MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

First Impressions Tourism Assessment

City of Ferrysburg, MI



Executive Summary

September 2026

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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

Assessment Approach & Participant Profile

The Ferrysburg First Impressions Tourism assessment was conducted by a team of five assessors who evaluated the community from the perspective of first-time visitors. The assessment included pre-visit research, an in-person visit, evaluation of tourism assets and visitor experiences, and follow-up assessment of Ferrysburg's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. This report is a general summary of data collected highlighting the team's first impressions of Ferrysburg.

All five assessors conducted research before their visit. Three spent approximately 2–4 hours researching Ferrysburg, one spent 1–2 hours, and one spent more than four hours. Google Maps was used by all five assessors, while Facebook, TripAdvisor, Yelp, and YouTube were also used to evaluate the community and develop a general idea of things to do and offerings.

The assessment visits took place separately between **late May – early July 2026**, with Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday being specifically referenced as the days spent conducting visits. Assessors experienced a variety of Ferrysburg's tourism offerings, including parks, trails, beaches, waterfront areas, local businesses in a perceived downtown, restaurants, and lodging. Some assessors also experienced unique outdoor accommodations such as treehouses and yurts.

The assessment did include overnight experiences. The strongest example was Ottawa Sands/Idema Explorers Camp, where two assessors experienced:

- Treehouse lodging
- Yurts
- Camping

Another assessor stayed at a hotel nearby to Ferrysburg in Spring Lake, while the fourth assessor stayed in a Bed and Breakfast in Grand Haven. The fifth assessor conducted day trip visits to Ferrysburg from the Grand Rapids area.

Participant Profile

The five-person assessment team consisted primarily of **Millennial and Gen X travelers**:

- **3 Gen X assessors — 60%**
- **2 Millennial assessors — 40%**
- No Baby Boomers, Silent Generation, or Gen Z assessors participated.

Most assessors traveled independently:

- **3 traveled alone — 60%**
- **2 traveled with a spouse/partner — 40%**
- In total, Ferrysburg had seven visitors, five of which had responsibilities for the FIT program.
- The team was more representative of independent adult travelers/couples.
- The five-person team are all residents of Michigan and MSU Extension employees.

Although assessors' personal interests had little bearing on the formation of the five-person team, all members had strong interests that aligned with Ferrysburg's primary tourism assets. The team brought a particularly relevant mix of outdoor and tourism interests including **hiking, trail running, mountain biking, leisure biking, paddling, stand-up paddleboarding, beaches, nature, history, food, and travel**.





Ferrysburg Community Overview

Ferrysburg is a scenic waterfront community in the Tri-Cities area, adjacent to Grand Haven and Spring Lake. Surrounded by established tourism destinations, Ferrysburg offers a quieter experience centered on nature, outdoor recreation, and quality of life.

The community's greatest strengths are its exceptional natural and recreational assets, including Lake Michigan, Spring Lake, the Grand River, extensive parks and trails, protected dune ecosystems, beaches, and strong hiking and biking opportunities. Rather than functioning as a traditional tourism destination, Ferrysburg is better positioned as a gateway to outdoor recreation and a base for exploring the surrounding area.

However, visitors experienced Ferrysburg as a collection of individual parks and recreational assets rather than a cohesive destination. The community's tourism offerings can be difficult to discover without advance research, and its limited downtown identity, visitor services, events, wayfinding, and tourism infrastructure make it challenging to encourage visitors to stay longer and spend more locally.

Ferrysburg has significant potential to establish a stronger identity as a West Michigan outdoor recreation destination. Better connecting and promoting its existing assets through branding, wayfinding, visitor amenities, partnerships, and stronger digital marketing could help transform Ferrysburg's natural strengths into a more cohesive and compelling visitor experience.

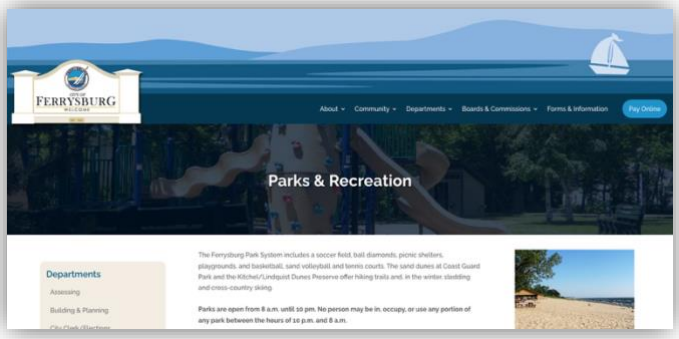
The main themes that emerge

1. **Outdoor recreation is Ferrysburg's primary strength**
   Parks, trails, waterways, beaches, dunes, hiking, and biking consistently define the community's tourism potential.
2. **Ferrysburg lacks a cohesive destination identity**
   Visitors see individual attractions and parks, but not necessarily a unified Ferrysburg experience.
3. **Ferrysburg is overshadowed by neighboring destinations**
   Its location next to Grand Haven and Spring Lake provides tremendous opportunity but also makes it easy for visitors to bypass Ferrysburg.
4. **The challenge is connection, not necessarily a lack of assets**
   Ferrysburg already has many high-quality resources. The bigger issue is connecting, packaging, interpreting, and promoting them as a destination.
5. **Visitor infrastructure and marketing need improvement**
   Wayfinding, amenities, events, downtown attractions, and digital marketing could make existing assets easier to find and more likely to generate longer stays and local spending.

Bottom line: Ferrysburg doesn't necessarily need to become a traditional tourism town. Its strongest opportunity is to embrace what makes it different—an accessible, quieter outdoor recreation destination—and build a stronger identity around the exceptional natural assets it already possesses.

Pre-Visit:

Initial Visitor Impressions



Ferrysburg.org

Prior to visiting, online research suggested:

- Small lakeside community
- Limited downtown attractions
- Exceptional Park system
- Outdoor recreation focus
- Few lodging and dining options
- Difficult to understand how the community was organized geographically

Once visiting, many of those impressions proved accurate. The parks exceeded expectations, while the downtown offered fewer visitor experiences than anticipated.

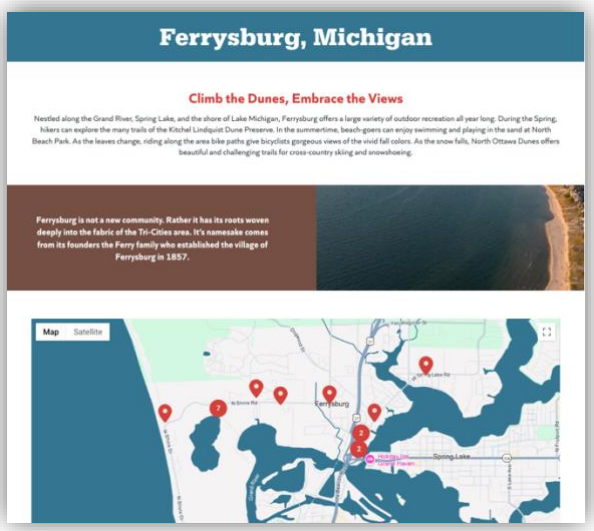
Digital Presence Assessment

Strengths

Visitors generally found accurate information through regional tourism websites.

Positive observations included:

- Strong information on parks and recreation
- Good mapping of outdoor assets
- Attractive photography
- Helpful trail information
- Quality regional promotion through Grand Haven tourism resources
- Pure Michigan provided additional exposure



visitgrandhaven.com/communities/ferrysburg/

Research helped visitors:

- Plan outdoor activities
- Locate parks
- Build realistic expectations
- Understand available recreation

Weaknesses

Ferrysburg's digital presence does not fully communicate the overall visitor experience.

Common observations included:

- Limited destination storytelling
- Little emphasis on downtown experiences
- Lodging information difficult to locate
- Few videos showing actual visitor experiences
- Community identity not immediately apparent
- Difficult to visualize how parks connect together

Visitors often had to search multiple websites before understanding what Ferrysburg offered.

Most Helpful Website(s) –

- The Visit Grand Haven website on Ferrysburg was ranked as most helpful.
- City of Ferrysburg website was also mentioned as helpful but did not have adequate information to plan a visit.

The Visit:

What Ferrysburg Does Well

1. Exceptional Natural and Outdoor Recreation Assets

The strongest aspect of Ferrysburg is its access to nature and outdoor recreation. Assessors particularly enjoyed hiking, trail running, biking, beaches, and the scenic natural environment. All five assessors identified being in nature as a reason visitors come to the destination, while four identified outdoor recreation such as hiking and mountain biking (*See page 9- Visitor Motives*).

The most highly rated assets included:

- Ottawa Sands County Park
- North Ottawa Dunes
- North Beach Park
- Coast Guard Park
- Bike trails
- Lake Michigan beaches
- Ottawa Sands and the Idema Explorers Camp



One of the clearest strengths is the connection between Ferrysburg's parks and regional trail system. Assessors noted that visitors can bike between Ferrysburg, Grand Haven, Spring Lake, and nearby recreation areas, but these opportunities were not evident to assessors prior to visiting. Only after being in Ferrysburg for an extended period did, it become apparent to assessors these cycling opportunities exist.

2. High-Quality Parks

Ferrysburg benefits from an impressive collection of local, county, and nearby state recreation resources.

Ottawa Sands and North Ottawa Dunes received especially strong praise for their trails, scenery, accessibility, and unique experiences. Coast Guard Park was also viewed as a well-maintained, multi-use community park.



These parks represent one of Ferrysburg's greatest tourism opportunities.

3. A Few Strong Local Businesses

Although the number of businesses is limited, several received very positive reviews.

Pine Street Cafe was repeatedly identified as a memorable experience because of its food, service, atmosphere, and location. CC's Market was also viewed as a unique shopping and food experience, with local products, coffee, smoothies, ice cream, and specialty foods.

These businesses could become important components of visitor itineraries.

4. Clean, Safe and Friendly Community

All five assessors said they felt welcomed in Ferrysburg. Hospitality and customer service were rated positively, while cleanliness and road conditions received particularly strong scores.

The community was generally described as quiet, clean, attractive, and comfortable.





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. High scores indicate where the host community is strongest, whereas low scores indicate weaknesses. These scores identify strengths and weaknesses in the host community's downtown/business area.

Parking is secure	12
Parking charges are reasonable	12
Parking is centrally located	11
Walking sidewalks are well maintained	10
Business information is displayed on the exterior of businesses	9
There are walker/biker friendly signs	8
There are areas of green space	8
The grounds have been landscaped with flowers, trees, shrubs, and bushes	8
Inviting signs are displayed on the exterior of businesses	8
Additional walking paths are available	8
There is pedestrian traffic (foot and bike)	7
Vehicle traffic is managed to encourage pedestrian movement, via foot or bike	6
There is a gateway point to enter/leave town (piece of art, mural, sign, etc.)	6
Bike lanes exist on roadways	6
The downtown business area is handicapped accessible	5
There is a mix of ages	3
This is a welcoming downtown	1
There is a mix of ethnic groups	1
The main downtown business area is a major tourists draw for the area	1
The main downtown business area feels distinct or special	0



Visitor Motives – Assessors were presented with a list of 15 motives and then asked to select the top three motives someone might have to visit this community and surrounding area.

Be in nature	5
Outdoor recreation (MTB, Hiking, etc.)	4
In transit to somewhere else	3
Other	2
Visit friends and family	2
Get away from people	1
Relax	1
Other	0
Engage in religious activities	0
Engage in business activities	0
Get entertained/for entertainment	0
Agritourism	0
Shop	0
Experience a unique culture	0
Visit historical sites	0





**Other: Work and Beach

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.

Nature-based activities	13
Hospitality and friendliness of residents	12
Customer service	12
Safety and security	10
Cleanliness	10
Road conditions	10
Visitor accessibility to attractions	9
Pedestrian travel infrastructure	9
Authenticity of attractions	9
Accessibility of destination	7
Activities for children	7
Well-marked roads/attractions	7
Value for money in tourism experiences	7
Communication infrastructure	7
Community involvement	7
Adventure-based activities	6
Directional signage	5
Variety and quality of accommodations	4
Interesting architecture	4
Well known landmarks	4
Dedicated tourism attractions	3
Conveniently located	3
Variety of activities to do	3
Special events	3
Shopping facilities	1
Variety and quality of restaurants	1
Historic/heritage attractions	1
Variety and quality of shopping options	0
Cultural attractions	0





Post-Visit:

Challenges

As part of a FIT assessment, participating communities receive first-time visitor identified challenges, strengths and opportunities.

1. Ferrysburg Lacks a Strong Downtown Identity

This was the most consistent concern throughout the assessment.

Assessors repeatedly commented that they could not easily identify a traditional downtown or a place where visitors could simply park, walk around, shop, eat, and spend several hours.

The downtown was described as:

- Small and difficult to identify
- Lacking a strong sense of place
- Dominated by traffic, private marinas, and industrial uses
- Easy to drive through without stopping
- Lacking a strong visitor "pull"

All five assessors disagreed that the downtown felt distinct or special, and four disagreed that it was a major tourist draw (See page 8 results).

One assessor summarized the issue particularly well: visitors need a place to "land" and “wander”, and Ferrysburg currently does not have that type of gathering area. One assessor noted, “If I had to choose one place that might serve this purpose, I would say Ferrysburg Park currently but that is stretching it.”

2. Limited Hospitality and Visitor Services

Ferrysburg has many recreational assets but comparatively few businesses that support a visitor economy

Assessors identified limited:

- Restaurants
- Shopping
- Lodging
- Indoor activities
- Evening activities
- Events
- Visitor-oriented services

Restaurant variety and shopping options were among the lowest-rated destination attributes (See page 10).

The result is that visitors may come to Ferrysburg for a park or trail but then leave the community to eat, shop, stay overnight, or find additional entertainment.

3. Waterfront Access Is Underdeveloped

Ferrysburg's location on the water is one of its greatest opportunities, but the downtown appears restricted from taking full advantage of it.

Assessors noted that private marinas and industrial buildings limit views and access to the waterfront. William Ferry Park provides some public access, but there are few opportunities for visitors to actively experience the water from the downtown area.



Ideas included:

- A fishing pier
- Kayak or canoe launch
- Paddleboard access
- Kayak/SUP rentals
- (Extending) Waterfront trails
- Expanded Park space
- A watersports outfitter

4. Traffic, Wayfinding and Accessibility

Getting into Ferrysburg can be confusing and, at times, uncomfortable for visitors.



Assessors specifically mentioned:

- Difficult (and dangerous) highway exits
- High-speed and heavy truck traffic
- Confusing intersections
- Limited sense of arrival into Ferrysburg
- Apprehension when crossing roads on foot
- Difficulty identifying community boundaries

While the city has made positive investments in signage and pedestrian infrastructure, the overall arrival experience does not consistently communicate that visitors have reached Ferrysburg.

5. Ferrysburg Is Difficult to Discover Online

The digital presence was considered helpful but incomplete.

The **Visit Grand Haven Ferrysburg page** was frequently identified as the most useful tourism resource because it provided information, photos, maps, and park information. **The City of Ferrysburg website** was praised for its historical information but was viewed as being more focused on residents than visitors.

The assessment found that pre-visit research was necessary and generally helpful for setting expectations and identifying (some) recreational opportunities. Some digital gaps made it difficult for visitors to understand Ferrysburg full range of offerings.

Digital gaps included:

- Lodging information
- Visitor itineraries/suggestions
- Waterfront opportunities
- Up-to-date Events
- Trail and cycling information (maps, distances, routes, etc.)
- Photos and videos showing people experiencing Ferrysburg
- Clear connections between Ferrysburg and Grand Haven tourism resources

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Ferrysburg's Biggest Opportunity

Build on Outdoor Recreation



The assessment strongly suggests that Ferrysburg does not need to create a completely new tourism identity. Instead, it should build around what it already has.

A strong positioning opportunity is:

Ferrysburg as a quieter outdoor recreation destination within the Grand Haven area. These assets give Ferrysburg a legitimate tourism story.

- Hiking
- Trail running
- Biking
- Beaches
- Dunes
- Water
- Parks
- Wildlife and nature
- Unique outdoor lodging

The community could particularly appeal to visitors interested in active outdoor experiences, including hikers, runners, cyclists, paddlers, families, and nature lovers.

More Opportunities

Opportunities, as they are presented here by first-time visitors, serve as suggestions to foster and support dialogue in and with the host community.

Priority 1: Create a Stronger Visitor Identity

Develop a clear story for Ferrysburg that connects its lakes, dunes, trails, parks, and quiet outdoor character.

Potential themes identified by assessors included:

- "City of Lakes and Dunes"
- "The Quiet Side"
- “The City Under the Bridge”
- "The Grand Haven Area's Wild Side"
- A destination centered around bikes, trails, water, and nature

The goal should be to give visitors a reason to intentionally choose Ferrysburg rather than simply passing through.

Priority 2: Improve the Waterfront Experience

Look for realistic ways to reconnect the downtown with the water.

Potential improvements include:

- Expanding William Ferry Park
- Creating a fishing pier
- Developing kayak/SUP access
- Adding waterfront trails
- Exploring kayak, bike, or paddleboard rentals
- Adding food trucks or seasonal businesses
- Creating gathering spaces near the water



Priority 3: Promote Ferrysburg's Parks and Trails

The parks are already a major asset, but they need to be marketed more assertively.

Create simple visitor itineraries such as:



- **Hike + Brunch**
  North Ottawa Dunes → Pine Street Cafe
- **Bike + Beach**
  Ferrysburg trails → North Beach Park
- **Parks + Paddle**
  Ottawa Sands → water recreation → local food
- **Outdoor Weekend**
  Trail experience → unique lodging → local restaurant

These itineraries could turn individual assets into a complete visitor experience.

Priority 4: Downtown Development and Events



Redevelopment and events could help create the downtown activity that assessors felt was missing. Extensive unused space at the Ferrysburg municipal building was suggested as a location to start with.

Potential event ideas include:

- Farmers and/or artisan markets
- Food truck and music in the parks
- Outdoor recreation events
- Heritage or seasonal festivals

Events could provide an immediate reason for residents of Grand Haven, Spring Lake, and surrounding communities to visit Ferrysburg.



Downtown development ideas include:

- Consider form-based codes to build a cohesive downtown when buildings become vacant.
- Allow for more home-based businesses or other commercial activity extending from Pine Street Café to Tri-City Oil gas station.

Priority 5: Strengthen Tourism Partnerships

- Ferrysburg should continue building its relationship with the Grand Haven Area CVB, Ottawa County Parks, and other regional tourism organizations.
- The assessment repeatedly identified regional collaboration as an important opportunity, particularly because Ferrysburg benefits from being located next to an established tourism destination.
- Ferrysburg does not necessarily need to compete with Grand Haven. It can position itself as a different experience within the same regional destination.

Priority 6: Make History Visible

Ferrysburg has more history than visitors realize.

The city website contains historical information, but assessors felt that history was largely invisible during their actual physical visit. What is Ferrysburg's history?

Opportunities include:

- Historical markers
- Interpretive signs
- William Ferry storytelling
- Coast Guard history
- Maritime heritage
- Indigenous history and cultural interpretation
- Historic walking routes
- Exhibits at parks and gathering spaces

Overall Assessment

Ferrysburg's greatest challenge is not a lack of assets. It is a lack of connection between those assets and a cohesive visitor experience.

The community has:

- *Excellent natural resources + strong parks + regional trail connections + Lake Michigan access + quality local businesses + proximity to Grand Haven*

but currently lacks:

- *A recognizable downtown + strong tourism identity + visitor services + events + easy-to-find information + strong waterfront connection.*

The assessment team saw Ferrysburg as a community with significant untapped potential. Most importantly, the community has an opportunity is to become the quieter, more nature-focused, outdoor-oriented side of the Grand Haven area.

Bottom Line

Ferrysburg has the natural assets to attract visitors. The next step is creating more reasons for those visitors to stop, stay, explore, eat, participate, and return.

The highest-impact strategy would be to focus on outdoor recreation, waterfront experiences, events, stronger digital marketing, historical storytelling, and partnerships with the Grand Haven tourism community.

The biggest takeaway is that **Ferrysburg's problem is not a lack of quality assets—it is the weak connection between those assets and a recognizable, visitor-oriented destination experience.**

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 Ferrysburg for more information. Orange stars indicate which assets would inspire assessors to return to the host community and/or surrounding area.





City of Ferrysburg - FIT Community Leadership Team

- Craig Bessinger, City Manager
- Garry Post, Ferrysburg Planning Commission Chair
- John Cole, Leppinks Food Center, Owner
- Marci Cisneros, Grand Haven Area Visitors Center, President
- Mark Allen, Grand Haven, Spring Lake, Ferrysburg Chamber President
- Richard Carlson, Ferrysburg Mayor

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

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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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