



First Impressions Tourism Assessment Wayland, MI



Summary of Results

December 2024

Compiled by:

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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 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, has seen approximately 25 Michigan communities participate in the program.

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 a 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 a wide-range of initiatives to support community-driven tourism development across Michigan.

II. Summary of Results for City of Wayland, MI

The City of Wayland began their FIT program in early 2024 with a kick-off meeting comprised of community leaders and MSU Extension. By end of 2024, the process culminated with the sharing of findings summarized in this report at a FIT community forum host in Wayland. Community leaders, business owners, and residents were present at the forum. Funding for Wayland's FIT assessment was provided by The Michigan Economic Development Corporation.

Visitor/Assessor Profiles:

The City of Wayland and surrounding area (CWA) received five visitors in the Summer 2024, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors". To ensure diverse perspectives, the assessors were recruited across multiple disciplines within MSU Extension and had minimal to no knowledge of CWA. All assessors are MI residents and traveled to experience Wayland as first-time visitors.

Of the five assessors, there were three males and two females. Two assessors identified as Millennials, two from Generation X, and one Baby Boomer. More than half the assessors are parents of young or teenage children or grandparents. Assessors identified interests in their personal lives as artists, bicyclists (or mountain bikers), foodies, hikers, fishers, and/or world travelers. Four assessors visited CWA alone while the remaining assessor visited with their spouse or relative.

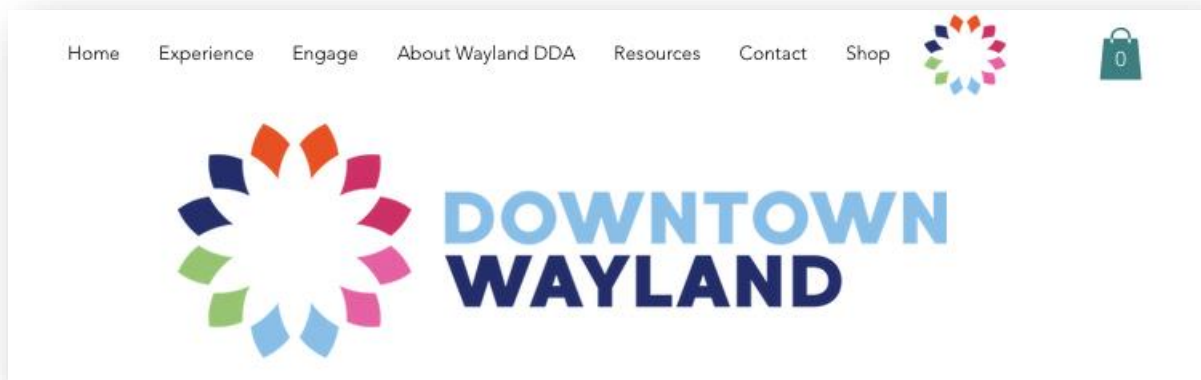


To generate distinct experiences, assessors visited CWA separately during different days of the week between late May and mid-July. Other than Monday, CWA was visited every day of the week for various lengths of time. Four assessors stayed in a local hotel/motel near Wayland and the last assessor visited for the day. All overnight assessors spent between 18-36 hours visiting CWA's wide range of assets within the downtown and surrounding area that contribute to the local economy. The day-trip assessor spent approximately eight hours doing the same. In addition to onsite visits, assessors also spent between 1-4 hours researching CWA (prior to assessments) using mobile devices and/or personal computers to gain a deeper understanding of the host community's assets, services, and things to do via various websites and social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, and/or TripAdvisor.

This report is a general summary of data collected highlighting assessors' experiences captured before, during, and after via FIT survey data. Results are separated by **Pre-Visit**, **The Visit**, and **Post-Visit**. FIT results also include Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities identified by assessors and are provided at the end of the report.

Pre-Visit:

Web Research & Digital First Impressions



Most Helpful Website(s) Identified by Assessors -

- <http://www.downtownwayland.com> – has the most extensive list of things to do in the area. It listed all major parks, restaurants, and things to do.
- The Downtown Development Authority (DDA) website did a good job of highlighting a lot of attractions in a small area of downtown.
- I thought the DDA website was quite unique and differed from others I have seen.
- DDA website was helpful, but that was 7th down on the list!



Second Most Helpful Website Identified -

“Pure Michigan gave a good overview of things to do. It has links to both the Downtown Development Authority and the Chamber of Commerce. Additionally, two specific articles had curated collections of things to do in Wayland.” (Images below are from Pure MI website.)



Based on assessors' pre-visit research, City of Wayland and surrounding area is known for these attractions and/or events?

- *Gun Lake Casino (mentioned by 3 assessors)*
- *Wayland Summer Fest,*
- *Wayland Farmer's Market*
- *Gun Lake*

How did pre-visit research impact your visit? What impression was given online?

- *Based off the internet research I thought there might be a little bit more going on in Wayland.*
- *Clean, neat, engaged, small town feel with the biggest attraction being the casino.*
- *Internet research helped to manage my expectations and informed me that I would likely need to look outside of the downtown and in neighboring towns for things to do*
- *I had the impression that I was going to go to a city with a small but established downtown with a lot of history and art mixed in. I had some concerns about finding things to do in Wayland given how much my research kept pushing me towards Gun Lake or even Allegan.*
- *The websites and social media gave me a different impression of the community than what I experienced onsite.*



The Visit:

First 5-Minute Impression(s) of Wayland -

- *When getting off the freeway my first impression was that of a basic highway exit, gas stations and convenience stores. As I continued into town I got the impression of a small town with tidy well-kept houses. The downtown area was well-kept looking but had the kind of strange inclusion of stores that generally are free standing.*
- *Wayland has a 'laid-back' feel to it. The small footprint of the downtown made it clear that I would need to look outside the downtown for more destination locations and local activities. The downtown mini park added a nice touch to the relaxed vibe, creating the opportunity and reason to get out of the car and walk around. Driving around the community was a pleasant experience with well-kept homes and a good vibe.*
- *Driving into Wayland from the 131 exit I noticed that it was a busy exit with several gas stations and businesses along the main road taking you towards downtown. Once I entered the downtown area, I saw examples of placemaking efforts like murals and small parks in the downtown area. I was surprised by the small scale of things as it seemed like there was only one block of businesses in the downtown area.*
- *I was surprised to see how small the town was when I know I entered. I guess their strong downtown Main Street website gave me an over-inflated sense there was more to see and do there. Onsite, I saw signs to trails coming in from 131 but then didn't see again other than the Rabbit Trail.*





Community Art and Culture Information -

- *I noticed several vibrantly colored murals around town that seemed to have a similar style and feel. I also liked the historic building walking tour of the downtown area. I think Rainbow Road could be enhanced more to become a public gathering space*
- *I did enjoy the creativity of Art Alley, and the outdoor murals added some color and life to the area.*
- *Good job of highlighting their history online, but once in the community it was not clear as to what was historically important.*



Visitor Motives – Assessors were presented with a list of 14 visitor motives and then asked to select the top three motives someone might have to visit this community and surrounding area.

• Other	4
• Visit friends and family	4
• Other	2
• In transit to somewhere else	2
• Shop	2
• Engage in business activities	1
• Get entertained/for entertainment	1
• Outdoor recreation (MTB, Hiking, etc.)	1
• Engage in religious activities	0
• Agritourism	0
• Experience a unique culture	0
• Visit historical sites	0
• Get away from people	0
• Be in nature	0
• Relax	0
• Total	15

- Others:**
- Buy marijuana
 - Come to eat
 - Dollar store
 - Gun Lake/Casino (x2)
 - Gilmore Car Museum





Wayland's Downtown Area - Rankings are aggregated from individual assessor scores, with 15 being the highest and the lowest zero. Scores identify Downtown Wayland's Strengths and Weaknesses.

• Parking is centrally located	15
• Parking charges are reasonable	15
• The grounds have been landscaped with flowers, trees, shrubs, and bushes	14
• There are areas of green space	14
• Walking sidewalks are well maintained	14
• Business information is displayed on the exterior of businesses	13
• Parking is secure	13
• There is a gateway point to enter/leave town (piece of art, mural, sign,	12
• There is a mix of ages	12
• Inviting signs are displayed on the exterior of businesses	11
• There is pedestrian traffic (foot and bike)	11
• Additional walking paths are available	10
• This is a welcoming downtown	10
• The downtown business area is handicapped accessible	9
• Vehicle traffic is managed to encourage pedestrian movement, via foot or bike	8
• The main downtown business area feels distinct or special	8
• There are walker/biker friendly signs	6
• The main downtown business area is a major tourists draw	6
• There is a mix of ethnic groups	4
• Bike lanes exist on roadways	1

Downtown Impression and Comments:



- The downtown area had a historic small town feel with older brick in good condition.
- Once I entered the downtown area, I saw examples of placemaking efforts like murals and small parks in the downtown area.
- Wayland and other local groups have clearly put a lot of effort into promoting the downtown and doing all those things we see Main Streets doing that raise the quality of life.



Community Information –

- 2/5 Assessors “agreed” it was easy to find information useful for visitors in the community.
- 3/5 Assessors “disagreed” it was easy to find a community/tourist brochure in the community.
- 4/5 Assessors were “neutral” that the local/ newspaper was informative during their visit.

Destination Attributes - Rankings are generated from individual assessor scores then aggregated and sorted from highest to lowest. Highest possible score is 15 and the lowest zero. These scores identify Wayland’s strengths and weaknesses as a destination.

Hospitality and friendliness of residents	13
Conveniently located	13
Customer service	12
Cleanliness	12
Safety and security	10
Directional signage	10
Road conditions	10
Communication infrastructure	10
Pedestrian travel infrastructure	10
Community involvement	10
Accessibility of destination	9
Well-marked roads/attractions	9
Historic/heritage attractions	8
Special events	8
Visitor accessibility to attractions	7

Value for money in tourism experiences	7
Activities for children	6
Interesting architecture	6
Authenticity of attractions	6
Shopping facilities	5
Variety and quality of restaurants	5
Nature-based activities	5
Well known landmarks	5
Variety of activities to do	4
Variety and quality of shopping options	4
Dedicated tourism attractions	3
Cultural attractions	3
Variety and quality of accommodations	2
Adventure-based activities	2

Destination Attribute Comments-

- *Wayland appears to provide a good "quality of life" experience for residents, with seasonal events and outdoor activities.*
- *Expanding and better communicating what there is to do outside of the large events will help Wayland attract repeat visitors.*
- *As a visitor, when a festival wasn't happening, I was struggling to find those visitor attractions or experiences that would keep people engaged.*
- *One of my biggest reflections on Wayland was the realization that even after all my research and time spent in the community, I wasn't sure what made Wayland unique.*



Sense of Safety and Feeling Welcomed –

“Did you feel welcomed in the community at all times?” –

- Yes, everyone I interacted with was very friendly and happy to suggest things to do and places to eat.
- Staff at all the establishments were nice and eager to help or recommended something.
- Yes, for the most part but it was quite eerie at times being the only person on the street mid-Saturday.



“Did you feel safe at all times?” –

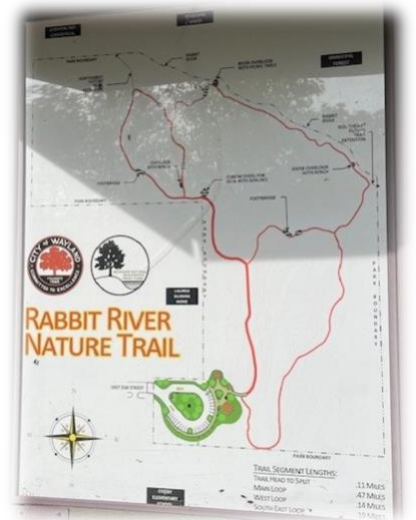
- *I found the parking lot near the Dollar Store and party store to be somewhat unwelcoming and unsafe at times.*
- *The entire parking lot was an eye-sore and made me overly cautious when walking nearby.*



Post-Visit Reflections:

What will you remember most six months from now?

- The Auction House Café
- Gilmore Car Museum
- The size of Wayland
- The mural(s) downtown
- The adorable downtown
- The hammocks downtown
- The potential for more trails
- The Rabbit River Nature Trail
- Relaxing in the mini park hammock
- Wanting to know Wayland’s story
- The Wayland gear on the website and if it sells





Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities –

As part of a FIT assessment, participating communities receive a list of FIT assessor-identified Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities (SCOs). SCOs are generated directly from specific FIT survey data. SCOs are not considered solely as all-encompassing solution(s) to a community’s ecological, economic, social, and/or tourism development challenges. SCOs, as they are presented here, are intended to foster and support, where and when feasible, new ideas and dialogue once a community has completed the FIT program.

Strengths-

- Active DDA
- Vibrant web presence
- Enthusiastic marketing
- Wayland Chamber
- Public Art
- Gun Lake Park
- Gun Lake Casino
- Public Mini-parks
- City Park/splashpad
- Community involvement
- Thriving local businesses
- Downtown signage
- *Main Street* charm
- Vibrant local art
- Mexican food presence

- Food truck festivals
- Rabbit River Nature Trail
- Park and outdoor activities
- Quaint and restful
- Family friendly place to visit
- Proximity to highway
- Location between Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids





Challenges-

- Community matching website
- Lack of identity
- What is Wayland's story?
- "Dahlia City", what it means?
- Downtown vacancies
- Lack of food variety
- Excess of bars
- Limited trails
- Limited activities and ways to fill time
- Lack of advertising of activities
- Limits pushed assessors elsewhere



Opportunities

1. Regional Marketing and Tourism Development
2. Community Branding and Identity
3. Infrastructure and Accessibility Enhancements
4. Cultural and Recreational Opportunities
5. Downtown Revitalization and Community Engagement



Regional Marketing and Tourism Development

- **Collaborative Tourism Presence:**
 - Create a regional tourism initiative with nearby small communities, targeting residents of Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo.
- **Curated Itineraries:**
 - Develop itineraries that showcase outdoor recreation, shopping, and dining in small towns along the route.
- **Highlighting Walking Tours:**
 - Promote existing walking tours to emphasize local history and culture.
 - Expand on customized street signs to strengthen story, identity, and connectivity across community



Community Branding and Identity

- **"Dahlia City" Promotion:**
 - Lean into the "Dahlia City" theme by incorporating dahlias into downtown green spaces and developing interpretive materials about the town's connection to this branding.
- **Finding Wayland's Unique Story:**
 - Investigate and articulate what makes Wayland unique, potentially focusing on local history, cultural markers, and community identity. This could involve community engagement initiatives to gather input.





Infrastructure and Accessibility Enhancements

- **Outdoor Seating and Social Spaces:**
 - Enhance outdoor seating options for restaurants and promote existing social districts, considering creative uses for public spaces like mini parks.
- **Walking and Biking Infrastructure:**
 - Increase walking and/or biking infrastructure in downtown, including bike lanes, and develop a regional walk/bike path to connect Wayland with neighboring communities.



Cultural and Recreational Opportunities

- **Agritourism Development:**
 - Explore agritourism opportunities to attract visitors to local farms and agricultural experiences.
- **Historical and/or Cultural Trail Development:**
 - Collaborate with neighboring communities to establish a historical or cultural trail that showcases shared heritage and strengthens partnerships.
 - Connect with walk/bike trail
- **Water Sports Promotion:**
 - Encourage exploration of water sports and activities around local lakes to diversify recreational offerings.





Downtown Revitalization & Community Engagement

- **Enhanced Downtown Amenities:**
 - Develop reasons for visitors and residents to spend more time downtown by adding diverse dining options, coffee shops, bookstores, and boutique shops.
- **Event Promotion and Community Engagement:**
 - Establish a central calendar of events and a visitor station to inform residents and visitors about happenings.
 - Utilize social media for promotion and community involvement.
- **Supporting Local Artists:**
 - Invest in local artists by creating opportunities for them to showcase, sell, and teach their work, potentially with the help of grants and local business sponsorship.





Assets Visited

Assessors intentionally experience a variety of public and private assets during FIT assessments. Along with a qualitative review, each asset is given a rating of poor, good, very good, or excellent. Some assets are visited multiple times by assessors separately resulting in several reviews. Orange stars indicate which assets would inspire assessors to return to Wayland. Reviews of assets are available. Contact the City of Wayland’s Main Street for more information.

Visitor Attractions/Activities

- ★ Rabbit River Walking Trail
- 2. Gun Lake Casino
- 3. Wayland City Hall
- 4. Wayland City Park
- 5. Red Wagon Garden Center
- 6. Henika District Library
- 7. City Park & Splash Pad
- 8. City Mini Park
- 9. Historical Walking Tour
- ★ Gilmore Car Museum
- 11. Rainbow Road Art Alley
- 12. City Park
- 13. Gun Lake Park
- 14. Gun Lake Recreation Area
- 15. Best Western
- 16. Yankee Springs Recreation area
- 17. MI Studio Space
- ★ Art Alley
- 19. Bysterveld Park
- ★ Stop, Drop & Play Arcade/4 One 2



Eating/Drinking

- ★ Auction House Cafe
- ★ Don Pacho Mexican Restaurant
- 3. McDuff’s Bar & Grille
- 4. Salvino’s
- 5. No 1 Chinese
- 6. 4One2
- 7. Big Dipper Ice Cream
- ★ Open Road Brewery
- 9. Bigby Coffee
- 10. Wayland Hotel Bar and Grill



Shopping Locations

- ★ Acqua in Vino
- 2. Dollar General
- 3. Wayland Discount
- 4. Hardings Friendly Markets
- ★ Jackson’s English/Western Store
- 6. Country Cat Lady & Catz Den
- 7. Jars
- 8. General RV Center
- 9. Family Farm and Home



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FIT Community Leadership Team

City of Wayland – Community Leadership Team – FIT 2024

Denise Behm	Chamber of Commerce
Holli McPherson	Downtown Wayland
Erik Wilson	City Manager
Steve Stepek	City Council/Parks and Rec
Robin Beckwith	Chair of Economic Vitality Committee
River Knoll	McDuff’s Bar and Grill/Owner
Cierra Bakovka	Director of Henika Library
Jennifer Antel	Mayor of Wayland



Wayland’s FIT assessment was funded by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation as a benefit of City of Wayland’s status as a certified Main Street Community.



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-sugar-trails.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, 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>.



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