



First Impressions Tourism Assessment

White Cloud, MI



Summary of Results

May 2025

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 20 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 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

II. Summary of Results for City of White Cloud, MI

The City of White Cloud worked with Michigan State University Extension to complete a First Impressions Tourism Assessment (FIT) of the community in 2024/25. The program kicked off with an initial meeting of the Community Leadership Team in June of 2024 and ended with the Community Report Forum in May of 2025. The in-person assessment took place in August and September 2024. This report contains summarized results from the in-person assessment portion of the FIT Program.

Visitor/Assessor Profiles:

The City of White Cloud and surrounding area (CWCA) received five visitors in the Early Fall 2024, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors". To generate diverse perspectives, a wide range of assessors were recruited across multiple disciplines within MSU Extension. All assessors are currently residents of Michigan and had very minimal knowledge of CWCA prior to participating.

Three assessors were male and the other two female. Two assessors identified as Millennials, two as Generation X, and one as a Baby Boomer. Assessors identified expertise in arts & culture, sustainable tourism, community food systems, tourism and hospitality and outdoor recreation. Four assessors visited CWCA alone while the remaining assessor visited with their spouse/partner. To generate diverse experiences, assessors visited CWCA separately during different days of the week



between Early August and early October. Assessors visited either Thursday, Friday or Saturday and stayed between 8 and 24+ hours in the community. Three of the five assessors spent a night in the community at either a motel, Airbnb, or camping. In addition to onsite visits, visitors also spent between 1-4 hour researching CWCA using mobile devices and/or personal computers visiting various websites and social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, and TripAdvisor. This report is a general summary of data collected highlighting assessors' experiences captured before, during, and after via survey data.

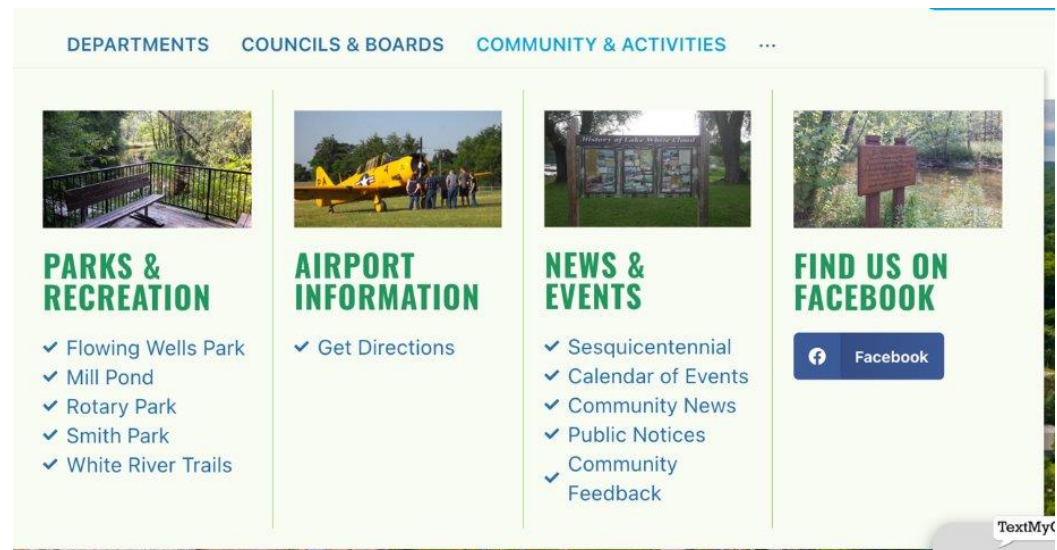
Results are separated by Pre-Visit, The Visit, and Post-Visit Reflections.

Pre-Visit:

Web Research & Digital First Impressions

- *The web presence seems sparse to me. I would have expected more on the City of White Cloud site and I didn't find a visitor's bureau site for White Cloud.*
- *Not much for visitors focused on White Cloud itself, and there is outdated information too. For instance, we had planned to eat at a restaurant in White Cloud that no longer exists, but appeared to based on Google Maps info and its Facebook page.*
- *There was a presence on social media and many of the businesses were listed on Google maps with updated hours, however many of those businesses (eateries) did not have great reviews on google maps.*

- *White Cloud is mentioned in a lot of the regional tourism websites, but there is not one go-to site for all things White Cloud tourism. It was also somewhat difficult to find a comprehensive source for trail maps.*



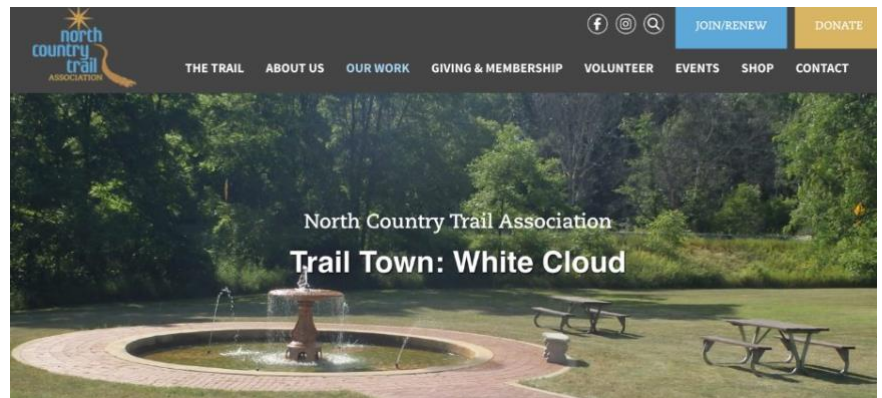


Attractions and/or events this community is known for?

- North Country Trail
- Dragon Mountain Bike Trail
- Overall known as “Trail Town”
- White River Water Tra

Most Helpful Websites –

- City of White Cloud Site (2)
- NCT Trail Association: White Cloud Site
- Blue Heron Retreat Site: Explore Page
- 100% agreed that –
 - Pages were visually appealing.
 - There were no typographical errors
- 80% agreed that –
 - Information was useful
 - Information was presented well



Challenges for most helpful website(s)

- 80% of assessors agreed this website needs more information.
- Assessors commented that there was not one central location to find information for visiting White Cloud and information on some websites was outdated.

The Visit:

First 5 Minute Impression(s) – (responses are direct quotes)

- White Cloud seems like a charming small town with a compact, walkable downtown. The streets and sidewalks of downtown are notably quiet for daytime on a Saturday. There are only



a couple of cars parked, and I don't see any pedestrians. Within the first five minutes I see the entire downtown and the campground where I am staying. I get my first sense of White Cloud's hospitality as

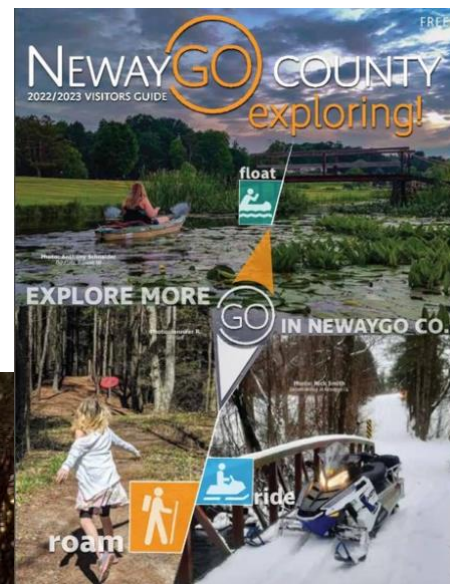


the ranger at the campground greets me on a golf cart and personally shows me to my campsite.

- As I drove into the surrounding area of the community, I noticed some initial businesses South of town on 37 that looked rustic, but inviting and the motel was a place I might stay on another visit. When I drove into the main town of White Cloud, I noticed the signage that welcomed me to the community and realized that I was going to be passing through the town rather quickly and just how small the downtown area was. I also noticed the marijuana dispensaries on the north side of town.*
- Main Rd. From Newaygo had some pretty views and the kinds of businesses you see on major rds. in rural areas. Lots of flea markets. Upon arriving downtown, it appeared to be a struggling downtown with some recent efforts visible (mural, hanging flowerpots and veteran tributes on lampposts, etc). There was a Friday night football game going on under the lights at the high school, so a lot of energy there.*
- Nice signage upon entry to the town. I had passed a large mill just before town, signifying a farming community. The small downtown area had a wide road and marked crosswalks. Things were clean and tidy, but sparse. The general area is beautiful but marred with political signs that did not feel welcoming to me. Several pick-up trucks tried to "push" me on the road through town, even though I was traveling 5 miles an hour above the posted limit.*

Community Information Available to Visitors –

- It was easy to find information for visitors –
 - 3 Disagreed, 2 Neutral, 1 Agreed
- Info available was useful for visitors –
 - 3 Neutral, 2 Agreed, 1 Disagreed
- It was easy to find a community/tourist brochure –
 - 3 Neutral, 2 Disagreed, 1 Agreed





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

Outdoor recreation (MTB, Hiking, etc.)	5
Be in nature	4
In transit to somewhere else	4
Relax	2
Get away from people	2
Visit friends/family	1



White Cloud's Downtown Business Area (Best = 5, Worst = 0)

Parking charges are reasonable	5
Parking is centrally located	4.75
Parking is secure	4.75
Walking sidewalks are well maintained	4.5
There is a gateway point to enter/leave town (piece of art, mural, sign, etc.)	4.25
The downtown business area is handicapped accessible	3.75
The grounds have been landscaped with flowers, trees, shrubs, and bushes	3.75
Business information is displayed on the exterior of businesses	3.5
Vehicle traffic is managed to encourage pedestrian movement, via foot or bike	3.5
The main downtown business area feels distinct or special	3
There are areas of green space	3
There is a mix of ages	3
There are walker/biker friendly signs	2.75
This is a welcoming downtown	2.75
There is pedestrian traffic (foot and bike)	2.5
Additional walking paths are available	2.25
Inviting signs are displayed on the exterior of businesses	2.25
There is a mix of ethnic groups	1.75
Bike lanes exist on roadways	1.25
The main downtown business area is a major tourists draw for the area	1.25



Thoughts on Downtown White Cloud:

- *With limited shopping and dining options, there isn't much reason to go downtown, except to pick up supplies, maybe go to the library or health clinic.*
- *Downtown is a weak point for the community. It's difficult to attract successful and attractive businesses in a community like this.*
- *With limited shopping and dining options, there isn't much reason to go downtown, except to pick up supplies, maybe go to the library or health clinic.*



Destination Attributes (Rankings: Best = 5, Worst = 0)

Nature-based activities	4.75
Adventure-based activities	4.25
Authenticity of attractions	4
Conveniently located	4
Customer service	4
Hospitality and friendliness of residents	4
Pedestrian travel infrastructure	4
Road conditions	3.75
Cleanliness	3.5
Communication infrastructure	3.5
Historic/heritage attractions	3.5
Safety and security	3.5
Accessibility of destination	3.25
Value for money in tourism experiences	3.25
Visitor accessibility to attractions	3.25
Well marked roads/attractions	3

Activities for children	3
Community involvement	3
Interesting architecture	3
Well known landmarks	3
Directional signage	2.75
Dedicated tourism attractions	2.5
Variety of activities to do	2.5
Cultural attractions	2.25
Shopping facilities	2.25
Special events	2.25
Variety and quality of accommodations	2
Variety and quality of shopping options	1.5
Variety and quality of restaurants	1.25



Did you feel welcomed in the community at all times?

4/5 said yes

Everyone I interacted with was very friendly

For the most part, I did feel a little out of place walking into some of the more local establishments as a visitor.

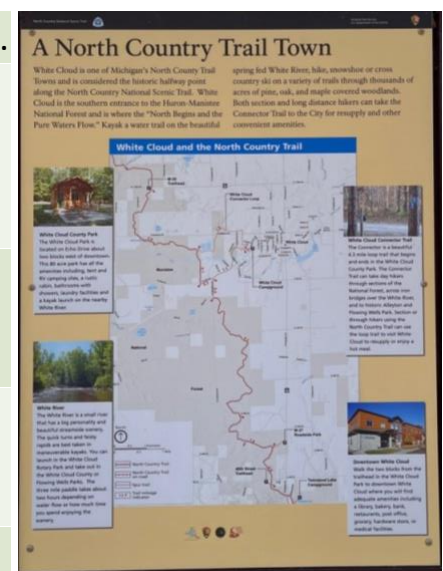
Except for the massive amount of political signs indicating one might be more welcome if they support a particular candidate..



Post-Visit Reflections:

What will you remember most about Lapeer six months from now?

- The walkability and the natural beauty of the parks and trails.
- I hate to say it again, but I'll remember the political signs...but, I will also remember the beautiful scenery, excellent parks, and of course, my restful stay at the Blue Heron Retreat.
- The great trail access and proximity to where I live in Grand Rapids. The White River and making plans to go back for a paddle.
- The fact that the NC Trail goes right through/next to their town. The downtown being a blank canvas for them to get started.
- Rotary Park





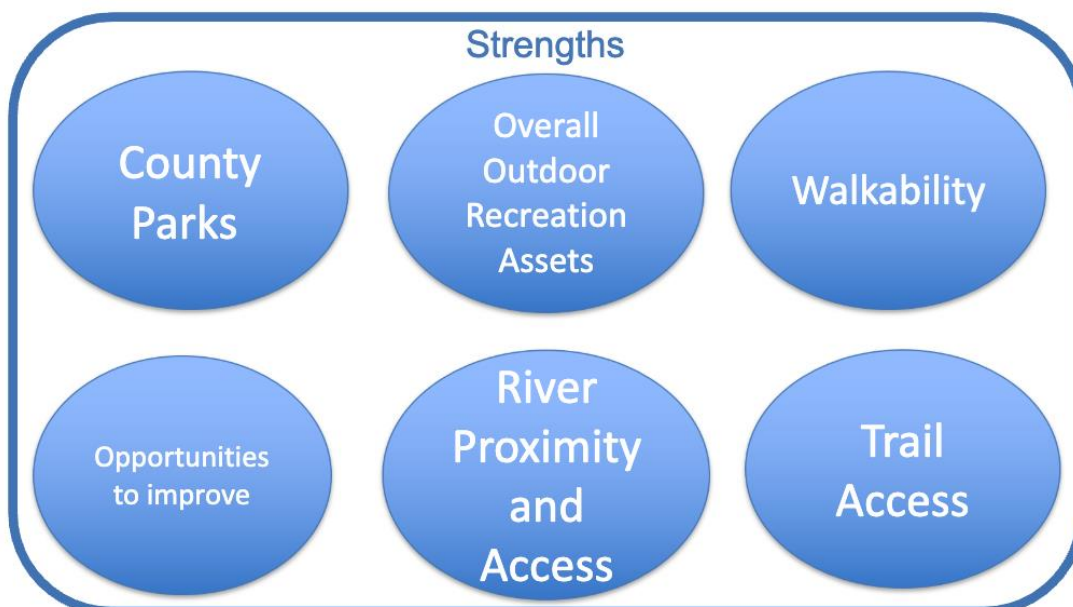
Reflections...



Question	Definitely	Maybe	Probably Not
I would feel compelled to stop in this community if randomly passing by?	0	3	3
I would recommend the destination to my friends and family?	0	2	3
I would visit the destination on a pleasure trip in the future?	2	2	1




FIT Assessor Identified Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities –





Challenges

Limited
Lodging

Lack of
businesses
serving
visitors

Lack of
information
on web

Limited
Food
Variety

Competition
with
Newaygo

Vibrancy of
Downtown





Key Recommendations: Downtown



Invest in a small attractive space downtown (e.g., pocket park or some other attractive place) to host small regular events (e.g., weekly outdoor music)

Revitalize storefronts and signage:

Several assessors noted that downtown felt sparse, underwhelming, and lacked a distinct identity. Suggestions included repainting buildings, updating business signage, and enhancing visual appeal.

Encourage active storefronts and visitor-facing businesses: Many shops were closed or uninviting. Pop-up markets, seasonal events, and artist co-ops could fill gaps and bring vibrancy.

Enhance pedestrian amenities: Improve walkability by adding water fountains, public restrooms, Wi-Fi, and comfortable benches. These were consistently rated poorly or missing.

There is a lot of potential to brighten up the downtown space and make it a destination for folks looking for weekend getaway in a charming small town. Proximity to Grand Rapids is an asset for attracting folks who may be looking for this type of escape from the city.

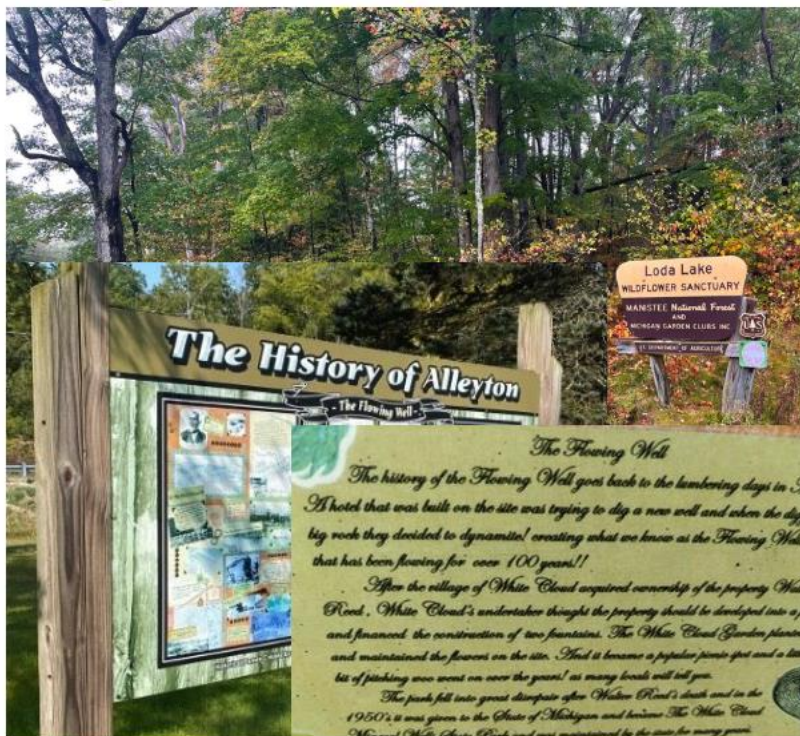
Attracting a variety of food trucks could be a nice way to bring more food diversity into the downtown.

Look to diversify food options and create a gathering spot in the downtown, could be something new, but could also be expanding the use of a place like the library or Maikie's for community activities and a place to meet.





Key Recommendations: Arts and Culture



Capitalize on existing community assets: Community theatre, murals, and farmers/artisan markets exist but need more visibility, frequency, and continuity.

Increase event-based attractions: Host recurring events (e.g., music in the park, outdoor movies, crafting workshops). These can drive repeat visitation and support local businesses.

Highlight local heritage: Improve readability and visibility of historical signs. Incorporate QR codes linking to online content. Consider walking tours or interpretive signage featuring Indigenous and settler histories.

Key Recommendations: Community Marketing

1. Develop a Cohesive Brand Identity for White Cloud

- **Embrace the “Trail Town” identity.** This theme appeared consistently in assessor feedback and should serve as the cornerstone of all marketing efforts.
- **Develop trail-related merchandising and branding:** T-shirts, stickers, trail maps, and signage could reinforce the “Trail Town” theme.
- **Use consistent visuals and slogans, such as:**
 - “White Cloud: Gateway to Nature’s Wonders”
 - “Explore Every Trail in Every Season”
 - “Small Town. Big Outdoors.”
- **Logo imagery suggestions:** Incorporate trail signs, the White River, and local flora (e.g., wildflowers, pines) into visual branding.



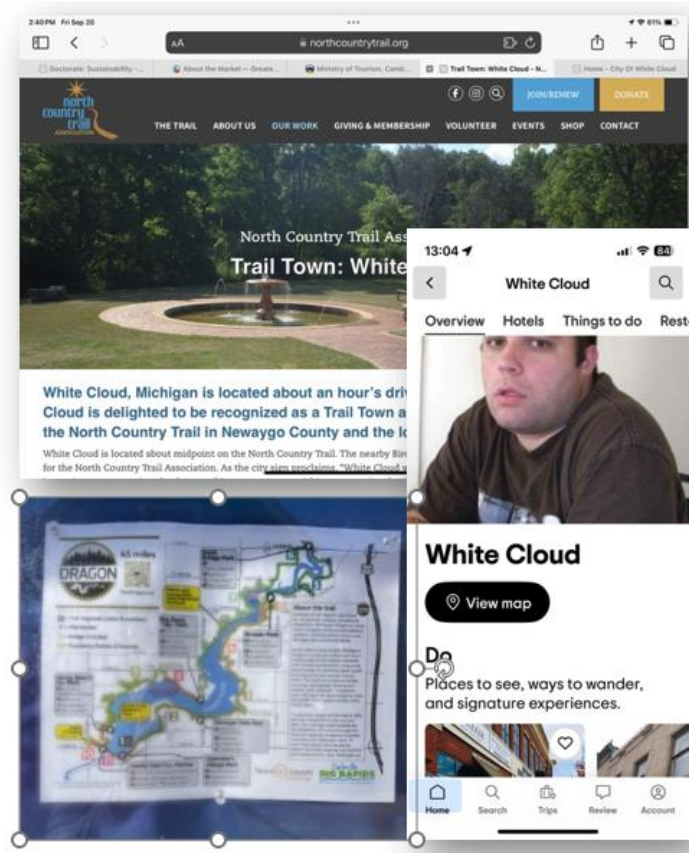


2. Centralize Tourism Information

- Create a **visitor-friendly landing page** (or revamp the city's current website) with:
 - Clear sections for **things to do, maps, lodging, dining, and trail information**
 - A regularly updated **event calendar**
 - Embedded trail maps, guides, and downloadable itineraries
- Include links to regional sites like [Newaygo County Exploring](#) and the [North Country Trail Association](#).

3. Strengthen Digital Presence

- Audit and update Google Maps and Yelp listings to remove closed businesses and highlight active ones.
- Support local businesses in setting up and maintaining **social media accounts** and **Google Business Profiles**.
- Encourage user-generated content by promoting hashtags (e.g., #ExploreWhiteCloudMI) and photo contests.



Key Recommendations: Outdoor Recreation



1. Improve Access and Infrastructure at Natural Assets

- **Enhance signage** at trailheads and parks (e.g., North Country Trail, Dragon Trail, White River Water Trail).
- Add **kayak/canoe rental options** in town to encourage river use and keep recreation revenue local.
- Expand and improve **benches, restrooms, water fountains, and bike racks** at outdoor recreation hubs.

2. Promote and Package Outdoor Experiences

- Partner with county or private businesses to offer:
 - Guided nature hikes, paddling tours, or bike rentals
 - Outdoor skill clinics (e.g., trail navigation, birding, nature photography)
- Market seasonal draws like:
 - Loda Lake Wildflower Sanctuary in spring
 - Fall color hikes along the Dragon Trail/NCT
 - Winter fat biking or snowshoeing



3. Leverage Events to Promote Outdoor Assets

- Host events that tie into White Cloud's natural setting, such as:
- **A Trail Town Festival**
- **An Outdoor Adventure Expo**
- **Full moon paddle or hike nights**
- Promote through online channels, regional tourism websites, and partner organizations.

4. Increase Visibility of Trail Assets

- Create an **Outdoor Recreation Map** that includes:
- Hiking, biking, paddling, and fishing locations
- Parking and access points
- Food, lodging, and gear options nearby
- Use QR codes on signage to lead users to detailed online maps and conditions.



Assets Visited in White Cloud and The Region

History of White Cloud

-Morgan-Est. 1873-



17 - Tourism Attractions (lodging, activities, festivals, museums, parks, etc.)

7 - Eating and Drinking Places

10 - Shopping Places

Thirty-four tourism assets evaluated!



White Cloud's FIT Community Leadership Team

Name	Title/Org
April Storms	City Manager
Kelli Arnold	City Clerk
Lori Shears	City Council/Parks and Rec
Kelly Rider	River County Chamber ED
Amy Stockwell	Library Director
Julie Burrell	Newaygo County Economic Development/Tourism Council
Ryan Coffey-Hoag	MSU Extension





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>.