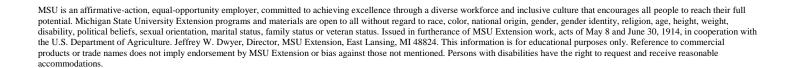# First Impressions
Assessing your Community for Tourism

First Impressions for Tourism Summary Report
Bessemer, Michigan

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I. Introduction

The First Impressions 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 program's results have been used to inform economic initiatives or further develop community goals to communities across the USA and Canada. Michigan State University Extension has adapted this program to meet the needs of Michigan communities.

This summary report is based on the observations of five assessors. Before beginning their unannounced visit to Bessemer, each assessor was asked to conduct research of the destination online. This research helped plan and shape their visit based on personal interests, activities in the community, and within a budget allocated to each individual. They then traveled individually to Bessemer between August 15th and September 30th, 2018. Each team member recorded their experiences conducting their visitor research, maneuvering through and around Bessemer and the surrounding area, visiting stores, restaurants, outdoor spaces, and additional tourism-related sites. They evaluated community characteristics by completing a multi-page assessment focused on initial and lasting impressions, community information, visitor motives, the destination and its downtown, residential area, tourism assets, as well as providing input on the quality of information found online of Bessemer. Their assessment results and photographs of the community were then downloaded into a data management program. The compiled results were extrapolated to create this written report and the public presentation.

Key findings were presented at a public forum on October 24th, 2018. A copy of the PowerPoint public presentation and Qualtrics data are attached to this report.

II. Key Findings

This portion of the report is divided into 11 sections reflecting the structure of the assessment tool used by each assessor before, during, and after their visit.

Bessemer has assets

Bessemer has some wonderful assets including Ethnic Commons, Bluff Valley Park, a compact, walkable downtown with improving amenities for pedestrians, and regional attractions like Copper Peak and the Black River Harbor Recreation Area.

Bessemer may have work to do to become a tourist destination, but these assets serve as a foundation to build upon and strengthen Bessemer's image for visitors and possible future residents.

Pre-Assessment

In order to foster a true tourist experience, online research was conducted by the visitors prior to traveling to Bessemer. The purpose was to prepare for the in-person tourist experience. By requiring visitors to view Bessemer electronically beforehand assessors were able to determine highlights in the community they intended to visit and/or learn more about. The City of Bessemer website was one of the top-two results for all of the assessors. All of the assessors used the site and gave it high marks. "[B]y far the best. It has dedicated tabs

‘Visit’ and ‘Live/Work’ with great graphics and info. Easy to navigate and use. Branded logo/image in left upper corner is the same as the signs when you come into town on US2.” The youth assessor group leader noted: “I was impressed with all the things that were listed on the seasonal day in Bessemer page. Our group ended up visiting a lot of the places listed on the website.” It was noted however that some of the visitor information on the website was drawn from the regional website “explorewesternup.com” and that much of this information does not focus prospective visitors on Bessemer specifically. This may be something to work on improving over time.

Other web research was hit-and-miss, with most assessors turning to big social media sites like TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Google for further research on specific locations and day-of-visit information.

Section 1 and 9 of the Qualtrics data report highlights additional pre and post-assessment of web-based information and assessor experiences.

Visualizing Bessemer:

Assessors were asked to visualize Bessemer prior to visiting. Overall, assessors visualized a small town/bedroom community "with limited tourism appeal outside of the ski industry nearby.”

Initial Impression

Upon arriving, assessors were asked to give their initial impression within the first 5 minutes. One assessor's comment: “there is a lot more here than what you can see from US2” was the overriding theme of the team's first impressions. Another assessor wrote: “Candidly, ‘curb appeal’ from US2 is just bad. Even the gas stations are not particularly well-kept and attractive, a lot of asphalt and bare dirt. There was no signage that I saw to indicate I should turn at the blinker to get downtown. If I weren't going to Bessemer, I very likely would not stop.”

However, once downtown things improved: “Well done with the bike racks, signage, pocket parks, and walkable streets,” and “I was impressed with the ‘Ethnic Commons’ and the street furniture, planters, and nice big trees.”

Finally: “After turning off of US2 to the north, headed to Copper Peak, I thought that the town looked really clean and had a nice looking park. The houses seemed well cared for. It was obvious that the people who live in Bessemer have a lot of pride in their town.”

Community Information

Assessors felt directions were accurate, but were split on the idea that a visitor center of any kind was easy to locate. Likewise, maps were hard to find for some. In general, it appears that community information is available in town but is not especially easy to locate. Our assessment team looks for this, some found it and some did not. As an example, one question is "It was easy to find a community/regional tourist brochure." Assessors responded Disagree (1), Somewhat Disagree (1), Somewhat Agree (2), Agree (1). This sort of spread is somewhat unusual and indicates a lack of coherent distribution methods for this information.

Visitor Motives

Assessors were presented with a list of 14 reasons visitors come to a destination and asked to select the top three. Assessors broadly agreed on these, as seen in the accompanying table.

Seek adventure	4
Be in nature	4
In transit to somewhere else	4
Engage in sports activities	2
Get away from people	1

Destination Strengths

- Nature-based activities
- Authenticity of attractions
- Value for money in tourism experiences
- Adventure-based activities
- Safety and Security
- Hospitality and friendliness of residents
- Customer Service
- Dedicated tourism attractions
- Accessibility of destinations
- Historic/Heritage attractions

"The access to outdoor activities was awesome!"

Destination Opportunities for Improvement

- Variety and quality of shopping options
- Variety and quality of restaurants
  - Especially an issue for youth
- Shopping facilities
- Well-marked roads and attractions
- Directional signage
- Activities for children
- Pedestrian travel infrastructure

"There is a lot to do in the area, but I did not see much if any tourist oriented directional signage."

Residential Areas

Assessors were encouraged to visit residential areas either by walking, cycling, and/or driving. By visiting the residential areas, this gives assessors a better understanding of the community at large and also provides

communities with a perspective rarely evaluated by outside visitors. Overall, residential areas were rated "Good" by the team. One comment that sums things up: "The houses and residential areas seemed quiet, well cared for, clean and safe."

Tourism Assets You Visited

Each asset visited received a review and is found in Section 7 of the Qualtrics data report. In addition, assessors chose not share reviews of private businesses during public forums, but do encourage community leadership teams to notify businesses of their reviews whether negative or positive. Please note, some assessors visited assets in neighboring communities, especially Ironwood. This is permitted and expected, as assessors are asked to behave as if they are "real tourists." Thus, if in the course of their research on Bessemer they decided they wished to visit an asset in Ironwood or Wakefield they did. This should be understood by the Bessemer Community Leadership Team as normal visitor behavior and these neighboring assets should be looked at as Bessemer's assets as well.

Lasting Impressions

The visiting team identified various <u>positive experiences</u> while visiting Bessemer.

- Discovering the trails that I did not know existed in the area.
- Copper Peak was something I will remember forever. I might be too scared to go back though!
- Hiking right next to Rainbow falls and the amazing views along the Black Harbor trail system.
- Copper Peak was the most exciting experience, but I would say the most positive experience was the excellent customer service we received at all the places we visited.
- I had a great but brief conversation with the two folks at the Wakefield visitors center, who were very helpful, and great at point out things to see in Bessemer specifically.

However, the visiting team also identified various <u>negative experience</u> while visiting Bessemer.

- Customer service was not great in general and would not entice me back.
- I was disappointed with the limited selection of restaurants that were not bars. There seemed to be a lot of bars and pubs in the area, which doesn't say "family friendly" to me. That being the case, we had great experiences at Bread of Life and Tacconelli's.
- Walking around downtown and trying to cross US2 a couple of times.

What are the destinations strengths and challenges?
- Strengths:
  - Outdoor recreation, both silent and motorized and across skill and ability levels.

- o "Bessemer is a place where you can have more genuine interactions with friendly people. There are some great nature attractions that you can experience without large crowds."
- Challenges:
  - o "Getting people to stop as they drive through town on US2."
  - o "Limited nightlife/cultural offerings, lack of lodging."
  - o "Curb appeal on US2 is bad and this will be hard to fix. Need signage to emphasize 'downtown is over here!' like Wakefield has, for instance."

Who is or should be involved with tourism development, management, and/or marketing in Bessemer?

Assessors were asked if they identified organizations that are involved with tourism development. The City was the main organization identified. When asked what organizations *should be* involved, answers focused heavily on the business community, both by improving their own marketing and improving the attractiveness of their facilities and customer service.

> *"A place to experience Michigan's rich past and its unrivaled natural areas."*

Using Senses and Safety

Assessors commented that Bessemer didn't have any pleasant or unpleasant smells throughout the community. Two of the assessors noted that traffic on US2 causes unpleasant sound.

Regarding safety and security in Bessemer, there were mixed feelings. Overall, assessors felt welcomed and found residents pleasant, however one assessor noted that they felt unsafe at Ethnic Commons, when they were "pretty thoroughly stared at by a local smoking a cigarette." Another assessor wrote: "Customer service was pretty perfunctory and no one really seemed happy to see me aside from folks at Copper Peak."

III.   Suggestions

Business:

- Hold tourism and customer service training series so businesses can learn of local tourism assets to be promoted and best practices for doing so while making visitors feel welcome and comfortable.
- Consider programs (e.g. revolving loan fund) to improve facades in downtown. For vacant properties, paint the windows with a seasonal theme or cover them so visitors do not see the interior condition.
- Explore "Popup Shop" program to fill vacant storefronts during busy tourist seasons. This may help grow permanent downtown businesses as well.
- Focus business development efforts in the downtown area on family friendly restaurants, coffee shops, and the like.
- Work to improve lodging options in the community, especially by exploring Airbnb, VRBO and the like. A municipal campground would also be welcome.
- Encourage business to take ownership of their Yelp, Google, and TripAdvisor pages to properly market themselves in this space and curate the content (e.g. negative reviews) that others post.

Community:

- Work with businesses, MDOT, and other relevant stakeholders to improve areas facing US2 to make them more attractive to visitors.
- Improve wayfinding signage throughout, especially directions to downtown from US2. Wakefield does this especially well, for example.
- Consolidate tourist information in one location and use clear signage to direct visitors to it. Again, Wakefield is a good example.
- Build on the strength of the current City website with more Bessemer-specific content.
- Consider developing an app similar to those in use by the Keweenaw and Ironwood.

Recreation:

- Continue to market Bessemer as an outdoor recreation destination.
- Work proactively with regional partners to develop and improve marketing materials and gather relevant data on visitors.
- Focus business development efforts on amenities for the outdoor recreation demographic, such a brewpub or even simply an upscale bar and grill, an outfitter, bike shop, etc.
- Adventure tourism is a growing market segment, and Bessemer is well-positioned to take advantage of this in marketing and promotion.

General Suggestions to All FIT communities:

- Considering developing "Be a tourist in your own community" (e.g. 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, and play and *visit*.
- Update all websites regularly (daily or weekly), ensuring business hours and other pertinent information is always accurate.
- Encourage monthly or quarterly business after hours at downtown businesses and create downtown as a gathering place
- Continue downtown improvements (Façade, parking, filling vacant storefronts, visible business signage, creatively using vacant building window space, sandwich boards, etc.).
- Improve marketing by involving downtown businesses, increasing cooperative marketing, utilizing regional guides and Pure Michigan branding, applying for state matching funds via DDA, etc.
- Provide training to business owners/employees (customer service, local event updates/brochures). Ensure all businesses are aware of and promote what there is to do 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 – search-out new funding opportunities.

- Search-out low-hanging tourism-related projects, picking one or two items that can be accomplished immediately and ensure its completion.
- Schedule a discussion between the CLT, local leaders, and active/concerned citizens of all ages to review this document and discuss opportunities to work together.
- Encourage and support entrepreneurship. Provide 'how to start a business' and other entrepreneur training, such as an online program presented by MSU Extension Educator Andy Northrop - *Shared Economy for Entrepreneurs and Tourism* (northro5@anr.msu.edu).
- Explore Agri-tourism as a niche. Identify farmers, explore what other areas are doing, and become involved with Michigan Agritourism (http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/), and review articles (http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/).
- Consult "FIT Community Next Steps" manual provided to your CLT.

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.

Contact

As Bessemer continues on its journey in tourism development, please contact MSU Extension as needs arise!

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