



First Impressions Tourism Assessment

Lapeer, MI



Summary of Results

September 2023

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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 Lapeer, MI

The Michigan Economic Development Corporation provided financial support for the City of Lapeer to participate in MSU Extension's FIT program as part of their Redevelopment Ready Certification effort. The City of Lapeer began their participation in the program early 2023. The key findings summarized in this report were presented to the Lapeer community in September 2023.

Visitor/Assessor Profiles:

The City of Lapeer and surrounding area (CLA) received six visitors in the Summer 2023, 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 CLA prior to participating.

Four assessors were male and the other two female. Three assessors identified as Millennials, two as Generation X, and one as a Baby Boomer. Assessors were non-parents or parents and/or grandparents. Assessors personally identified as artists, bicyclists (or mountain bikers), entrepreneurs, foodies, hikers, and/or world travelers. Five assessors visited CLA alone while the remaining assessor visited with their spouse/partner. To generate diverse experiences, assessors visited CLA separately during different days of the week between late May and early July. Other than Saturday and Sunday, CLA was visited every day of the week with Friday receiving two assessors. Five assessors stayed in a local hotel and the remaining one



camped. All assessors spent between 18-24 hours visiting CLA’s wide range of assets within the downtown and surrounding area that contribute to the local visitor/tourism economy. In addition to onsite visits, visitors also spent between 1-4 hour researching CLA 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

- *I think the pre-research helped manage my expectations.*
- *Websites clearly matched the community visit which is rare!*
- *Websites got me excited to visit Lapeer, but there is room is for improvements to them.*
- *Pure MI was good for what to do but may have given me an overinflated expectation of how much history was going to be on display.*
- *Video tours were helpful but would have loved to see one focused on visitors/tourists.*



Attractions and/or events this community is known for?

- *Past Tense Cider Mill*
- *Oakdale Trails*
- *Historical Courthouse and Churches*
- *Pocket Parks/Alleyway Performances*
- *The Cruise*
- *The Lapeer Arts Association*
- *Food Truck Festival(s)*
- *Tilted Axis Brewery*
- *Motorcycle Gathering*



Most Helpful Websites – <https://downtownlapeer.com/>

- *Downtown Development Authority’s website provided the most detailed info in one place to get me started in what to look for and pay attention to*
- *Downtown Lapeer is excellent, and I used it quite a bit!*
- *DDA (and Pure MI) were the best and provided a wealth of info.*
- *100% agreed that -*
 - *info available was useful.*
 - *pages were visually appealing.*
 - *info on website was presented well.*



Challenges for most helpful website(s)

- *50% of assessors agreed this website needs more information.*

The Visit:

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

- *Although quite a busy strip of concrete after exiting 69 and heading north, once I found my way out of the congestion, I pleasantly surprised such a wide range of amenities exists for residents and visitors. After entering the historical downtown, I was pleased to see such a healthy downtown with eclectic shops and eateries.*
- *I thought it looked much better than I had imagined...The commercial area from the highway toward downtown was larger and more vibrant than I'd imagined.*
- *A very strong downtown area, clearly, they've put a lot of effort into placemaking: painted benches, streetscaping, the big LAPEER sign/selfie station...There needs to be an official visitor center or visitors' information kiosk somewhere in the downtown area, as I could not find one.*





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.

• Visit historical sites	3
• Outdoor recreation (Hiking, Biking, etc)	2
• Visit friends and family	2
• Shop	2
• Engage in business activities	2
• In transit to somewhere else	2
• Relax	1
• Be in nature	1
• Get entertained/for entertainment	1
• Engage in religious activities	1
• Other – <i>Weekend Getaway</i>	1
• Get away from people	0
• Experience a unique culture	0
• Agritourism	0





Lapeer’s Downtown Business Area (Best = 18, Worst = 0)

There are areas of green space	18
Parking charges are reasonable	18
There is a gateway point to enter/leave town (piece of art, mural, sign, etc.)	18
Business information is displayed on the exterior of businesses	17
Walking sidewalks are well maintained	17
Parking is centrally located	17
Parking is secure	17
The grounds have been landscaped with flowers, trees, shrubs, and bushes	16
Inviting signs are displayed on the exterior of businesses	16
Additional walking paths are available	16
This is a welcoming downtown	16
There is a mix of ages	15
The main downtown business area feels distinct or special	15
The main downtown business area is a major tourists draw for the area	15
Vehicle traffic is managed to encourage pedestrian movement, via foot or bike	14
There is pedestrian traffic (foot and bike)	14
The downtown business area is handicapped accessible	13
There are walker/biker friendly signs	12
Bike lanes exist on roadways	8
There is a mix of ethnic groups	6



Thoughts and Ideas for Downtown:

- *Downtown Lapeer is on the upswing!*
- *I found value in the DDA and Good News newsletters...*
- *I appreciate the painted benches, control boxes, and murals.*
- *I wish I could have learned who painted the murals...*
- *The alleyway music performance space was surprising for how well it worked...*





Destination Attributes (Rankings: Best = 18, Worst = 0)

Customer service	16	Special events	12
Safety and security	16	Variety of activities to do	11
Cleanliness	16	Well-marked roads/attractions	11
Authenticity of attractions	16	Historic/heritage attractions	11
Hospitality and friendliness of residents	15	Well known landmarks	11
Value for money in tourism experiences	15	Communication infrastructure	11
Conveniently located	14	Activities for children	10
Accessibility of destination	14	Variety and quality of restaurants	10
Visitor accessibility to attractions	14	Variety and quality of shopping options	10
Interesting architecture	14	Cultural attractions	10
Pedestrian travel infrastructure	14	Community involvement	10
Community involvement	14	Dedicated tourism attractions	8
Road conditions	13	Directional signage	8
Shopping facilities	13	Variety and quality of accommodations	7
Nature-based activities	12	Adventure-based activities	7

Sense of Welcoming and Safety-

The people at service venues actually stood out for their friendliness. This was true at one of the hotels, all the restaurants and two different gas stations...

I really felt the like the community/city/surrounding area is set up to welcome visitors.

Everyone was friendly and lots of documented cases of folks going above and beyond to answer questions.

People were friendly and kind, shared information freely.

All were friendly, customer service was great. Good vibes downtown at the Monday night cruise.



Post-Visit Reflections:

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

- Vibrant Downtown/Stores
- MTB/Oakdale Trails
- LaClair pocket park
- Historical courthouse
- The *free* yoga at the library
- Quiet and slow pace
- Farmers market
- Great planning
- Pedestrian friendly
- Wide sidewalks
- Very clean
- Cool artwork
- Gallery 194 and Art Community
- The Monday night cruise
- All the potential for more
- Green and blue spaces
- Untapped water nearby
- Wildlife viewing in Rowden Park



- I would feel compelled to stop by this community if passing by?
 - 2 said *definitely*, 3 said *maybe*, 1 said *probably not*
- I would recommend Lapeer to friends and family?
 - 2 said *definitely*, 2 said *maybe*, 1 said *probably not*
- I would visit Lapeer on a pleasure trip in the future?
 - 3 said *definitely*, 3 said *probably not*



FIT Assessor Identified Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities –

Strengths:

- Livability
- Parks
- Healthy downtown
- Active “Main Street”
- Eclectic businesses
- Willingness to grow
- Engaged population
- Good physical structure
 - Adequate parking
 - Wide sidewalks
- MTB trails
- Outdoor recreation assets
- Rural charm
- Agriculture community
- Farmers market
- *Some* diverse food options
- Access to I-69
- Close to Metro-Detroit
- Consistent architecture
- Historical buildings
- Art, theatre, and murals
- “Creative-class” potential
- Great customer service (beyond normal)
- Very welcoming to visitors
- Strong sense of place





Challenges:

- Bike rental
- Bike lane/street safety
- No distance key at MTB trailhead
- No Downtown accommodation
- Businesses lacking web/social media presence
- Businesses unequipped to handle small purchases
- Farmer Market lacks size and foot traffic
- Lack of signage and visitor info/center
- Information lacks for events, attractions, what to do, go, etc.
- Low knowledge from businesses of things to do/places to go
- Elevating the volume of activity to outside audiences
- Raising awareness of Chamber booklet and assets promoted
- Being directed to other communities by service staff
- Congested exit at I-69





Opportunities:

Theme 1 – Outdoor Recreation

Theme 2 – Arts, Culture, and History

Theme 3 – Community Business and Marketing

Theme 4- Community Development





Outdoor Recreation

- Show a map of outdoor recreation and nature locations on website
- Work with RV Park to help visitors understand recreation opportunities
- Capitalize on Mountain Bike (MTB) trails
 - Properly note trail distances on map for new riders
 - Events, publicity and, if feasible, rentals
- Decide if Lapeer is a bike friendly community. If so,
 - Develop bike programs w/ businesses
 - Add bike lanes/friendly signs
 - Add a bike repair station(s)
 - Increase bike racks
- Elevate *all* trails in/near the downtown
 - Increase signage, marketing, website video tours,
 - Crampton Park –
 - kayak launch noted on Google maps
 - No launch seen
 - Rotary Park
 - kayak trail - add map, signage, etc.
 - Rowden Park – birding activities
 - Is fishing allowed here?
 - what species exist?
- Can the southside river be activated for all users?
 - Make water ADA accessible
 - Kayak/Stand Up Paddle Boards?





Art, Culture, and History

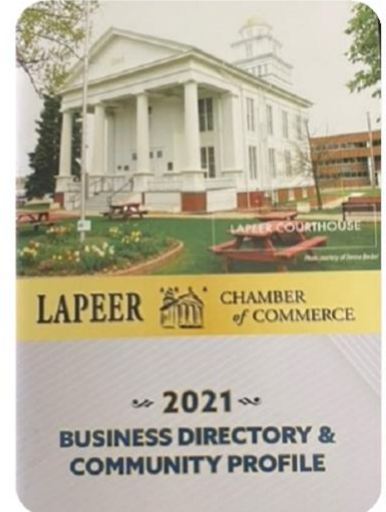
- Activate parking lots north/south of downtown with art
 - Using sides of buildings and
 - Parking lot space
- Provide more info on murals
 - Who painted them,
 - Why they were selected, etc.
- Host specialized events in concert with businesses
 - Circus acts downtown as an event with Odditorium
- Continue (and expand) the DDA and *Good News* newsletters
- Increase historical signage within the community to match the history
 - What pre-settlement opportunities exist?
 - What post-settlement opportunities exist?
- Make the history of the city easy to access for visitors
 - (Accidentally) found library scavenger hunt history
 - Use the library scavenger hunt info to strengthen the historical aspect of Lapeer
 - Generate a full walking tour with signage
 - Install QR code and/or wayfinding signage for history/architectural sites





Community Business & Marketing

- Collectively work to promote volume of assets outside of city limits
- City's calendar could be a one-stop for all events
 - Post library events on the community calendar
- Work with local businesses on web presence/management
- *Chamber of Commerce* booklet
 - Guide suggested there was less to do than there is.
 - Add assets (trails, parks, mini-golf...)
 - Increase distribution at hotels and other locations
- Improve signage along I-69 and off/near exit
 - Increase wayfinding



Could the depot be activated as a visitor's center? Or one of the cabooses? This is a central, well kept area but doesn't seem much used aside from two Amtrak trains per day.



Community Development

- Create crosswalk light on all streets of the main corridor near busy car traffic
- Keep building out community nodes
- Explore zoning for downtown accommodation
- Sustainability/Green Destination?
 - Highlight green/blue spaces on websites
 - Increase / highlight “Green Infrastructure”
 - Increase/add recycling
 - Solar options?





Assets Visited

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

- Attractions/Activities**
- Downtown Lapeer
 - City Hall
 - Best Western
 - Holiday Inn
 - Getaway Cabins
 - Crampton Park
 - Pure MI Architecture Tour
 - Lapeer Depot
 - LJ’s Farmers Market
 - Ed LaClair Rotary Pocket Park
 - Lapeer Historical Museum
 - County Courthouse Lawn
 - Lapeer District Library
 - (Scavenger Hunt)
 - Oakdale (MTB) Trails
 - Gallery 194
 - Lapeer Area Chamber of Commerce
 - Rowden Park
 - The PIX Theatre
 - Historic Churches (Various)
 - Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church
 - Lapeer Community Center
 - Lapeer Concert Series
 - Marguerite deAngli Library
 - Monday night cruise
 - Audubon Park
 - Past Tense Country Store
 - Lapeer Library/Yoga
 - Lapeer County Display Gardens
 - Axecadia

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>Eating & Drinking Establishments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tilted Axis Brewing Company <input type="checkbox"/> Max’s Donuts <input type="checkbox"/> Blend <input type="checkbox"/> Woodchips <input type="checkbox"/> Vinyl Bar and Grill <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Past Tense Cider Mill <input type="checkbox"/> Cream/Dagwoods <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Kooky and Kream <input type="checkbox"/> Hernandez Mexican Food <input type="checkbox"/> Pita Way <input type="checkbox"/> Krave <input type="checkbox"/> Tim Hortons <input type="checkbox"/> The Lake Inn <input type="checkbox"/> Old Detroit Burger Bar <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Food Trucks (Various) | <p>Shopping Places</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The ODDitorium <input type="checkbox"/> New-to-You consignment <input type="checkbox"/> Never-ending Story Books <input type="checkbox"/> Lyric Mall <input type="checkbox"/> Crank Cycle and Fitness <input type="checkbox"/> The Lapeer Art Association <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Essential Necessities LLC & The Rock Shop <input type="checkbox"/> Off the Wall Antiques <input type="checkbox"/> The Flower Basket <input type="checkbox"/> Rogers Pharmacy <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Plastic Planet Toy Store <input type="checkbox"/> Grace Apparel <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Halo2 Himalayan Salt Cave |
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Lapeer’s FIT Community Leadership Team

Name	Title
James Alt	Executive Director DDA
Rodney Church	Director of Parks, Recreation & Cemetery
Jill Bristow	DDA Communications
Josh Atwood	City Commissioner
Payton Cordes	Youth Representative
Samantha Warren	Restaurant/Retail Owner



Financial support for this FIT assessment was provided by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation as a benefit of City of Lapeer’s status as a certified Redevelopment Ready Community. Further information can be found by visiting - <https://www.miplace.org/programs/redevelopment-ready-communities/>



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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