First Impressions Tourism Assessment

City of Ionia, MI

Summary of Results

September 2024

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 25 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 a 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 a wide-range of initiatives to support community-driven tourism development across Michigan.

II. Summary of Results for City of Ionia, MI

The Michigan Economic Development Corporation provided financial support for the City of Ionia to participate in MSU Extension's FIT program as part of their Redevelopment Ready Certification effort. The City of Ionia began their FIT program in early 2024. The key findings summarized in this report were presented to the Ionia community in September 2024.

Visitor/Assessor Profiles:

The City of Ionia and surrounding area (CIA) received five visitors in the Summer 2024, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors". To generate diverse perspectives, the assessors reside in various communities across Upper and Lower Michigan and were recruited across multiple disciplines within MSU Extension. Additionally, all five assessors had minimal knowledge of CIA prior to participating.

Of the five assessors, there were three males and two females. Two assessors identified as Millennials and three as Generation X. More than half the assessors are parents of young or teenage children. Assessors identified interests in their personal lives as artists, bicyclists (or mountain bikers), foodies, hikers, fishers, and/or world travelers. Three assessors visited CIA alone while the remaining two assessors visited with their spouse or relative. To generate diverse experiences, assessors visited CIA separately during different days of the week between late June and early July. Other than Thursday, CIA was visited every day of the week. Two assessors stayed in a local hotel, one

camped, one stayed overnight in a short-term rental near downtown Ionia, and the last assessor visited for the day. All overnight assessors spent between 18-36 hours visiting CIA's wide range of assets within the downtown and surrounding area that contribute to the local economy. The day-trip assessor spent approximately eight hours doing the same. In addition to onsite visits, assessors also spent between 1-4 hours researching CIA (prior to assessments) using mobile devices and/or personal computers to gain a deeper understanding of the host community's assets, services, and things to do via various websites and social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, and/or TripAdvisor.

This report is a general summary of data collected highlighting assessors' experiences captured before, during, and after via FIT survey data. Results are separated by **Pre-Visit**, **The Visit**, and **Post-Visit**. FIT results also include Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities identified by assessors and are provided at the end of the report.

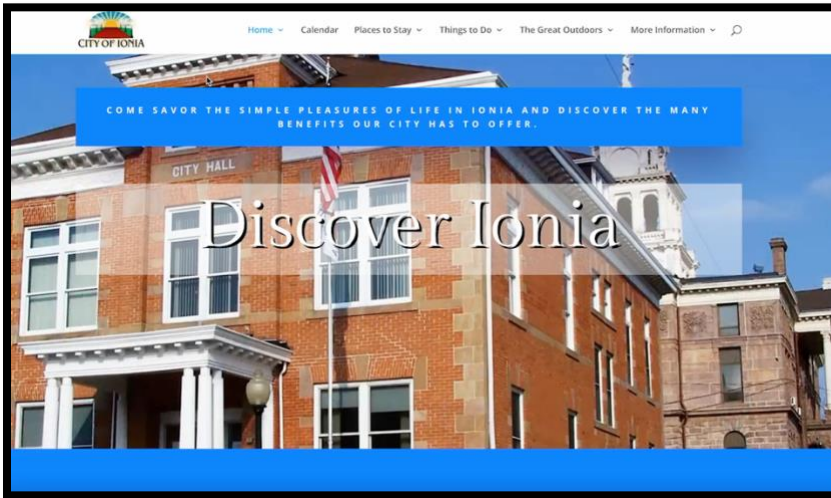## Pre-Visit:

Web Research & Digital First Impressions
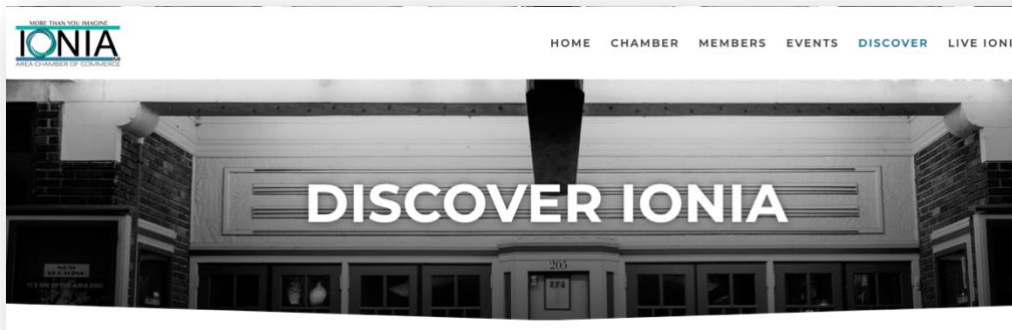
Most Helpful Website(s) -

- *__Ionia Area Chamber__ website (https://www.ioniachamber.org) was by far the most useful as it was the only site that included specific information about lodging, dining and different things to do for a visitor.*
- *The directory of local businesses and events was very informative and easy to use.*
- *Links to business/event websites are listed, which is convenient for finding details, like hours, or menus.*
- *It has a pdf download of a visitor's guide which has A LOT of ads and not much visitor-focused content, this is not something that is going to be useful to many people especially if they're on a mobile device.*

Second Most Helpful Website

- **Discover Ionia** (https://discoverionia.com) was identified as a helpful website, too.

- *"It has nearly everything but wasn't found on/via the city website or elsewhere until it was eventually discovered by adding "things to do" to my search, and then populated towards the bottom of Google making it hard to find"*

Based on pre-visit research, CIA is known for these attractions and/or events?

- *Ionia Free Fair (identified by all fiver assessors)*
- *Ionia State Rec (identified by two assessors)*
- *Fred Meijer Trail*
- *Downtown Ionia,*
- *Big box shopping stores*
- *Trails, history, and a brewery*
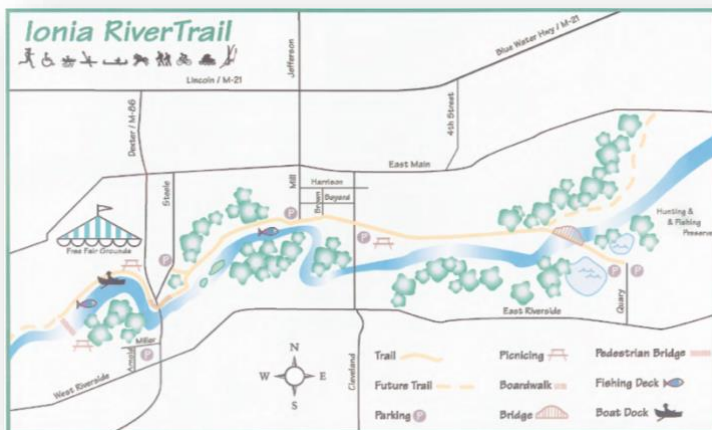
How did pre-visit research impact your visit? What impression was given online?

- *I was picturing a quaint and small downtown surrounded by farm fields and forests.*
- *I imagined Ionia was a small, quiet town with a nice downtown district, including a brick street, rail trail and the river. I thought the entire community would be walkable, with most of the activity and attraction in the downtown area.*
- *I was curious about biking along the river, enough to bring my bike. The downtown looked attractive, and I was eager to check it out.*
- *While some aspects of the web research/websites were clunky, I did begin to think there was quite a bit to do there because they had a strong presence on Pure MI, Trip Advisor, and their own websites as well.*
- *Overall, I found that Ionia was highlighted quite well on other platforms like Trip Advisor and Pure MI giving me the impression there is/would be a lot to do there.*

The Visit:

First 5-Minute Impression(s)

- *I entered the community on M-21 from the east. The "Welcome to the City of Ionia" sign signaled that I had entered the edge of the City of Ionia. The sign was in good repair and the area around it was mowed and landscaped, which made me smile (community pride). I was wholly impressed with the historic nature of the homes as well as the clean, mowed, and in many cases well landscaped yards. I instantly felt at home, and at ease entering the City of Ionia.*
- *A bit disorientating at first coming in/off from 96 going north but was pleasantly surprised with historical downtown and brick streetscapes once I found my way. I almost felt like the town itself was out of the Pacific NW states given it is surround by green space and historical buildings/infrastructure.*

- *On my drive into Ionia, I was initially struck by how far off the highway (I96) the actual community is. I was surprised by the number and diversity of chain and fast-food restaurants that were along the road as I got closer to downtown… As I entered the downtown area it seemed quiet, but I was pleasantly surprised by the historic buildings and re-done facades on many of the buildings as well as planters and streetlights throughout the downtown area.*

Community Art and Culture Information

- *I felt the community is already doing a great job of elevating its history. I did notice some murals around the back sides of town. Seems there is ample building space that could be leveraged as canvas to bring in more.*
- *I would like to have learned more about the industry that provided the city's wealth…*
- *Is there a connection to Native American history here in Ionia that could be showcased?*

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

Visit friends and family	3
Outdoor recreation (MTB, Hiking, etc.)	3
In transit to somewhere else	2
Engage in business activities	2
Shop	2
Visit historical sites	2
BIKE RIDE Other	1
Other	0
Engage in religious activities	0
Get entertained/for entertainment	0
Agritourism	0
Experience a unique culture	0
Get away from people	0
Be in nature	0
Relax	0
Total	15

Ionia's Downtown Business Area - Rankings are generated from individual assessor scores then aggregated and sorted from highest to lowest. Highest possible score is 15 and the lowest zero. These scores identify Ionia's strengths and weaknesses in their historic downtown business area.

The grounds have been landscaped with flowers, trees, shrubs, and bushes	15
Parking is centrally located	15
Parking is secure	15
Additional walking paths are available	14
There are areas of green space	13
Walking sidewalks are well maintained	13
Parking charges are reasonable	13
Vehicle traffic is managed to encourage pedestrian movement, via foot or bike	12
There is a gateway point to enter/leave town (piece of art, mural, sign, etc.)	12
The main downtown business area feels distinct or special	12
This is a welcoming downtown	11
Inviting signs are displayed on the exterior of businesses	9
Business information is displayed on the exterior of businesses	9
There are walker/biker friendly signs	9
The downtown business area is handicapped accessible	9
There is pedestrian traffic (foot and bike)	9
The main downtown business area is a major tourists draw for the area	9
There is a mix of ages	7
Bike lanes exist on roadways	6
There is a mix of ethnic groups	6

Downtown Impression and Ideas:

- *Beyond the bricks and traffic calming, more little things could be done like hanging baskets etc. Also, there are alleys that could encourage people to linger more by turning them into pocket parks.*
- *I noticed there were a lot of benches throughout the community and downtown, which are not always obvious in other communities as they are here.*
- *I felt that two-hour parking limits were very restrictive for such a quiet downtown. I did accidentally exceed those two hours multiple times without a receiving ticket, but I wonder if extending the length or eliminating all together has been discussed?*
- *Moving the library downtown will help activate the main street more!*

Destination Attributes - Rankings are generated from individual assessor scores then aggregated and sorted from highest to lowest. Highest possible score is 15 and the lowest zero. These scores identify strengths and weaknesses.

Hospitality and friendliness of residents	12	Accessibility of destination	8
Customer service	11	Road conditions	8
Value for money in tourism experiences	11	Interesting architecture	8
Historic/heritage attractions	11	Communication infrastructure	8
Safety and security	10	Directional signage	7
Cleanliness	10	Variety and quality of accommodations	7
Variety and quality of restaurants	10	Adventure-based activities	7
Authenticity of attractions	10	Pedestrian travel infrastructure	7
Community involvement	10	Dedicated tourism attractions	6
Conveniently located	9	Shopping facilities	6
Visitor accessibility to attractions	9	Variety and quality of shopping options	6
Well-marked roads/attractions	9	Well known landmarks	6
Nature-based activities	9	Variety of activities to do	5
Cultural attractions	9	Activities for children	5
Special events	9		

Destination Attribute Thoughts and Ideas-

- *City of Ionia has a strong presence on major tourism related platforms which gives the impression there is a lot to do there for a couple/few days. However, while I covered some ground in 26 hours, had I been asked to stay longer than that I would have struggled.*

- *I was able to stay active the entire time there. Trails, brewery, Ionia rec area, downtown, history... Impressively, there seemed to be quite a bit there for 24-36 hours if someone is willing to push themselves and time their visit right.*

- *I was super impressed by Steele St. Brewing and was wondering the entire time why this place is not downtown.*

Sense of Welcoming and Safety – Assessors were asked, "*Did you feel welcomed in the community at all times?*"

- *Everyone was welcoming - and smiling! Very warm reception in this community. Aunt Stephanie's was particularly friendly!*
- *I generally thought folks were very nice and customer service was uniformly very good.*
- *Yes, for the most part. Nothing really stood out as exceptionally welcoming or not. Some businesses seemed indifferent to me being present.*

In addition to responses highlighted as direct quotes in italics, some assessors noted they had specific challenges with businesses catering to historical buildings and accommodation in Ionia.

Post-Visit Reflections:

What will you remember most six months from now?

- The Grand River
- Nice downtown
- The Fred Meijer bike trail
- Delicious coffee from Sozo
- Great outdoor recreation nearby
- Historical mansions East of town
- Brick streets and detailed brick work
- The completely deserted downtown area
- Blanchard House, specifically the sandstone
- Huge (unpainted) ag silos that serve as memorable landmarks

FIT Assessor Identified Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities –

As part of a FIT assessment, participating communities receive insights to their Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities (SCOs) from assessors. These insights are gathered directly from specific survey data questions designed to elicit results to support SCOs. Opportunities, as they are presented here, serve only as suggestions to foster and support, where and when feasible, further dialogue once a community has completed the FIT program. Strengths, challenges, and/or opportunities should not be viewed a single or all-encompassing solution(s) to a community's ecological, economic, and/or social challenges, whether related to tourism or not.

Strengths
1. Active gov and community
2. Great/attractive downtown
   • Minimal vacancy
   • Unique shopping
   • Brick Street(s)
3. Community investments
   • Streets, sidewalks, landscaping,
   • Interpretive signage
   • Historical markers
4. Growing food scene
   • Steele Brewery
   • Farmers Market
5. Hispanic Community
   • Entrepreneurs
   • Ethnic food
6. Historical infrastructure
   • Blanchard House
   • Library
   • Active historical society
7. Visitors Guide
8. Robust web-presence
9. Outdoor Rec amenities
   • Bertha Rock
   • Ionia SRA
   • Fishing at Sessions Point
   • Trails
10. Placemaking
11. Agritourism opportunities
   • U-picks
12. 2019 Master Plan
   • Steele St. Plan

Challenges
- *Website Confusion*
  - *Discover Ionia* - City or County?
- Disconnect to Grand River
  - Minimal access points
  - Minimal information
    - How to access, history, etc.
- Cycling infrastructure
  - Minimal draw from trail
  - Minimal signage on trail
  - Minimal bike racks
- Inaccurate web information
  - Local business hours
  - Farmer's Market hours
- Poor communication
  - Business hours
  - Making reservations
- Minimal Lodging options
- Downtown
  - No third place to "just be"
- Short parking limits
  - 2 hours
- Accessible bathrooms
  - Public signage
  - Armory (specific)
- Ionia *Free* Fair (Promo)
  - Lack of information on banners

Opportunities

- Community Development

- Outdoor Recreation

- Art, Culture, and History

- Community Business and Marketing

Community Development

1. As a driver, this M66/Main intersection sent my eyes (and attention) forward, up the hill and to the left– AWAY from downtown.
2. Where there is just grass and the fence, consider adding to the "Downtown Ionia" sign area some landscaping, flags, or public art to entice the driver to turn right.
3. Removing the fence might also open up that corner visually.
4. Opportunity to add more visual cues to the cross walk.
5. Overall, a more robust gateway to the downtown is needed due to the pace of traffic and geometry at this intersection.

These traffic calming planters with historical items and interpretive signage are very cool and nicely done.

A couple of things:

1. The existing Master Plan acknowledges that they impede the installation of the bike lanes Main St. desperately needs
2. A little more could go a long way, hanging baskets would be a great addition.

Community Development

There are several alleys that are nicely landscaped but for pedestrian access only.

- Upkeep here would also encourage visitors and activity, as some assessors didn't find this a welcoming alley to stroll through.
- These could easily and quickly be turned into actual pocket parks with lighting, murals, and/or seating
- Waste cans could use (creative) repainting

There was a lot of empty and wide-open parking surfaces in the downtown area.

- These are an eyesore and increase the heat in the downtown area.
- Are there opportunities to repurpose these spaces for the community's benefit?

- Could the depot be put to better use as a *community hub?*
  - Examples -
    - Village of Roscommon Depot
  - Incubator space?
  - Bike shop?
  - Brewery?
  - "Chalk the Walk" events?

Community Development

- The downtown area has ample parking and a nice wide sidewalk.
- Could this area be activated by providing outdoor seating space for restaurants and...
- have sidewalk displays for retail stores to make them more inviting?
- Also, parklets would be a great addition since parking is so readily available.

Outdoor Recreation

- This location/business serves as gateway to Ionia for cyclists when they stop at the trailhead.
- Something vibrant is needed here to lure more people into town from the bike path.
- The interesting architecture of the main structure and open space behind the building would lend itself well to a restaurant or brewery with the potential to take advantage of the outdoor space behind the building for food, recreation, and live music.

Outdoor Recreation

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Cow Pie Classic- Gravel Race (early morning)

- These maps at *Dan's Bike Shop* are very helpful for visitors.
- I didn't see information like this when I was researching the area.
- Between the bike shop, bike trail, and state-wide race in Ionia, Ionia could do more intentionally cater to a biking community and market to that interest segment.
  - Especially as part of a regional partnership with other communities on the Frederick Meijer trail.

- For safety reasons, it might be worthwhile to highlight the prison area, so users are aware.
- Work regionally to have maps and mile markers on bike trail(s).
- "Up next is... The next town is/has...
- Maps could be featured along bike infrastructure (bike repair spot, racks, etc.) in the downtown area or at Trailhead park

Outdoor Recreation

These grids occur at regular intervals along the bike path.

- **The issue** I encountered was that as a visitor, I didn't know where on the grid I was, exactly.
- **Opportunity** for creativity here!
- Mark the "YOU ARE HERE" for the bench stops to something more colorful and visual to denote attractions ahead (like bridges and towns).
- Great project for a summer intern— working in coordination with the State Parks and other community partners.

Ionia RiverTrail

- Excellent maps for visitors
- Position these publicly
- Likely <u>more</u> could be added to maps
- Helps with Ionia's identity and wide range of things to do

Outdoor Recreation

(Grand) River / Water Access - "**Major area of improvement**"
- Visible/experienced by cyclists outside of town
- Was not visible/noticeable once in town by most

Opportunities
- Increase infrastructure
  - (benches, fishing dock)
- Increase accessibility
  - Cutting back brush
  - Signage
  - Launch points
- Boat launch needs updating
- If more access, increase publicity

Art, Culture, and History

- *"Appreciated these signs outside of some of the historical buildings in town."*

  - **Opportunity** –
  - Include some additional information with QR code linking to web with more information.
  - Develop a historic walking/cycling tour of downtown or, if there is one already, highlight it better.
  - Might there be some deeper connection to
    - Native American history? Industry history?

Art, Culture, and History

- The murals are eye catching,
- Is there an opportunity to do more?
- Might buildings and/or alleys be available?
- Could some murals be created depicting the rich history of the area?

Opportunity

- "Silo(s) serves as the first asset many see as they come into Ionia.."
- This silo presents a great opportunity for a public art exhibit...
- Could be the site of a mural telling the town's history, directing riders to town, or ?
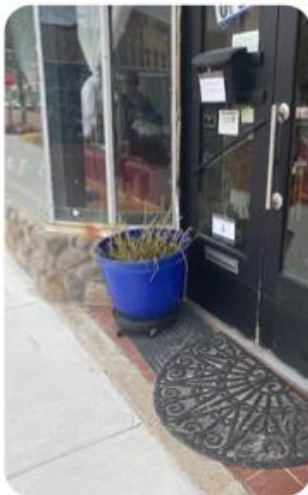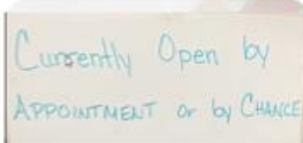
Community Business & Marketing

- These wayfinding signs are very attractive and well located.

- This sign is the closest one that would direct bikers to the downtown.

- Is there an opportunity here to include
  - Shops?
  - Restaurants ?
  - QR codes of events,
  - maps, or?

- Web-presence trainings for local businesses
- Overall, there is significant room for improvement in the customer experience downtown-- such as
  1. posting regular hours,
  2. improving window dressing,
  3. moving toward consistent hours of operation for more businesses,
  4. and increasing visibility to the inside of the store.

Currently Open by APPOINTMENT or by CHANCE

Community Business & Marketing

- "The community has some nice retail and lifestyle businesses/assets.
  - Brewery, artisan foods, shops, trails, farmers market and more)

- Opportunities to market those assets in a coherent manner
  - One – three-day itineraries
  - Target day trips
  - Position on web

- "World Largest…" is that drawing visitors? Is the claim accurate?
- *Free*, is the draw
- When is it? No date(s)…
- "Free Fair" is on here twice

Opportunities
- Add the dates
- Use "Ionia *Free* Fair" once
- Consider a QR code for passersby
- Connect event to Downtown
- "Free Popcorn" might draw more people than "Worlds Largest.."
- Consider "First Impressions Fair Assessment"

Community Business & Marketing

- Highlight Agri-tourism in the area/county
  - U-picks
  - Barn weddings
- Capitalize on local food(s) scene and industry
- Connecting trail system to Agri-tourism ventures?

Assets Visited

Assessors intentionally experience a variety of public and private assets during 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 City of Ionia's or Downtown Development Authority for more information. Orange stars indicate which assets would inspire assessors to return to Ionia.

Tourism Attractions/Activities

- ⭐ Bertha Brock Park
- Super 8 Motel
- ⭐ Frederick Meijer Grand River Valley Rail Trail
- Cornell Alley
- ⭐ Ionia State Recreation Area
- Riverside Park
- Ionia Community Library
- Ionia Armory and WW2 Memorial Park
- Grand River – Ionia Fairgrounds Boat Launch
- ⭐ Blanchard House
- Trail Head Park (Splashpad)
- Downtown Main Street
- Lakeside Resort Campground
- ⭐ Ionia Free Fair-Fairgrounds
- Alice Springs RV Park & Resort
- ⭐ History of the area

Eating and Drinking Establishments

- Sozo Coffee Roasting
- ⭐ MOO-ville Creamery "The Udder Store"
- Bluewater Cafe
- El Mariachi Mexican Grill & Bar
- New Oriental Star Chinese Restaurant
- ⭐ Aunt Stephanie's Restaurant
- ⭐ Steele Street Brewery
- Ionia Smoothie Company
- Olivera's Restaurant
- Cook & Co. Creamery & Confections
- McDonalds

Shopping Places

- Ken's Market
- Ionia City Market
- Hanulcik Farm Market
- Pocket Change 360
- CCG Prime
- Horrocks Nursery Farms / Horrocks Garden Center
- Riverbank Treasures
- Dan's Bike Shop
- Downtown Vintage
- Rite Aid

Ionia's FIT Community Leadership Team

Community Leadership Team (CLT)

Name	Organization/Title
Ken Baker	Soaring Above Teen Center – Director
Jonathan Bowman	City of Ionia – Assistant to the City Manager/Planning/Zoning
Joe Cantwell	Downtown Business Owner/Community Event Coordinator
Kathleen Cook Downtown Property Owner	Ionia Public Schools Elementary Teacher/ Historical Society/
Linda Curtis	Downtown Development Authority (DDA) – Director
Lynelle Wilson	Ionia Area Chamber of Commerce – Executive Director
Keegan Rice	City of Ionia Parks and Rec. – Assistant Director
Ryan Wilson	Ionia County Economic Alliance (ICEA) – Executive Director

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

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- 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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