

# First Impressions Tourism Assessment Village of Millington, MI



# **Summary of Results**

September 2025

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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 Village of Millington, MI

As part of their Redevelopment Ready Certification, The Michigan Economic Development Corporation funded the Village of Millington to participate in MSU Extension's FIT program. The Village of Millington applied for the FIT program and became involved in early 2025. The key findings summarized in this report were presented to the Millington community in September 2025.

#### Visitor/Assessor Profiles:

The Village of Millington and the surrounding area (VMA) received five visitors in the Summer 2025, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors". All five assessors had minimal-to-no knowledge of VMA prior to participating. Four assessors were first time visitors to VMA and one had briefly visited VMA in 2014.

To generate diverse perspectives, assessors from different professional backgrounds were recruited within MSU Extension across from Upper and Lower Michigan communities. Of the five assessors, there were three males and two females. One assessor identified from Generation Z (born between 1997-2012). One assessor identified as a Millennial (1981-1996), and the remaining three as Generation X (1965-1980). Three assessors are parents of young children. Assessors identified as hikers, runners, antique shoppers, mountain bikers, world travelers, cultural explorers, and outdoor and history enthusiasts.

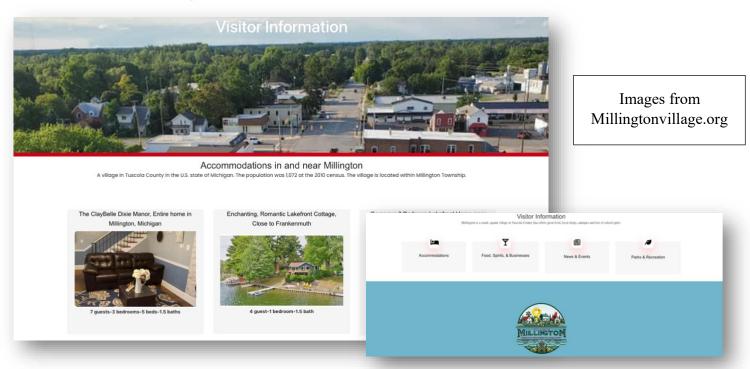


Three assessors visited VMA alone while the remaining two assessors visited with their friend or family member(s). To capture diverse experiences, assessors visited VMA separately during different days of the week between late May and mid-July. Three assessors spent most of their time in VMA on a Thursday, while the remaining two assessors were in VMA on a Wednesday and Friday. Four assessors stayed in hotels within close proximity to VMA and the last assessor visited for the day twice. All overnight assessors spent between 18-36 hours visiting VMA'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 on both visits. In addition to onsite visits, assessors also conducted between 1-4 hours researching VMA 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) – www.Millingtonvillage.org** was identified as "the most helpful website" when conducting research prior to assessors visiting.

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- All assessors said webpages were appealing and absent of typographical errors,
- Easy to Navigate Simple layout made it quick to find relevant information.
- Dedicated Visitor Page Included sections for food, parks, and local activities.
- Comprehensive Business Listings Provided links (mostly to Facebook) for local businesses and services.
- Central Source of Information Appeared to be the only robust site with useful content about Millington.

### ₱ Limitations:

- Basic Presentation Listings and event details were minimal—required outside searches for more info.
- Few Visuals or Interactive Features Mostly text-based with limited engagement tools
- 4/5 assessors stated "more information is needed on the most helpful website"

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

- **Positive Web Presence** Village site gave the impression that Millington is trying to be visitor-friendly and welcoming online.
- Based on assessor opinion generated via research, Village of Millington is known for -
  - Quality antique shops
  - Limitless RC Track
  - Murphy Lake & Historic Society
  - Cinnamon Rolls
  - Live Music
  - Southern Link Railway







### What impressions did you get of the community before visiting?

- Small, Historical, and Tight-Knit Perceived as a slower-paced, rural town with "old town" charm and agricultural roots.
- Quaint but Unclear Research suggested activity, but it was difficult to grasp specific highlights or what set Millington apart.
- Anticipated Modest Offerings Some expected limited engagement or typical small-town features (antique shops, bar-and-grills).



### **The Visit:**

Upong arrival to the destination, assessors are asked to capture their "first five-minute impression". Responses from four assessors has been provided below.

### **First 5-Minute Impressions:**

• Approaching the village, shops and roadside attractions became more numerous and in closer proximity to one another compared to the spread-out reality of the previous miles. After some inviting shops it was clear you were entering a small town. Beautiful homes, old and sizable homes lining state road with smaller roads off the main one leading to more houses. McPherson's Family Restaurant stood out and signaled to me that I was entering the downtown. Older facades of buildings showed me that there were several stores that I could check out. No big chain stores were immediately visible. Parking was abundant on the street yet there were some people already parked which was inviting. Buildings were old but well-

kept and very consistent with historical downtowns across the state. The village was intriguing enough for me to look around at the old buildings and read signage, but I'm not sure it was exciting enough for me to stop there if I was headed elsewhere and this was along the way.





- I did a day trip and got rained out in mid-June...My second trip back gave me a better impression and was more memorable and positive. I brought my bike and was able to ride around town and outside the area too using the Southern Links Trailway. I found the community to have some eyesores yet at the same time have a lot of opportunity for Placemaking and community improvement. I was happy to see the Cardinal/red theme and some of the businesses in town with welcoming storefronts and healthy appearances.
- I came in from the West, on Millington Road, where the farmland gives way to houses that become more frequent until it transitions to a traditional neighborhood. All yards approaching Millington were groomed, giving a welcome and community focused feeling. There was a sign that welcomed me to Millington prominent and well kept. This route included a large cemetery surrounded by a neighborhood, which was heartwarming once I thought about it as the lost community members continue to be part of the Village. A

speed sign also helped me slow down to the Village speed limit of 25; I appreciated that! And was excited to enter the Village and to see more of Millington!!

 Upon entering Millington from the north on M-15, my initial impression was mixed. The first structure I noticed was the car wash, which appeared somewhat worn, prompting me to wonder about the overall level of upkeep throughout the community. However, just moments



later, I passed the local flower shop,
which stood out for its well-maintained
exterior and inviting presence. The "Curly
Cone" also caught my eye, offering a nostalgic, homey charm
that made it feel like a local favorite. As I continued driving at a
leisurely pace through the downtown area, I found myself
curious about what attractions, activities, or destinations a
visitor might discover.



**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	4
Relax	3
Other	2
In transit to somewhere else	2
Agritourism	2
Shop	2
Get entertained/for	1
entertainment	
Visit historical sites	1
Get away from people	1
Outdoor recreation (MTB, Hiking)	1
Other	0
Engage in religious activities	0
Engage in business activities	0
Experience a unique culture	0
Be in nature	0

### Other

- Kids games/school event
- RC Track



**Millington's Downtown 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 Downtown Millington's Strengths and Weaknesses.

Parking charges are reasonable	15
Parking is centrally located	14
Parking is secure	14
The grounds have been landscaped with flowers, trees, shrubs, and bushes	10
There are areas of green space	10
Inviting signs are displayed on the exterior of businesses	10
Walking sidewalks are well maintained	10
Additional walking paths are available	10
This is a welcoming downtown	10
The main downtown business area feels distinct or special	10
Business information is displayed on the exterior of businesses	9
There is pedestrian traffic (foot and bike)	8
There is a mix of ages	8
The main downtown business area is a major tourists draw for the area	8
The downtown business area is handicapped accessible	7
There is a gateway point to enter/leave town (piece of art, mural, sign, etc.)	7
There are walker/biker friendly signs	5
There is a mix of ethnic groups	5
Vehicle traffic is managed to encourage pedestrian movement, via foot or bike	4
Bike lanes exist on roadways	2

## **Key Observations & Experiences in Downtown Millington**

- Pedestrian Challenges
  - Drivers often don't yield at crosswalks
  - Missing crosswalks in key areas
    - (e.g., Depot Lot → Worth's Market)
  - Uneven walkability and sidewalk connectivity
- Limited Visual Cues for Visitors
  - No large banners or event promotions to attract passthrough traffic
  - (Some) businesses lack descriptive or welcoming signs
  - Summer festival signage lacked visibility



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	13
Customer service	13
Safety and security	13
Community involvement	13
Cleanliness	12
Value for money in tourism experiences	11
Road conditions	10
Authenticity of attractions	10
Accessibility of destination	9
Shopping facilities	9
Nature-based activities	9
Well-marked roads/attractions	8
Variety and quality of restaurants	8
Historic/heritage attractions	8
Special events	8

Communication infrastructure	8
Pedestrian travel infrastructure	8
Conveniently located	7
Visitor accessibility to attractions	7
Activities for children	7
Directional signage	7
Variety and quality of shopping options	7
Adventure-based activities	7
Variety of activities to do	6
Interesting architecture	6
Cultural attractions	6
Well known landmarks	4
Dedicated tourism attractions	3
Variety and quality of accommodations	1

### **Destination Attribute Thoughts and Ideas-**

Throughout my visit, I consistently felt welcomed. The sense of friendliness and hospitality left a strong, positive impressions and speaks to Millington pride.!



More benches, places to linger, flower (pots) and the like could encourage the presence of people on the streets. **Sense of Welcoming and Safety –** Assessors were asked a series of questions on feeling welcomed and sense of safety while visiting Millington,

### "Did you feel welcomed in the community at all times?"

- Talking to vendors at the live music made it welcoming!
- The women at the historical museum and library were warm and helpful.
- Everyone we encountered was a delight!
- · Fellas at the RC track were fun to talk with!

"Did you feel safe at all times?" – One assessor stated, "Even as a male, it felt eerie in Arthur Park on my own."

In addition to responses highlighted as direct quotes in italics, some assessors noted they had challenges specifically with unpleasant sounds from large trucks, tractor trailers, and traffic in general.

### **Arts & Culture – Millington Highlights**

- Music in Millington
  - · Strong attendance, family-friendly vibe,
  - · Memorable atmosphere
- M-15 "Shop Hop" Event
  - Strong participation, enthusiasm from business owners
- Museum and Library are Cultural Anchors
  - Museum praised for passion Library & seasonal festivals
- Unique Experiences
  - Limitless RC







### **Post-Visit Reflections:**

# What Visitors Will Remember About Millington After Six Months?

- Location & Proximity to Destinations (Frankenmuth, etc.)
- Antiques & Unique Finds
  - Was a highlight for several visitors and added personal value
- Historical Museum & Human
  Connection
  - The Millington—Arbela Historical Museum left a deep impression
- Recreation & Outdoor Experiences
  - Southern Links Trailway and disc golf course stood out
  - The Limitless RC Track was a surprise and memorable

- Friendly People
  - Many will remember the warm, personal interactions that made the visit feel inviting
- Food & Regional Appeal
  - · Mexican food and cinnamon rolls

HOME OF THE CARDINA

- Opportunities to connect with other small towns in Thumb
- · The Cardinal theme!





# 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.



# K Community Pride & Infrastructure

- Strong local pride in schools and businesses (Red/Cardinals)
- Library supports community programming
- Clean, safe, and welcoming environment

# Strategic Location

- · Proximity to Flint, Saginaw, Detroit
- · Near Birch Run and Frankenmuth
- Positioned along M-15 (antiques, travel flow)

### Recreational Assets

- Southern Links Trailway for biking/walking
- · Latham Park & Disc Golf Course

# Local Food & Appeal

- Known for cinnamon rolls, Mexican food
- Affordable and down-to-earth dining

# Events & Cultural Opportunities

- Hosts concerts, festivals, car shows
- Untapped potential for creative tourism



# Challenges

- - Small town size and limited business hours
  - Few standout features to attract passersby
  - Easy to drive through without reason to stop
- Outdoor Recreation Variety
  - No visible trail access or diverse recreation
  - Underdeveloped trails, Limited infrastructure for outdoor tourism/recreation

- Marie Downtown Experience
  - Lack of crosswalks hinder a walkable downtown
  - Lacks coffee shops, retail, outdoor dining or "anchor" gathering spots
  - · Sparse amenities along Millington Road
- Marketing & Tourism Infrastructure
  - Lack cohesive marketing or branding strategy
    - · (in development)
  - No lodging for overnight visitors
  - · Limited dining variety

# Opportunities

# Millington Tourism and Downtown Development Summary

- **Activating Downtown with Enhanced Infrastructure** 1.
- **Build Regional Tourism Partnerships** 2.
- 3. Leverage Art, Culture, Heritage for Creative Spaces





# 1. Activating Downtown with Enhanced Infrastructure

#### Enhancements for safety, ambiance, and engagement

- More prominent signage to SLT in Millington with QR codes to info
- More prominent, event-specific signage and/or new kiosk
- Add benches, flowerpots, and other visual elements
- Improve landscaping to create a more inviting aesthetic
- Launch pop-up retail & seasonal storefront activations
- Repaint and improve pedestrian crosswalks
- Install clear signage for safety and events
- Enhance more visible crosswalks
- Activate space behind museum







### 2. Build Regional Connectivity via Tourism Partnerships

- Create/Explore forming a regional Thumb brand as "Visit the Rolling Hills of MI"
- Create 1–3 day visitor itineraries using shared assets like trails and events with other communities.
- Expand the Southern Links Trailway to connect more communities with QR codes in place
- Attract tourists/visitors from Birch Run/Frankenmuth with heritage to differentiate from larger attractions
- Attract RC track visitors to downtown via events











# 3. Leverage Art, Culture, Heritage for Creative Spaces

### Expand Public Art/Displays & Community Events

- Use vacant storefronts for painted windows or rotating art exhibits.
- Add street-level art like decorated benches or crosswalks.
- Is there a history with the mills/silos to leverage?
- Install murals on buildings or silos.







# 3. Leverage Art, Culture, Heritage for Creative Spaces

### Enhance Community Identity & Branding

- Develop a clear cultural theme around Millington's historical roots and rural charm by adding interpretive signage telling stories.
- Build on partnerships with local artisans and shops like Quilted Hearts Quilting to offer workshops or public demos.
- Incorporate the Cardinal symbol in public art and more signage.
- Use the appealing village logo more prominently.
- What about painting the town red?







### Assets Visited and Experienced

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 Village of Millington for more information. Orange stars indicate which assets would inspire assessors to return to the community.



# Millington Assets Visited - Points of Interest

- Arthur Latham Park
- Dean (Jody) Memorial Park
- Depot Parking Lot
- Disc Golf Course
- Friday Night Car Cruise
- Hampton Inn Birch Run
- Library / Millington Arbela District Library
- Local Park
- Millington Elementary School Playground
- Millington Info Board
- Millington-Arbela Historical Society
- Municipal Office
- Murphy Lake "Trail" / State Game Area

- Music in Millington
- Playground at Lutheran School
- Playground at Millington Schools
- Postcard Cabins The Thumb Southern Lakes Trailhead
- Southern Links Trailway



### Shopping Destinations

- A Wilderness Treasures Experience
- Antiques in the Village
- Cozy Cottage Resale
- **Delightful Discoveries**
- Dollar General
- McDaniel Farm and Greenhouse
- Memories and More Flea Market
- MibbeCakes Creations
  - Mike's Antiques & Old Goodies
- Millington Pharmacy
- Quilted Hearts Quilting
- Limitless RC Track
- Resale Store Downtown
- Self-Serve Lumber & Home Center
- Speedway Gas Station
- Weathered Windmill
- Local Shirt Shop

# Eating & Drinking

- Asilynot Coffee
  - Benny's Bierhalle
- Cardinal Nest Pizza
- Curly Cone
  - Don Felipe
- McPherson Family
  - Restaurant
  - Millington Inn
  - Worth's Market





# Millington's FIT Community Leadership Team

Andrew Selich	President/DDA/PC
Kelly Shreve	Council/Park Board
Gailan Reinert	DDA Chairperson
<ul> <li>Dawn Pavelka</li> </ul>	DDA
<ul> <li>Troy Bonadurer</li> </ul>	Chamber/PC
Rachel Millington	School Board
<ul><li>Lennox Watkins</li></ul>	Youth representative
<ul> <li>Kaylene Long</li> </ul>	Village Clerk

Funding support for this FIT assessment was provided by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation as a benefit of Village of Millington's status as a certified Redevelopment Ready Community.



### **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.
  - O 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 <a href="https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs">https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs</a>
- 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 <a href="http://www.sblc-mi.org/michigan-sugar-trails.html">http://www.sblc-mi.org/michigan-sugar-trails.html</a>)
- 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.

• <a href="https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism">https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism</a> 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, ecotourism and/or cultural/heritage tourism.

#### Learn more

Learn more about MSU Extension tourism programs by visiting <a href="http://msue.anr.msu.edu/topic/info/tourism">http://msue.anr.msu.edu/topic/info/tourism</a>.



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