



**FIRST
IMPRESSIONS:**



Assessing your
community for
tourism
(FIT)



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Report:

Andy Northrop, MA

Advanced Educator

northro5@msu.edu

First Impressions Tourism

A Summary

of

Community Action & Successes

2021—2024

**May 2026
2nd Edition**

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What is FIT?

FIT is a comprehensive community assessment conducted by unannounced visitors in a host community. Overall, FIT helps communities learn about their strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of first-time visitors. It empowers leaders and stakeholders to develop an action plan to improve their communities based on new perspectives from first-time visitors. These action plans strengthen the quality of life for residents and visitors alike. The results of FIT also spawn local leadership; strengthen community vitality; and form the basis for future development.

Purpose of this report:

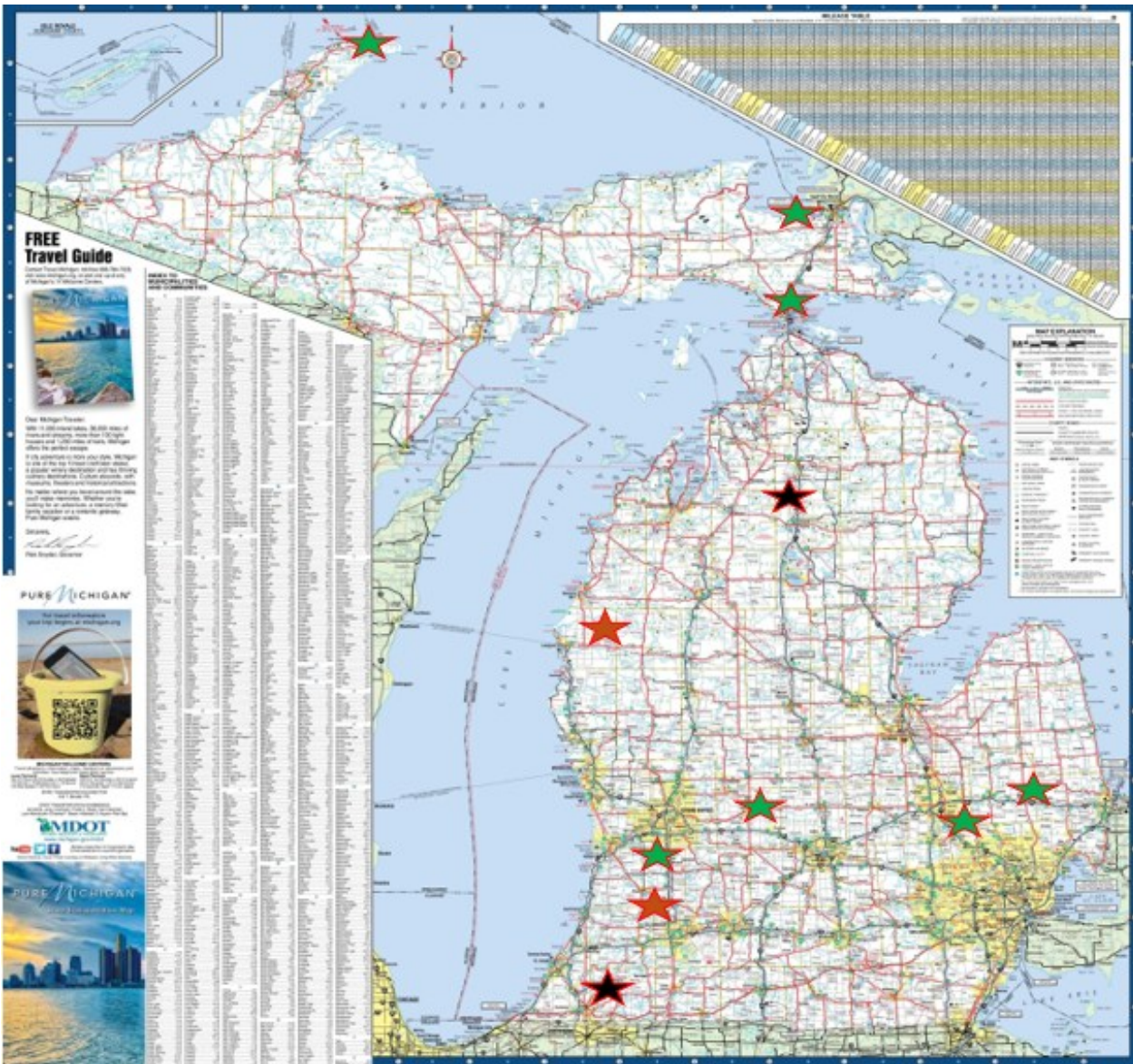
FIT has proven to be the catalyst needed to launch and foster tourism development across MI. Launched in 2017 as a solution to drive community-driven tourism, FIT has provided rural leaders and their stakeholders opportunities to collaborate around suggestions and strategies from first-time visitors to their community. This report focuses on the actions and successes implemented by several MI communities that engaged in the FIT program between 2021-2024.

This is the second edition.

Report Objectives:

1. To give a general overview of the FIT program.
2. To provide a comprehensive overview of the FIT program successes since 2021.
3. To identify specific actions and impacts taken by communities after capturing first-time visitor perspectives via FIT.
4. To serve as a resource for communities interested in learning more about FIT.

FIT Program History



2021

- Village of Cassopolis
- City of Grayling

2022

- City of Allegan
- City of Hart

2023

- City of Grand Blanc
- City of Lapeer
- Bay Mills Indian Community

2024

- City of Ionia
- City of Wayland
- Village of Copper Harbor
- City of St. Ignace

KEY:

- ★ = 2021
- ★ = 2022
- ★ = 2023/2024

FIT ACTIONS & SUCCESSES:

PROGRAM YEAR 2021

Village of Cassopolis – Population: 1, 712

- Created new relationships, reexamined our community assets, and highlighted unexplored avenues for continued growth.
- New Chamber of Commerce website
- Embracing the high point of being a “friendly” community
- Multi-sector partnership emerged for non-motorized trail grant connecting to TK Lawless Park within Cass County.
- Secured \$1 million Spark Grant from Department of Natural Resources
 - ◇ Funding will support directional signage, recreation, and parking.
- Funding secured to support installation of art murals in various locations
- Secured \$15,000 dollars in technical assistance to support the development of a new website.
- To learn more about how the Village of Cassopolis benefited from FIT, [click here.](#)



<https://www.cassopolis-mi.us/>

FIT ACTIONS & SUCCESSES:

PROGRAM YEAR 2022

City of Allegan - Population: 5, 220

- Completed a wayfinding signage analysis
- Increased beautification
- Developed and planned for better signage
- Created a community calendar
- Increased downtown recycling
- Increasing art in our community with our local Arts Council

City of Hart - Population: 2, 052

- Installed wayfinding signs at each City's entrance to lead visitors into downtown, attractions and amenities
- Created stakeholder groups to focus on downtown beautification and pedestrian-friendliness
 - Purchased/installed \$3k for annual flower beds in key downtown locations
- Committee formed to strengthen identity from neighbor communities using "Art in Hart"
 - Leveraging and expanding local art installations
 - Art installments aimed to highlight diversity and agricultural heritage
- Added signage along the bike trail to indicate distance and amenities downtown
- Installed wireless speakers downtown to enhance shopping experience
- Changed original website title to "Discover Hart" to be more inviting
- Launched "Eat Your Hart Out" campaign to further highlight international cuisines in Hart
- Installed signage distinguishing between the museum and historic downtown, and lake signage to highlight access
- Secured a total of \$53K via combination of grants from
 - MI Arts and Culture Council
 - Consumers Energy Foundation
 - Oceana Community Foundation
 - Great Lakes Energy People Fund



FIT ACTIONS & SUCCESSES:

PROGRAM YEAR 2023

City of Lapeer - Population: 9, 023

Participation in FIT:

- Reinforced Downtown Development Authority goals
- Wayfinding signage was identified and prioritized
- Murals installed from \$6k Community Foundation Grant
- Outdoor recreation assets identified included into Main Street Asset Mapping
- Helped secure \$13k MI Main Street Vibrancy Grant
- *FIT Public Private Assets Reviews* were delivered to business owners
- Helped secure Placemaking grant from Michigan State Housing Development Authority using FIT results
- Supported larger community storytelling initiative
- Resulted in City of Lapeer hosting Michigan State University Extension's 2025 Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities (CEC) Conference
- City of Lapeer raised \$17,000 for CEC, the most raised to date for a CEC Conference

- *"The MSU-Extension FIT program was an extremely valuable experience for the Historic Lapeer Main Street DDA. It reinforced many of the projects and strategies we were already exploring, while also bringing forward fresh ideas, new perspectives, and untapped assets that can help strengthen our work moving forward. Seeing our community through the eyes of first-time visitors was eye-opening and energizing, and it provided us with actionable insights that will support a more vibrant, welcoming, and dynamic downtown. The FIT program has truly become another powerful tool in our toolbox as we continue building a thriving Historic Downtown Lapeer."*

-Jim Alt, Lapeer DDA Executive Director



FIT ACTIONS & SUCCESSES:

PROGRAM YEAR 2023

Bay Mills Indian Community

- Hired a tourism and recreation staffer, first staff person dedicated to this in the community!
- Creating a *Destination Bay Mills* tourism web page
- Incorporating interactive maps for visitors
- Developed Tourism Action Plan for long range goals
- Updates made to the built environment, recreation, beautification, digital presence, and infrastructure!
- *"I hope other tribes participate in the program because it worked really well for us. It's a cool exercise to help through the administration process as well as other members of the community leadership team. Very cool program and happy with the results."*
 - Brianna Gunka, Bay Mills Indian Community Planning Manager



Grand Blanc - Population: 8,091

- Helped launch the development of wayfaring signage
- Fostered web development and social media regular updates
- Results help support mobility study and master planning process
- Helped spawn collaborations with local Chamber of Commerce
- Support Grand Blanc Parks Board and regular meetings

FIT ACTIONS & SUCCESSES:

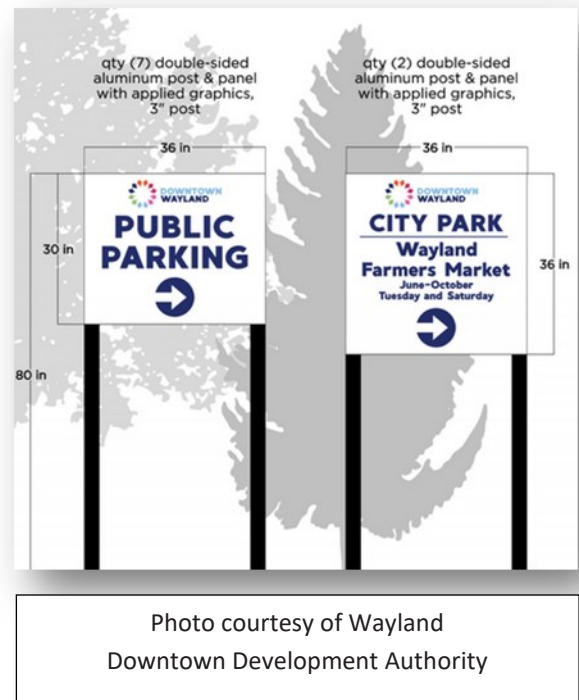
PROGRAM YEAR 2024

City of Ionia - Population: 13,378

- Various organizations have benefited from specific FIT data sets
- Increased marketing of downtown
- Hired a new staff member at City Hall to manage and increase social media
- Ionia DDA initiating Small Business Saturday
- Wayfinding signage being installed
- Discover Ionia website was updated
- Social district was established
- Secured \$400K grant from DNR Trust Fund for trail signage, trailhead, performing arts pavilion, and parking

City of Wayland - Population: 4,435

- Identified and emphasized the initial starting point of Wayland's downtown
- Identifying pop-up retail opportunities along with community green space
- Partnerships formed, for the first time, between Gun Lake Business Association and Tribe for promotion and sharing of information
- Partnerships formed, for the first time, between local area business association and the Wayland School District with the intention of implementing small business curriculum between students and businesses.
- Hired a "DDA Marketing Coordinator" for promoting, businesses, farmers markets, social media, and non-event projects such as landscape, decorations, roads, and alleyways.
 - Redoing four alleyways in Wayland's downtown to activate events.
- Added wayfinding signage highlighting public parking, city parks and Farmers Market time/days (see photo)
- *FIT Asset Reviews Report* shared to improve service at local businesses



FIT ACTIONS & SUCCESSES:

PROGRAM YEAR 2024

Copper Harbor -Population: 136

- Elevating community-wide Wi-Fi as a priority infrastructure project.
- Advancing safe walking areas and sidewalks.
- Planning for additional parking.
- Incorporating accessibility improvements into trail projects.
- Solidifying plans for expanded family-friendly recreation, including accessible trails and a proposed additional kayak launch.
- *“FIT caused the DDA to go back over our original plan and evaluate our priorities... It pulled us back to our original charter and what we’re supposed to be working toward.”*
-Mike Musiel, Copper Harbor Downtown Development Authority & Natasha Walters, Copper Harbor Improvement Association



FIT ACTIONS & SUCCESSES:

PROGRAM YEAR 2024

St. Ignace - Population: 2,306

- Launched a complete redesign of downtown directory signage
 - Invested in boardwalk repairs and enhancements
 - Created a new social district to support downtown restaurants
 - Began a full splash pad redevelopment campaign
 - Formed a committee to pursue new pickleball courts
 - Partnered with the Museum of Ojibwa Culture to expand cultural programming
 - Initiated a full website refresh with updated content and high-resolution visuals
 - Strengthened collaboration among the CVB, DDA, City, Chamber, and Recreation Department.
- *“We’ve realized that we’re all in this together, no matter what our roles are. Having the DDA and others more involved has helped us work more collaboratively and prioritize what’s most important.... It’s nice to have somebody else tell us what we should probably do, rather than everyone having their own ideas. That outside perspective was very helpful.”*
- Lora Brown, Executive Director, St. Ignace Visitors Bureau



FIT 2025 Impact Statement

As part of the FIT program, each community participating is responsible for hosting a community report forum (CRF) where the results are shared. The CRFs are approximately three-hour events open to anyone interested in learning what first-time visitors experienced in the host community.

CRFs are organized and hosted by their FIT Community Leadership Teams (CLT) that consist of self-identified community leaders. FIT communities host CRFs approximately four-to-six months after receiving the team of first-time visitors.

Community results from 2025:

The four CRFs held in 2025 hosted more than 200 people in total. Of those, 59 voluntarily took MSU Extension's short-term survey designed to evaluate learning and awareness as well as gauge potential foreseeable actions and limitations to acting on their FIT results.

Survey questions posed to participants included:

- My awareness of community assets increased because of participating in this program:
89% Strongly Agreed/Agreed
- My knowledge of how to maximize assets increased because of participating in this program:
86% Strongly Agreed/Agreed
- The program information shared will help strengthen collaboration within the community:
95% Strongly Agreed/Agreed
- I envision myself or community using the information shared to advance tourism in my community:
95% Strongly Agreed/Agreed

Overall, 98% of survey respondents stated “yes” when asked if FIT can help Michigan communities interested in developing tourism.

Participants were also asked a series of qualitative questions after participating in their community forum. Qualitative responses garnered from all three forums demonstrate the value of first-time visitor perspectives captured through FIT assessments.

Participants were asked: **“How FIT helped increase your awareness of assets in your community.”** Responses below are direct quotes from participants.

- *Many times, we only look at community assets that are of interest to ourselves, that may be because of age, where you are in regard to your family, financially, etc. This program helps you look at ALL the resources in the community, not just the ones you personally use. Helps you look at the big picture of what there is to offer.*
- *While I represent this county, I do not live here. It was tremendously helpful to learn about some of the hidden treasures.*
- *I think some take the lake for granted, and this was one of our highest assets.*
- *It really helped open my own eyes to my community.*
- *I do feel it was good insight. I would have liked to hear more of what type of businesses would be recommended and more guidance on next steps (even though, I know this is the community's work and decision).*
- *It showed me a different emphasis that is more forward looking. We sometimes think things are fine, so we stay where we are.*
- *Didn't realize all of what we had.*
- *This information coming from outside mouths helps us clarify our thinking.*
- *It's all I've been talking about in our community for years. Now maybe something will be done to improve it*
- *It gave great information on our strengths and weaknesses.*
- *I didn't know a lot of these things existed and I've lived here my entire life.*

FIT 2025 Impact Statement

Participants were then asked to specify any short-term (1-6 months) actions they intend to take because of participating in the FIT program. Responses below are direct quotes from participants.

- *We will be having a joint meeting in January (all the boards will review prior and come up with plans, what they can do) and we will review and discuss at the joint meeting. Joint meeting includes Council, Planning Commission, DDA, Chamber & School.*
- *Encourage better signage to promote business*
- *I am chairman of the Historical Society, and I want to look at commissioning an artist and getting funding for a mural on one or more buildings and I also want to look at getting some Historical Markers for some of the historic buildings in the village.*
- *Communicate with township to work on replacing signs into town, to work on getting fences for pickleball courts and replace or tear down playground equipment at Rec Park.*
- *I shared the results with our township board and encouraged them to be active members in some of the suggested changes. Encourage a better partnership.*
- *Want to see these implemented soon or by next summer*
- *Meeting with other community members and organizations to discuss and make future for the betterment of our town.*
- *Partner with local businesses and local artists to reflect more murals in our community.*
- *Communication of our events*
- *Buying books from historical society and emailing the leadership team to get more involved.*

The final survey question prompted participants to list any barriers that may prevent them from taking actions in their respective community after receiving their FIT results. Themes developed from specific responses include:

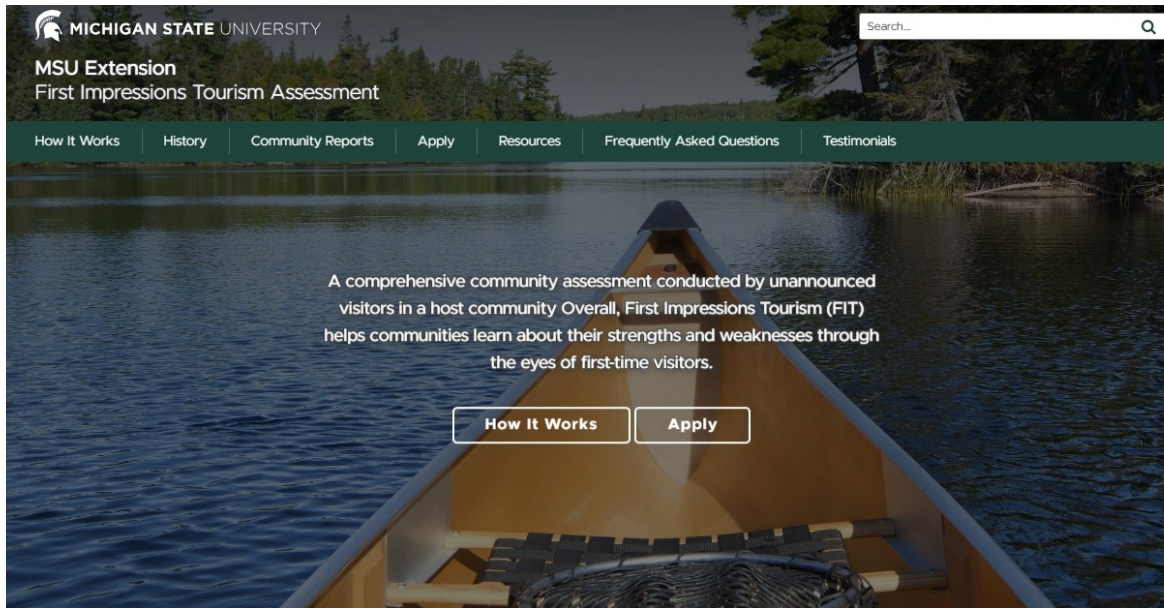
- *Time*
- *Fiscal/budget constraints*
- *Capacity*
- *Acquiring funding and volunteers to help with these projects*
- *Some community members don't like change*
- *Getting everyone on board*
- *Prudent use of resources*

FIT Program Summary:

Communities are engaging in FIT to:

- Build capacity within their community
- Strengthen their image, assets, and tourism/recreation opportunities
- Update master and/or recreation plans
- Spawn new ideas and leadership
- Increase grant applications to:
 - Arts and Humanities
 - Department of Natural Resources
 - Community Foundations
 - United States Department of Agriculture - Rural Development
- Organizing and applying for state agency programs, such as:
 - Redevelopment Ready Certification (RRC)
 - Main Street Programs

Resources



Our website houses multiple resources to guide communities through the next steps.

Website resources include:

- How it Works
- Community Reports
- Application and Resources
- FAQs

To learn more about FIT, please visit:

https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism_first_impressions/



Andy Northrop
 Advanced Educator
 Government/Community Vitality/Tourism
 Community, Food, and Environment Institute
 Michigan State University Extension
 northro5@msu.edu

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