yard downtown across the road from the Farmer's Market.”
- “Being uncomfortable trying to figure out what entrance to use when going to PDPs and Boondocks. Also trying to figure out if I seat myself/how to order.”

Strengths:

- “Close proximity to Lansing area.”
- “Scenery around the downtown is unusual and unique. The scenic drive(s) in from the West and South are something to capitalize on.”
- “Seems to be a lot of land around that could be developed for bike trails/walking trails.”
- “Sleepy Hollow State Park, Rose lake wildlife area, lakes and the Looking Glass River ”
- “Laingsburg is home to many good Michigan artists and musicians and is located within a half-hour drive of many mid-Michigan attractions.”
- “Lots of potential in the downtown area.”
- “Parks, residential areas and the Laingsburg schools.”



Photo: Northrop (2019)



- “The garage doors around town seemed to be an option for painting murals or opening them up to display what is behind them, such as artist shows or a festival.”

Challenges:

- “Buildings with unfinished paint jobs”
- “Getting foot traffic downtown.”
- “Cleaning up the residential area(s).”
- “The lack of a thriving downtown with places to eat.”
- “Out of the way and not near major highways.”
- “Finding reasons for people who are visiting Lansing, East Lansing, Owosso, and other surrounding communities to come specifically to Laingsburg.”
- “It is a very small town without many established businesses in the downtown area.”
- “Empty buildings downtown make it look like the town isn't doing well and there is nothing to offer.”
- “Little to no access to any body of water for the public.”
- “The general location could be an issue for some to get to (far from a highway).”
- “No lodging within Laingsburg other than camping, this forces visitors out of Laingsburg.”



Art and Culture

After assessors visited Laingsburg, they were asked a series of questions designed to evaluate specifically the arts and culture of the destination. Most assessors said they observed and/or experienced something memorable relative to arts and culture. Assessors said “the children art in McClintock Park,” “the Farmer's Market,” and “the Springtime Fair” were all very memorable. One assessor stated they had visited Laingsburg in the past for a 5K, and for the Pancake Breakfast and these events stood out as memorable.



Overall, assessors found the art and culture within Laingsburg memorable, but areas of improvement stood out for the majority of assessors. For example, four assessors agreed that there are opportunities for more public artwork. One assessor stated that it “seems like a number of blank, well-suited walls that could be used for murals to spruce up the town like the library has done.” Another assessor suggested there could be a sculpture or an outdoor interactive museum put in the downtown or park areas that relate to the area’s history. It was also noted to “fortify the farmer's market with investment in attracting quality food, art, and craft retailers,” and to “invest in infrastructure to support outdoor music events in McClintock Park and downtown.”

One assessor commented that there are many local artists connected with the Shiawassee or Lansing Art Councils, and “bringing opportunity to these artists through the councils would increase the opportunity for grant and other funding to create destination events that would benefit everyone.” Lastly, one assessor was



unable to view the history page of the city website due to a broken link or the page being under construction. They noted making sure those pages are available would strengthen Laingsburg's arts and culture.

Local Involvement

Assessors were asked if they identified organizations that are involved with tourism development, management, and/or marketing of the destination. Assessors identified the Laingsburg Downtown Development Authority, City of Laingsburg, Sleepy Hollow, City Council, Planning Commission, Building and Zoning, Michigan Economic Development Corporation, and the local fairs and festivals as being involved. Organizations that were not identified as being involved with tourism by the assessors but could be are Shiawassee Convention and Visitors Bureau, City of Laingsburg, Shiawassee County Chamber of Commerce, the Department of Natural Resources the Shiawassee Arts Center, the Pine Hills Golf Course, the Looking Glass Sportsman Club, and local restaurants and businesses.



Community Branding

After visiting the destination and reflecting on their assessment, assessors provided single statements best describing the destination. Most assessors commented on the small town feel and the potential for growth. Assessors also provided responses regarding what they will remember most about Laingsburg after six-months:

- “Tidy town tucked away in the trees away from traffic!”
- “Small town with room to grow”

- “The large amount of garage doors (facing downtown) and odd shaped buildings around town.”
- “There was a place to recycle used flags.”
- “The historical signage around town.”
- “The drive in from 127, I-69, and back roads to Laingsburg from Okemos.”
- “Camping at Sleepy Hollow State Park.”
- “The feeling of downtown, so many buildings were closed it felt like a ghost town at times, but the festivals were really fun.”
- “The food was really good at all three restaurants I went to.”

Two assessors stated they either would “likely” or “definitely” visit Laingsburg on a pleasure trip in the future. One assessor was neutral while two selected it would be unlikely for them to visit Laingsburg on a pleasure trip in the future. Only one assessor selected they were likely to recommend the destination to friends and/or family. The other four assessors were either neutral or unlikely to recommend Laingsburg to friends and family.

Using Senses and Safety

A series of questions designed to gauge assessors' senses and safety while visiting the destination are part of the FIT assessment. While in Laingsburg, one assessor noted while they did not find it unpleasant, other visitors may find the occasional “farm and manure” smell unpleasant while driving through the town. One assessor,



while attending the Springtime Fair, noted the downtown smelled like elephant ears and pizza, which was nice. None of the assessors found any unpleasant noise in Laingsburg during their visit. All five assessors stated they always felt welcomed in the community. One assessor stated, “When I walked into the eating establishments I was welcomed warmly.” However, one assessor noted, “Though I fit the towns demographic fairly well, I likely would have felt uncomfortable if I were a person of color.”

Regarding safety and security, four of the five assessors noted they felt safe and secure while in Laingsburg. One assessor, however, noted that they did not feel safe in the residential areas because they had “felt the presence of a lot of barking dogs, which appeared unleashed and unfenced” while riding their bike near the downtown.

Trip Reflections

All assessors conducted pre-trip online research prior to visiting. They were later asked a series of questions after their assessment was complete regarding how Laingsburg’s online presence affected their assessment/experience. All five assessors found the information online to match what they found when they arrived. Four out of the five assessors found the information helpful with their visit. Comments from assessors include, “It helped to learn about what the community is doing through the Planning Commission and with MEDC to develop the area” and “helped me decide where I would eat and what I would do.” One assessor commented that they had to visit many different websites to get the entire Laingsburg picture, which left a negative impression. They also stated, “If I did not have those four hours to research Laingsburg, this trip would not have been productive. I would have missed a lot of places and information if I had gone straight to Laingsburg without researching first. I do feel Laingsburg needs one easily accessible website that houses visitor information.”

Assessors did not use printed material to make decisions about where to visit. While in the community, three assessors used Google Maps to navigate around Laingsburg and two assessors used Facebook. The latter digital resource was used to look for new events and to view menus for restaurants in town. Assessors found their online research to set their expectations for Laingsburg. One assessor found in their online research that the limited food options and the lack of lodging gave them the impression of a small town with few attractions. Overall, assessors found the online presence of Laingsburg to have been useful when planning their visit, but also the lack of information available digitally restricted their awareness of activities and assets.

III. Suggestions

As part of the FIT program, assessors provide suggestions for improvements to FIT communities. These suggestions typically group into four categories: art, business, community, and recreation. The suggestions provided in this report are usually direct quotes from assessors. Some information presented in the suggestions may be inaccurate due to the assessors’ lack of historical knowledge and/or familiarity of the community’s entire assets.



Art and Culture:

- Use the garage doors/assets to create an event called Garage Door Days or art shows
- Tap local artists escaping to Owosso and surrounding communities and keep them in Laingsburg!
- There are a lot of amazing artists in and near Laingsburg and providing some places where their work could be displayed, marketed, and sold would really encourage visitors who might not otherwise come to town
- There could be partnerships formed with the local schools to have art and music camps for students over the summer
- Adding public art to McClintock Park and downtown would enhance the visitor experience. For example, Morrice Public School's small sculpture garden behind their High School. Something similar could be done in this central park location and could involve the school art programs
- There is ample room for outdoor community music events in McClintock Park, downtown, and restaurants. Adding a public performance stage would draw people from surrounding communities
- Work with the State Park officials and create music and art opportunities at Sleepy Hollow



Business:

- Utilize some of the empty buildings in the downtown area for more restaurants/retail that both residents and tourists would find interesting, such as a local brewery or a farm-to-table option
- Market the Farmers Market to people staying at the Sleepy Hollow campground
- Advertise to visitors going to Bates Scout Park for baseball games that there's a place to get pizza and ice cream after games
- Attract people into Laingsburg after visiting Peacock Farms. Laingsburg could give a rural/nostalgic experience after pumpkin or Christmas tree shopping
- Specialty shops downtown like boutiques and antiques could attract newcomers into Laingsburg
- With Sleepy Hollow so close by and being surrounded by natural areas, there could be a need for an outdoor gear/supply business for campers or hikers, which could bring in new people as well
- Add a small gym downtown or a yoga studio to attract a wider range of people
- Introduce a local coffee shop, a place that is open later where entrepreneurs, students, and/or employees can visit or work remotely. The Dairy Den has a great space, maybe consider expanding the menu to attract this clientele
- Explore and/or zone properly for short-term rentals, hotel/motel or a bed and breakfast in town so there are additional overnight options





- Clearly label front doors at restaurants and have them be more inviting with signs and flowers

Community:

- Highlighting the scenery for a potential scenic drive tour from 127 East to 69 or beyond
- Improve website info and social media presence, such as YouTube, Trip Advisor, etc.
- Consolidate websites into one easily accessible source for visitors
- Encourage and zone for outdoor seating at restaurants
- Build off the Pancake Breakfast and Car Show, but maybe come up with a different creative name for it or another theme
- Add some improvements to the streetscape of the downtown like flowers/planters, more signage, and promotion of more businesses
- Create bus trips into Lansing, East Lansing, Detroit, and/or Grand Rapids that start in Laingsburg and tour regional assets.
- A trip to Owosso to visit both the Shiawassee Arts Center and The Armory art exhibits would be delightful! Possible resource: Shiawassee Arts Center - shiawasseearts.org
- Better connect Laingsburg to Sleepy Hollow; the two felt separated even though the state park is in close proximity of Laingsburg.
- Represent Sleepy Hollow's history in downtown Laingsburg.
- Encourage Park visitors to enjoy restaurants in Laingsburg using brochures
- Replicate events listed on the front-page city website onto the Laingsburg city calendar.
- The intersection of E 1st N St and Laing St has an extremely confusing stop sign, with no lines on the road to guide traffic. There is just a stop sign in the middle of the pavement. This needs to be fixed, it felt very dangerous



Recreation:

- Kayaking in the Looking Glass River. If the Looking Glass Sportsman Club could partner with, or adopt a kayaking service, that is a great location to load into the river, and kayak further downstream to Babcock's landing. Closer options could be the bridges Laingsburg Rd, Hollister Rd, and Upton Rd. This would keep people in Laingsburg
- Have accessible water points for the public (or make it visible for visitors if they do exist)



- Explore adding a hiking or biking trail that goes along the Looking Glass river
- Manage the drainage and water issue at Bates Scout Park. It is such a great resource but the bugs drive people away. This site would be one of the best in the area for baseball tournaments, and the town's businesses would have a captive audience
- Merge restaurants/craft beer with music and outdoor recreation events.
- Create signage for parking at the Rose Lake Wildlife on Woodbury Road
- Explore and launch outdoor recreation and tourism activities to attract the MSU student and faculty population. Some example worth exploring include:
 - Tree Runner – (<https://treerunnergrandrapids.com>)
 - Min-golf
 - Hiking, biking, and/or kayak trails.



Additional Suggestions:

- 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, such as links to “things to do.”
- Use social media to your advantage by engaging already active groups (students and adults) that are promoting your community already.
- 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.
- Explore agritourism as a niche and become involved with the Michigan Agritourism Association (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>).
- 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.
- 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 the raw data further and identifying parts of the results to take action with; tap into MSU Extension Leadership and Tourism educators to facilitate your next steps.



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.

Learn more

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