



First Impressions: Assessing Your Community for Tourism



First Impressions Tourism Summary Report Cass City, Michigan January 2019

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I. Introduction

The First Impressions program was developed in 1991 by University of Wisconsin – Extension to help communities learn about their existing strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of first-time visitors. The program has been used to help communities across the U.S. and Canada inform economic initiatives or further develop community goals. Michigan State University Extension has adapted this program, adding a tourism focus to meet the needs of Michigan communities. MSU Extension’s First Impressions: Tourism Assessments program, or FIT, is unique to Michigan.

This summary report is based on the observations of five visitors or “assessors,” who were given stipends for participating. Before beginning an unannounced visit to Cass City, assessors conducted online research about the destination. This research helped them plan and shape their visits based on personal interests and activities in the community. Each person traveled individually to Cass City between August 24 and October 25, 2018.

The assessors recorded their experiences in conducting visitor research, maneuvering through and around Cass City, and visiting stores, restaurants, outdoor spaces and additional tourism-related sites. Each assessor completed a community characteristics assessment focused on his or her first and lasting impressions of the community, including its downtown and residential areas and its tourism assets, and the online information available about the community. The assessment results and photographs of the community were downloaded into the Qualtrics data management program and used in writing this report and developing a public presentation.

Key findings were presented at a public forum on January 23, 2019. A copy of the electronic slide presentation used during that forum and the Qualtrics data accompany this report.

II. Visitor Profile

Of the five assessors who visited Cass City, three identified as female and two as male. All five assessors noted they spent between 1 and 4 hours researching the community online before visiting. All but one assessor visited during September and October. Three of the five assessors visited on a Tuesday, one on a Thursday and one on a Sunday. Three of the assessors belonged to Generation X, and two identified as baby boomers. Two of the five assessors stayed overnight in either Cass City or nearby Bad Axe, and three made day trips. Three visited Cass City alone, one visited with three or more family members, and one brought his or her spouse or partner. Some assessors identified government and public policy as their professional backgrounds while others identified urban and regional planning, tourism and community vitality, and community food systems as fundamentals to their professional roles.

Key Findings

The key findings outlined in this section reflect the general structure of the assessment tool used by the assessors before, during and after their visits.

Cass City Assets

Cass City has intriguing and hidden assets with the potential to draw visitors to the area, including the Cass River, beautiful public parks near downtown, a medical complex supporting a large workforce, a farmers market, and several historical and sporting assets. Others include the city’s proximity to the Octagon Barn in Michigan’s Thumb area, the Sanilac Petroglyphs, and nearby farming communities. The assets and experiences identified by the five assessors can serve as a base that Cass City can capitalize on and use to strengthen its image and assets with visitors and potential residents.



Preassessments

To foster a true tourist experience, assessors were required to conduct online research before visiting Cass City. Identifying highlights in the community they intended to visit or learn more about helped assessors prepare for the in-person tourist experience. Most Cass City assessors found it easy to find appealing web pages with helpful information about local tourism-related amenities and activities. The Cass City Chamber of Commerce (<http://www.casscitychamber.com/>), Village of Cass City (<http://casscity.org>) and TripAdvisor (<https://www.tripadvisor.com/>) websites were viewed as the most informative.

Visitors found the chamber of commerce and the Cass City websites were the most helpful in finding information about things to do in the city, easiest to navigate and most visually appealing. Several visitors noted the new look of the Cass City website, while all noted that more information should be made available on it.

No assessors were able to find a helpful map on the local websites. Two noted they used Google Maps (<https://www.google.com/maps/>) and another reported only being able to find a zoning map. Assessors also used social media before visiting Cass City. The majority reported using Facebook (<http://facebook.com/>), and several reported using YouTube (<http://youtube.com/>).

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

Visualizing Cass City

Assessors were asked to visualize Cass City before their visits. These visualizations varied widely. One expected a “robust downtown and redevelopment” compared to nearby locations, another expected a “clean, functional downtown with basic amenities” and a third expected the town to be “small and empty.”

Initial Impressions

Assessors were asked to record their impressions of Cass City within 5 minutes of arriving there. One assessor wrote that Cass City seemed to be a “farm town with a strong connection to the families who live in the rural town but who come into the downtown area” for services more than for activities. Another assessor – and the assessor’s 64-year-old mother – reported they felt it was a “depressed area” and assumed there was “little to see and do.” A third assessor said the community “seemed to have ‘significant potential,’ ” but the person was “disappointed and perplexed” at the number of downtown vacancies and shocked at the lack of business information on the outside of buildings. Another noted the “fantastic school and park section on the east end of town that is visible from the main road,” but also said “there was no coffee shop, art venues or interesting shopping that caught my eye.”

Community Information

Eighty percent of visitors found directions to the destination were accurate, but it was hard to find a visitors center with convenient hours and helpful staff. Assessors also noted that it was not easy to locate a community brochure or map that the city lacked information booths and kiosks to help tourists locate attractions and services.





Visitor Motives

Assessors were asked to identify the top three of 15 possible reasons for visiting a tourist destination that might lead people to Cass City. Their choices are listed in order by number of times mentioned.

- Engage in sports (3 mentions)
- In transit to somewhere else (3 mentions)
- Engage in religious activities (2 mentions)
- Visit historical sites (2 mentions)
- Visit friends and family (2 mentions)
- Seek adventure (1 mention)
- Be in nature (1 mention)

Generational Appeal

Most of the assessors indicated that Cass City would appeal to members of Generation X (born 1965-1981) or older. One assessor, who visited Cass City with his or her mother, said the mother enjoyed how the town reminded her of towns she grew up in, and she wanted to stop in the farm store. Another noted the prevalence of service businesses that would appeal to older customers. Another assessor said that the sporting fields were well-planned and well-maintained and could be an option for weekend sporting events for families with children and young people.

Destination and Downtown Attributes

- Safety and security
- Accessibility of destination
- Road conditions
- Historic and heritage attractions
- Authenticity of attractions
- Community involvement
- Activities for children
- Interesting architecture
- Visitor accessibility to attractions
- Cleanliness
- Hospitality and friendliness of residents
- Community involvement

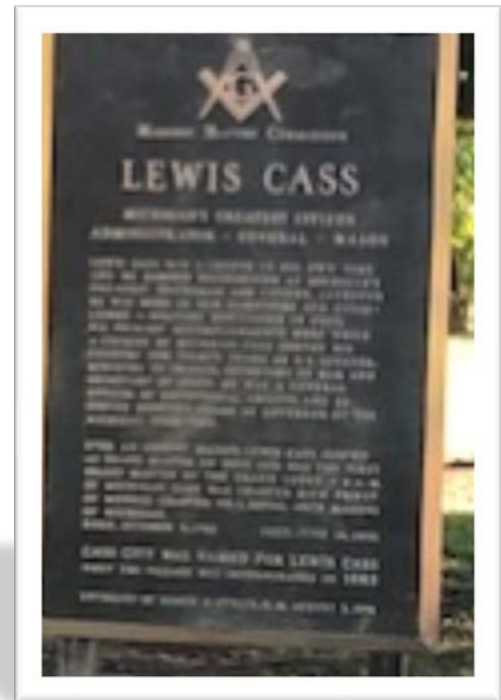


Photo: Northrop 2018



Destination and Downtown Weaknesses

- Variety and quality of accommodations
- Variety and quality of restaurants
- Variety and quality of shopping options
- Dedicated tourist attractions
- Variety of activities
- Adventure-based activities
- Cultural attractions
- Special events
- Directional signage



Assessors noted the lack of places to visit and said that while the municipal park and play areas inside the public library and McDonald’s restaurant were great, the streets “seemed gloomy and the vacant grocery store and silos seemed to be opportunities to make them something more.” Another commented on the “extremely limited dining options” while noting an obvious investment in sports fields, playgrounds and a pool. Another assessor highlighted the deep commitment of community service clubs to supporting pocket parks, signage and historic preservation.

Residential Areas

Assessors were encouraged to visit residential areas to help them develop a better understanding of the community at large so they would be able to give communities an outside perspective on this part of town that is rarely available to them. Assessors praised Cass City’s residential areas, with four rating their overall appearance as good and one as excellent. One assessor noted that the houses near the hospital area were “beautiful and quite frankly out of place when compared to downtown.” Assessors also noted a prevalent disconnect between the prosperous residential area and the struggling downtown. Another wrote that the houses were “well-kept and immaculate for the most part.”

Tourism Assets Visited

Assessors were asked to visit tourist attractions and assets that interested them either from their pre-visit research or that they discovered after arriving. These assets included lodging, restaurants, shops, parks, trails, and other locations or businesses. Assessors reviewed each asset they visited. The reviews are included in the Qualtrics data report and shared with Cass City leaders.

The Cass City assets that assessors visited most were a municipal park, a walking trail, Gilligan’s, the Octagon Barn, the public library, and a pharmacy. Assessors noted several places that would bring them back on return visits. Two mentioned the Octagon Barn, while others mentioned the snowmobile park and golf courses, the Red Market and the Cass River.





Waterfront Community Assessments

Assessors were asked about their first impressions of Cass City's water access. Assessors found this area of the assessment difficult because the Cass River was hard to find and local knowledge of its location was limited.

"I believe access to the Cass River is one of the potential attractions that could and should be explored for potential tourism attraction."

Lasting Impressions

The assessors identified their **most positive experiences** while visiting Cass City:

- The Octagonal Barn Agricultural Museum north of town were mentioned by two assessors.
- The Cass City library as mentioned by two assessors.
- Seeing prosperous hospital area and municipal park, including a disc golf course with sponsorships
- Real potential from a tourism perspective relative to historical context and the river

The assessors also identified their **most negative experiences** while visiting Cass City:

- Lack of shops and attractions.
- Lack of food options appropriate for young children in the evening.
- Business storefronts that need development and a lack of event promotion on the city website.
- Seeming lack of interest in river access and lack of knowledge about two historically noteworthy residents (Lewis Cass and Brewster Shaw).

Strengths and Challenges

Strengths

- Strong rural character and beautiful facades on downtown buildings
- Municipal park, petroglyphs and the Octagon Barn
- The Cass River, local history and public golf courses
- Prosperous medical community in close proximity to downtown and the surrounding community.

Challenges

- Lack of investment and abandonment of the area and the high number of downtown vacancies
- Lack of signage related to parks, natural resources, historical sites and the Octagon Barn
- Lack of attractions,
- Too much parking taking up valuable space and
- Very little or no local cultural identity



Photo: Northrop 2018



Local Involvement

Assessors were asked if they had been able to identify local organizations involved with tourism development. Responses varied, with one assessor unable to identify any local groups involved in local tourism and others mentioning the public library, Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, Lions Club, local schools and businesses sponsoring the disc golf course.

Community Branding

After visiting the destination and reflecting on their assessments, assessors provided single-sentence descriptions of Cass City as a tourist destination. One assessor described Cass City as a “rural American town with a prosperous peripheral with a dead downtown core.”

Assessors were asked to list two items that should appear on a graphic logo for the destination. One assessor offered, “recreational small craft boating and a logo of the space shuttle.” Another suggested the Cass River and Cass City Parks could serve as a logo. One assessor recommended “an historic downtown building façade done in the style of a quilt square.”

“A rural town in nature.”
“A pleasant agricultural community with more potential than it might realize.”

Using Senses and Safety

Most assessors didn’t note any unpleasant smells or sounds while in Cass City. Of the five assessors, one noted an unpleasant smell just outside the city near a dairy farm but felt that was to be expected. Another assessor mentioned the difficulty of holding a conversation outside because of regular semi-truck traffic.

Two assessors reported feeling safe and secure at all times while three noted cause for concern. One reported that the walking paths were not inviting and felt more like they were walking in a resident’s backyard. Another noted that the amount of speeding truck and small-car traffic felt like a threat. One assessor noted that they felt secure with their mother and daughter after seeing the police cruise by while they were playing in the park.

III. Suggestions

Assessors provide suggestions to FIT communities and they are grouped into four categories.

Arts and Culture

- Cultural, natural and historic tourist attractions in the vicinity of Cass City will attract visitors and spending . . . the downtown must capture these visitors and their dollars by providing transportation to the attractions and by linking the attractions with downtown events.
- The silos are an opportunity for art development or just paint them.





- Add beautiful murals to the sides of the plain buildings around town.

Businesses

- Building and business owners should be engaged at each step of the way, creating a commitment to improving the downtown because each building and storefront needs to tell a story 24 hours a day on why people should visit and shop there and why someone might rent a space for a business there, too.
- If a store is vacant downtown is there an opportunity to fill it with art somehow or to use it to advertise for other community events?
- The website can still be better by listing other local attractions. The chamber staff didn't suggest staying in Cass City, so I'm assuming safe, nice, family friendly lodging is a need even though I know there is a motel there. (The East Jordan, Michigan, Chamber of Commerce website is a great example.)
- Work with downtown businesses on facade improvements and proper signage that invites people in.
- Recruit interesting shops or pop-up businesses to enhance the downtown experience.
- Be open on Sundays and let that be known – this is when people can do day trips.
- Add a coffee shop downtown near Rotary Park.

Community

- The village council and DDA (Downtown Development Authority) needs to invest in the downtown, creating a vision first to address deficiencies block by block. Then line up funding through public monies, grants and donations to make necessary interior, exterior, parking, sidewalk and roadway improvements.
- Prioritize and strengthen the significant disconnect between the prosperous medical facility and the downtown core only a couple blocks away. (The medical facility is a tremendous asset in and of itself that seems largely disconnected from the struggling downtown.)
- Update the website with all events happening monthly by soliciting students or interns to do the work (if the paid staff members don't have the capacity to take it on).
- Provide some welcoming signage at community entrances and exits, as well as signage directing visitors to historical markers and natural attractions (such as the Cass River).
- Better signage to and inside the wonderful municipal park.
- Better signage and access to existing attractions.
- Begin discussions with local and county officials about the creation of a government services complex just east of town on M-81 that intersects the counties of Huron, Sanilac and Tuscola.



Recreation

- Signage needs to be improved for all of the fun things at the municipal park, including . . .
 - directional arrows, distance to the next attraction, a map and trail maps.



- The older equipment and park amenities in front should be removed because they deter visitors from progressing to the larger and newer park amenities in the back.
- In the municipal park, highlight the disc golf course better, the pool and the public bathrooms.
 - Use the disc course to advantage for events.
 - Create roadside signage highlighting the existence of the course for passersby.
 - Include a map of the course layout. (I couldn't find half the holes while walking it.)
- Leverage the downtown walking trail with the municipal park trails, connect and expand them.
- Better highlight walking trails in the downtown and surrounding area.
- Consider creating a destination location for access to the Cass River for recreational kayaking and canoeing just south of town.
- Consider reviewing and better highlighting the historical significance of past community members like Lewis Cass and Brewster Shaw relative to tourism attractions.



Photos are included to highlight assets assessors felt were overlooked or not marketed adequately by the community.



One assessor noted this business looked fascinating, but it wasn't accessible and unknown to locals.



Assessors wished they could have planned their visits around the Farmers Market, but information about it wasn't available online.

Photos: Northrop 2018



These events were not promoted on Cass City's helpful websites and were only noticeable after walking by a storefront.



Assessors saw these silos and murals as assets for local artwork.

Photos: Northrop 2018

IV. Additional Steps for All FIT Communities

- Consider developing a “Be a Tourist in Your Own Community” event or activity (such as the Alcona County Bus Tour).
- Use the stories of people who have made your community their home to weave a narrative that informs a sense of place and exemplifies what makes the community a great place to live, work, play and visit.
- Update all websites regularly (daily or weekly), ensuring that business hours and other pertinent information (such as “things to do” links) are always accurate.
- Use social media to your advantage by engaging existing groups (such as students and adults) that are promoting the community already.
- Encourage monthly or quarterly business after-hours events at downtown businesses, and create a sense of downtown as a gathering place.
- Continue downtown improvements including sprucing up façades, making parking easy and available, filling vacant storefronts, creating visible business signage, creatively using vacant building window space, using sandwich boards and making other changes where needed.
- Improve marketing by involving downtown businesses, increasing cooperative marketing, using regional guides and Pure Michigan branding, applying for state matching funds through the DDA and using other methods.
- Provide training to business owners and employees on customer service skills and local event and community happenings.
- Explore agritourism as a niche and become involved with the Michigan Agritourism Association (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>).
- Ensure all businesses are aware of and promote events and attractions in your community, including information that makes each place special and meaningful to the tourist.



- Catalog existing funding sources and search out new funding opportunities.
- Search out low-hanging tourism-related projects, picking one or two items that can be accomplished immediately and ensuring their completion.
- Schedule a meeting of the community leadership team, other local leaders, and active and concerned residents of all ages to review this document and discuss opportunities to work together.
- Consult the FIT Community Next Steps manual (provided to the community leadership team).
- Consider exploring the raw data from the FIT Assessment further and identifying parts of the results to take action on. Tap the expertise of MSU Extension leadership and tourism educators to facilitate next steps.

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V. Summary of MSU Extension Tourism Development Programs

The statewide MSU Extension programs listed here are available to guide community decision making around tourism development and implementation.

Understanding Tourism for Michigan Communities

This interactive workshop highlights tourism industry statistics and exposes communities to trends and travelers' interests, as well as a number of niche tourism markets. The UTMC program is specifically designed to promote regional synergies, leadership and tourism product development.

Planning for Tourism

This workshop walks communities through a planning process and uses life-cycle models to explore where communities may be in establishing themselves as tourism destinations. Additional tools will be employed to determine their readiness, identify next steps for action and explore engagement strategies for coalition building within the community.

First Impressions: Assessing Your Community for Tourism

FIT is a comprehensive community assessment conducted by unannounced visitors in a host community positioned to lead development based on the program results. FIT involves developing community leadership, assessing the host community, sharing the results in a community forum open to all, and providing suggestions to drive community action. Overall, FIT helps communities learn about their strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of first-time visitors.

Strengthening Tourism Leadership: Facilitation Tools to Move Community-driven Tourism Forward

This experiential workshop is designed to build and strengthen the skills necessary to lead and facilitate productive community groups. Participants will practice using a variety of facilitation tools and learn techniques and verbal skills necessary to lead group discussions, reach consensus, set outcome-based goals and generate ideas for action.

Custom Tourism Programs

MSU Extension tourism educators are equipped to meet the diverse needs and interests of Michigan communities. Specialized programs are available to communities with a specific interest in agritourism, ecotourism, and cultural and heritage tourism.

Learn More

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

