



*Thank you for another great programming year!
We couldn't do our work for the residents of Cass County without your continued partnership.*

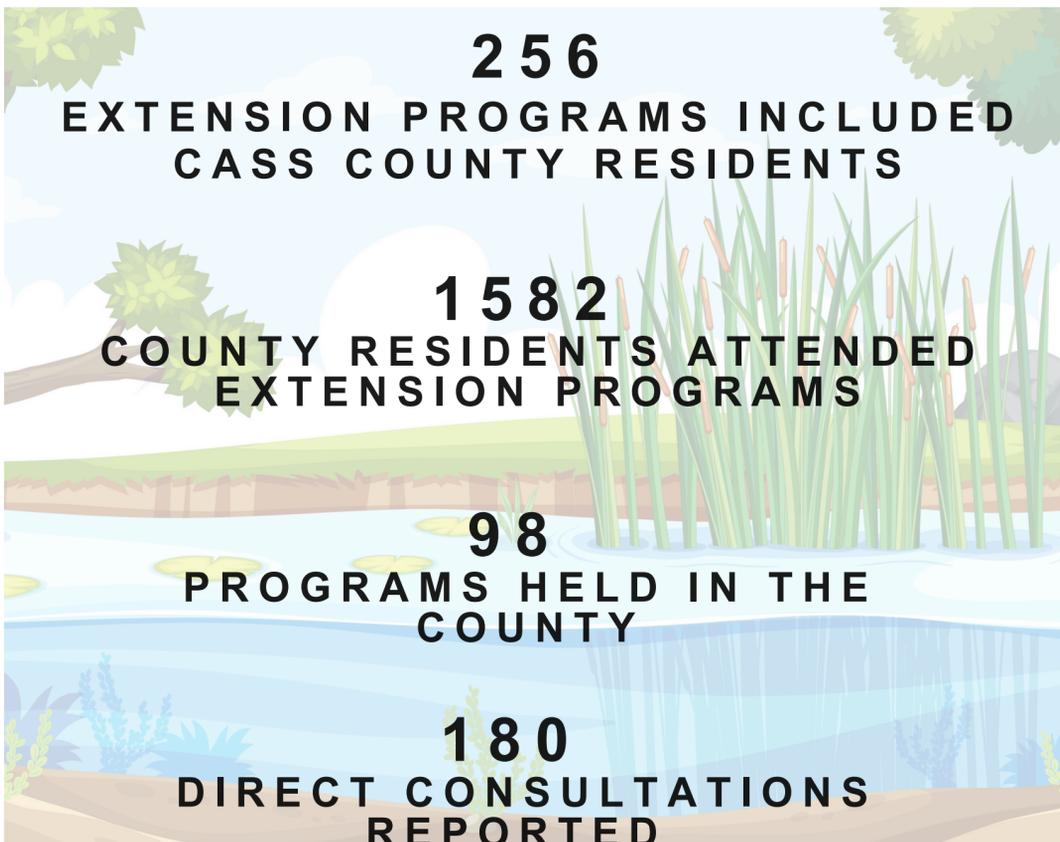
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**Cass County
General Fund Appropriations**

2021	\$121,460
2022	\$124,700
2023	\$133,000

**CASS COUNTY
MSU EXTENSION WEBSITE**

8,845 PAGE VIEWS
2,756 VISITORS
21% REGULAR CONSUMERS

“The First Impressions Tourism (FIT) program provided the opportunity for the Village of Cassopolis to create new relationships, reexamine our community assets, and highlighted unexplored avenues for continued growth. It is easy to lose sight of the many assets around you, but the FIT program reminded us to think about more than our two square miles and continue our mission to collaborate with all those around us. We are thankful that we were able to partner with the team at MSU Extension and the FIT Program and look forward to showcasing some of our teams projects to them in the future.” --Village of Cassopolis Manager, Emilie LaGrow

665 4-H Youth Enrolled

162 Adult Volunteers

23 Community Clubs

2617 Total Youth Reached

**858 YOUTH
113 ADULTS
REACHED VIA
SNAP EDUCATION**



**180 Direct
Consultations**



**26 “ASK EXTENSION”
Questions**



Health Programming Reaches Nearly 300 in Southwest Michigan

"It's so easy to feel stuck and tired with chronic illness. You have helped me to improve my life."

— **Chronic Pain PATH Participant**

Being healthy means tending to our unique physical health needs, however that takes shape. Whether practicing tai chi in a sunny park or ensuring our immunizations are up to date, we can improve our physical health by managing chronic conditions, preventing injury and illness, and embracing joyful movement to the best of our individual abilities.

Social-emotional and mental health is also key. We can care for this part of our health in a multitude of ways, from practicing mindfulness to learning how to support someone in a mental health crisis. This allows us to cope with negative situations and feelings, foster strong and healthy relationships with others and ourselves, and live with purpose and meaning.

Good sleep, access to healthy foods, supportive relationships — what it means to be healthy is different to us all. That's why MSU Extension is here to support all the ways we can live healthier lives and build healthier communities, by bringing the vast knowledge and resources of MSU directly to individuals, communities and businesses.

In 2023, nearly 300 residents from Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph and Van Buren Counties participated in health and food safety programming including Stress Less with Mindfulness, Personal Action Toward Health (PATH), RELAX: Alternatives to Anger, Home Food Preservation, Safe Food = Healthy Kids, the Michigan Vaccine Project, A Matter of Balance, and SLEEP Education for Everyone (SLEEP) just to name a few.

Nutrition Education Makes a Difference for Cass County Seniors

At a senior housing complex in Dowagiac, an MSU Extension SNAP-ED nutrition lesson that focused on reading labels made an impact in reducing sodium intake for one participant. The woman, who said she suffered from high blood pressure, was shocked by the sodium content in her favorite canned soup and decided to stop eating it because of what she saw on the label.

Understanding serving sizes and reading food labels helped the class make healthier choices and cut back on salty foods. In another lesson focused on grains, a senior learned that corn on the cob is a vegetable, not a grain, but cornmeal made from ground corn is a grain used in foods like cornbread. The incident highlighted the importance of breaking down information and continuous learning regardless of age. In a lesson at the Cass County Council on Aging, a senior participant shared her experience of using the MyPlate visual aid to recognize food groups on her plate while dining out. Community Nutrition Instructor Nora Lee's interactive approach proved effective in educating adults about nutrition and was beneficial for improving health awareness for Cass County.



2023 Great Lakes Expo

"I cannot say enough good things about this conference. The presence of University information and education (understandable for growers) combined with the industry resources is unmatched for the horticulture industry anywhere else." ---GLEXP Participant

The Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable & Farm Market EXPO, Michigan Greenhouse Growers EXPO (GLEXP) and Lavender Conference is an annual event that draws thousands of farmers from Michigan and beyond to the DeVos Place Convention Center in Grand Rapids each December. Attendees included fruit growers, vegetable growers, fruit and vegetable growers, and greenhouse growers. In 2023, the multi-day event had nearly 3,200 attendees in more than 90 educational sessions and workshops with sessions on specialty crops, greenhouses and farm marketing. More than 20 attendees visited from Cass County.

Online Business Template Supports Farmers

Financial statements are the foundation of business decisions for farm operations. The most common statement is a balance sheet, which provides a "snapshot" of the financial health of a farm business at a single point in time. and is required by lenders and other investors to identify potential risks or rewards of partnering with prospective farm operations.

Based on a request to find a "user-friendly" balance sheet, Jon Laporte, MSU Extension Farm Finance Educator, developed a Microsoft Excel template launched for beginning farmers in 2020. The form is a fillable document with formulas to assist in calculating totals, liquidity and solvency ratios with industry comparison baselines. The form not only provides the ability to create a financial statement, but also measures areas of strength or vulnerability of the farm business. An update in 2022 allows accrued interest to be directly entered in order to match loan statements.

Downloads of the template in 2021 were 4,019 and considered an impressive achievement for a new resource. However, that was surpassed in 2022 with 5,497 downloads and almost 15,000 pageviews. In 2023, the balance sheet template reached a new milestone with 6,763 downloads and over 18,000 pageviews.

Users include primarily Michigan farmers but also farmers from Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Canada. In 2023, 63% of pageviews were from international viewers.

Village of Cassopolis is FIT for Action

In spring 2023, MSU Extension First Impression Tourism team members followed up with the Village of Cassopolis' community leadership team to ask them questions about the impact of the program on their community. That conversation is summarized below and highlights some of the many reasons for communities to participate in a FIT program.

What has changed in your community as a result of participating in FIT?

- Members of the leadership team highlighted additional opportunities for the Cassopolis Chamber, which has propelled the Chamber to become more involved in the community compared to before the program. Comments at the FIT community forum in May 2022 also led to a Chamber website redevelopment.
- The community has leaned into the high scores in their FIT assessment around being a friendly community. The Village Manager for Cassopolis, Emilie LaGrow, will often lead conversations that feature this high point about the community.
- One member of the Cassopolis' community leadership team stated, "FIT is a very real part of the renaissance of this community. Because of all the things happening here, we are now hearing from folks (investors, the Governor, employers) interested in our community. This is kind of new!"
- One community leader stated: "FIT brought folks together and helped spur a lot for the community."

Have any new collaborations spawned from being a FIT Community?

- Community leadership identified a robust collaboration between the Village, Cass County, Midwest Energy & Communications, K&M Machine Fabricating, Village of Vandalia, and Diamond Lake Association which emerged for a non-motorized trail grant. This project will connect the Village to TK Lawless Park, a Cass County Park less than 10 miles from Village of Cassopolis TK Lawless was an asset highlighted in the FIT forum and report which motivated the collaboration on this project.

What improvements have or will be made to the Village of Cassopolis in regard to the built environment, recreation, beautification, and/or digital presence?

- As part of the built environment, the need for improved signage was something the community learned about through the FIT process. As a result, additional signage is included in plans for a the new SMART Park. According to community leaders, a Department of Natural Resources Spark grant in the amount of \$1 million will go to support



some of the improvements suggested via FIT results. Improvement like directional signage to the Cassopolis beach, other recreation opportunities, and parking that were suggested in the FIT results and are part of a second phase of Stone Lake Beach improvements being funded by the grant.

- When asked about beautification efforts spawning as a result of the FIT program, the community team mentioned that they are working on improvements to the pathway under a viaduct that connects the Village of Cassopolis with Diamond Lake. Village Manager Emilie LaGrow stated the Village of Cassopolis "hired a muralist to do a piece there using grant dollars leftover from a previous project and that more murals are being planned in the downtown."
- Feedback from the FIT program demonstrated to the Village was in dire need of an updated website. As a Redevelopment Ready Certified community, the Village secured \$15,000 in technical assistance from Michigan Economic Development Corporation to update their website.

First Impressions Tourism (FIT) assessment program is a comprehensive community assessment conducted by unannounced visitors in a host community positioned to lead development based on their unique results. The overarching goal of the program is to support community economic development by facilitating the growth of local and regional tourism economy. More information can be found on the FIT Program website, including information on how your community can apply to become a future FIT participant. Funding was provided by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation specifically for the Village of Cassopolis to participate in FIT.

CITIZEN SCIENCE: MiCorps Cooperative Lakes Monitoring Program



Sixteen Cass County residents volunteered their time to become stewards of Cass County waterways through the MiCorps Cooperative Lakes Monitoring program in 2023. The mission of MiCorps is to network and expand volunteer water quality monitoring organizations statewide for the purpose of collecting, sharing and using reliable data; educate and inform the public about water quality issues; and foster water resources stewardship to facilitate the preservation and protection of Michigan's water resources.

Program Goals:

- Establish a volunteer monitoring network to facilitate communication, data and information sharing, common methods, and quality assurance practices.
- Promote and expand the volunteer monitoring network by identifying and assisting the development of new volunteer monitors and volunteer monitoring programs statewide.
- Educate the public about water quality issues and foster exemplary environmental stewardship.
- Gather and exchange reliable and meaningful water quality data for water resources management and protection programs at the state and local level.
- Establish an Internet-based program, including an enrollment registry, directory of member organizations, a data exchange platform, volunteer monitoring resources, training aids, and a newsletter.
- Include a volunteer monitoring recognition program with a Certification of Recognition for each member organization and a Certificate of Participation for each volunteer member.



How to Start a Food Truck Business – Southwest Michigan Entrepreneurs Want to Know

In 2023, the “How to Start a Food Truck Business” online course was designed for entrepreneurs considering starting a food truck or mobile food business in Michigan.

Each module walks through the process of developing a business plan based on the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) business plan template, developing a menu, selecting a food truck, trailer, or cart, writing a marketing plan and identifying your target customers and competitors as well as Michigan's Mobile Unit and Special Transitory Food Unit (STFU) licensing processes.

This free, self-paced course was developed by Michigan State University (MSU) Extension and the MSU Product Center in partnership with the Grand Rapids Food Truck Association, GROW, Prep Space and the Kent County Health Department.

To earn a certificate of completion, participants must earn a 100% score on all nine quizzes.

Of the 246 participants who attended throughout the state, 18 attended from Berrien, Calhoun, Cass, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph and Van Buren Counties.

Citizen Planner Program Helps Local Governments

The MSU Extension Citizen Planner Program provides in depth education and skills building for Michigan land use decision makers such as elected officials, planning commission members, zoning board of appeals members, local government staff, and other community leaders. In 2023, 72 attendees participated in the training from Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph and Van Buren Counties. Short term evaluations have consistently shown that participants gain skills, knowledge, and confidence in fulfilling their important local government role.

“Honestly our most recent zoning ordinance and master plan seem very good, but prior to the Citizen Planner course I didn't appreciate what I was seeing.”

---Citizen Planner Participant