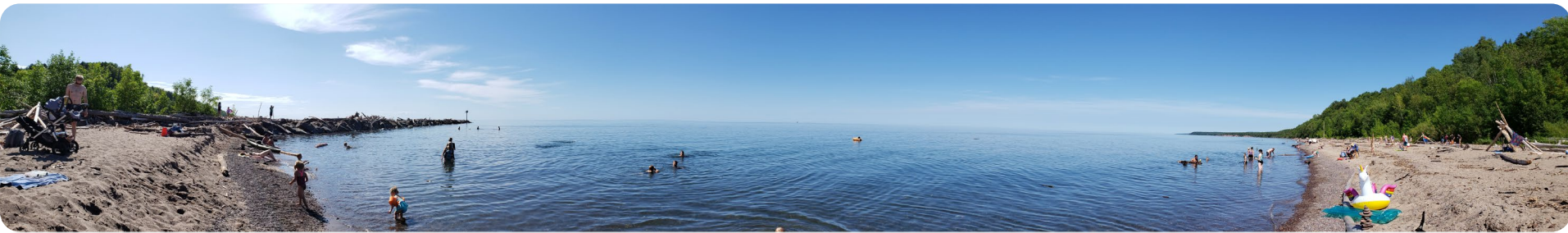
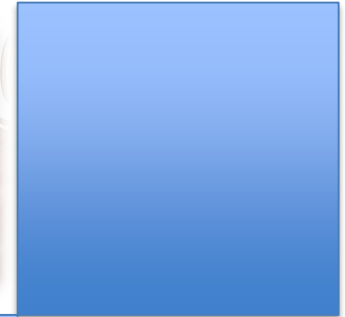


First Impressions: Tourism Assessment (FIT)

A Community Report Forum
for
Ironwood, MI
October 21st, 2019



MSU Extension Community, Food & Environment Institute

- Community Food Systems
- Entrepreneurship
- Finance & Homeownership
- Government/Public Policy
- Land Use
- Leadership
- Natural Resource Management
- **Tourism**



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“AND
JUSTICE
FOR ALL”



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Sponsors

City of Ironwood

Travel Ironwood

Ironwood Chamber of Commerce

Western Upper Peninsula Planning & Development Region

Western Upper Peninsula Regional Prosperity Initiative

MSU Extension 4-H



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FIRST IMPRESSIONS:

Assessing your community for tourism
(FIT)

msue.anr.msu.edu

- Welcome
- Program Overview
- FIT 2019 – Ironwood
 - Findings
 - Break
 - Results
- Questions and Answers
- Next Steps
- Conclusions



Program Overview





FI Adaptations - Modifications



Geographies

County Fairs

Urban Neighborhoods

Main Streets

Business Corridors

Tourism

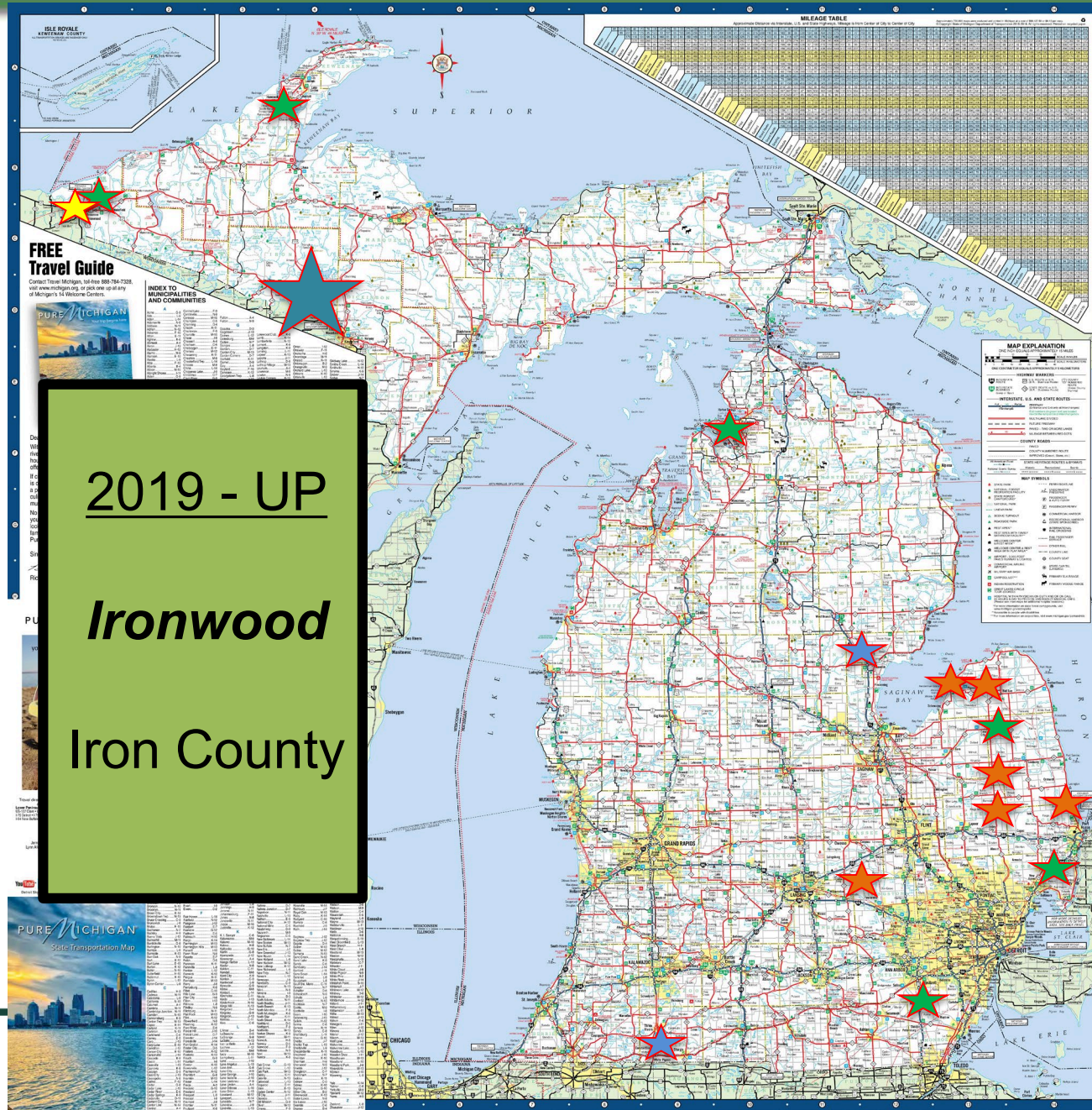
Audiences

Youth Impressions

Emerging leaders

FIT 2018-2019

- Houghton
- Bessemer
- St. Clair
- Laingsburg
- East Jordan
- Dundee
- Cass City
- Marine City



2019 - UP

Ironwood

Iron County

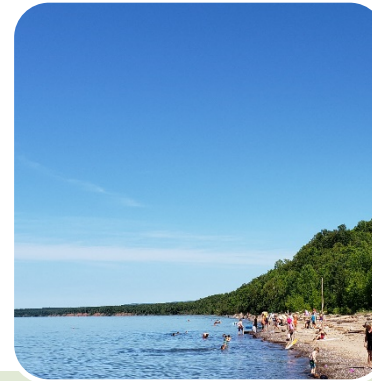


FIRST IMPRESSIONS:

Assessing your community for tourism (FIT)



msue.anr.msu.edu



What is First Impressions?

A comprehensive community assessment designed to help communities see themselves through the eyes of first-time visitors.

Program Objectives

- Create excitement around grassroots community development
- Form the basis for future development

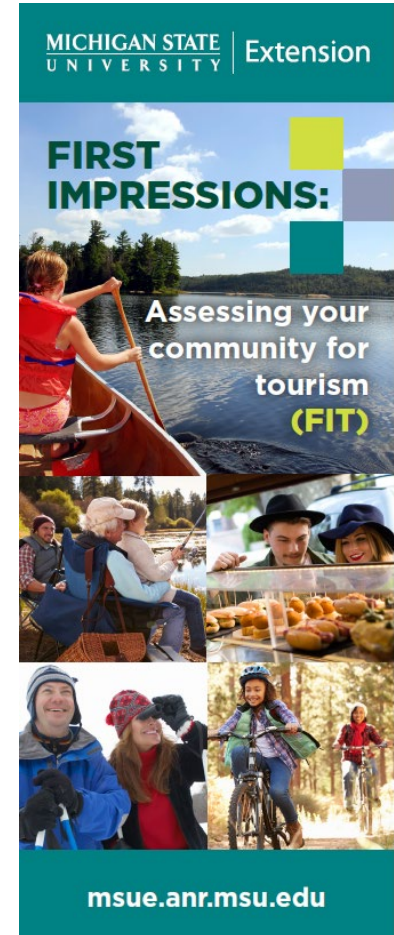
Communities Will

- Identify assets and opportunities
- Develop leadership capacity
- Identify action items and integrate them into community plans

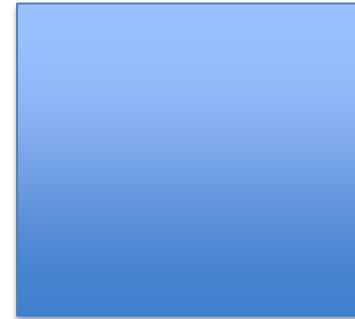


1. A Community Leadership Team (CLT) is formed.
2. CLT applies for FIT.
3. MSU Extension conducts a FIT orientation and outlines next steps with the CLT.
4. A team of FIT visitors visit the community unannounced
5. Internal meetings, results summarized.
6. CLT organizes a Community Report Forum and summary of results are shared in open forum.
7. A written report is provided to the CLT.
8. CLT takes the lead with community and decides to act.
9. MSU Extension conducts follow-up with CLT to gauge impacts and offer further assistance.

- Not *how* to become a tourist town, but what do tourists *think* of your town...
- ...*because every* community gets visitors.
- Will they return or not and what for?
- Information, not criticism
- Comments & questions at the end
- Taking our evaluation!



FIT 2019 – Ironwood Assessment Results



- **5 Visitors**

- 3 male, 2 female
- Age range:
 - 2 - Millennial
 - 2 - Gen X
 - 1 - Baby Boomer

- All Michigan residents
- All MSU Extension

- Majority were first time visitors to Ironwood



- **Backgrounds In:**
 - Arts and Culture
 - Government
 - Community Development
 - Planning
 - Natural Resources
 - Business
 - Tourism Development



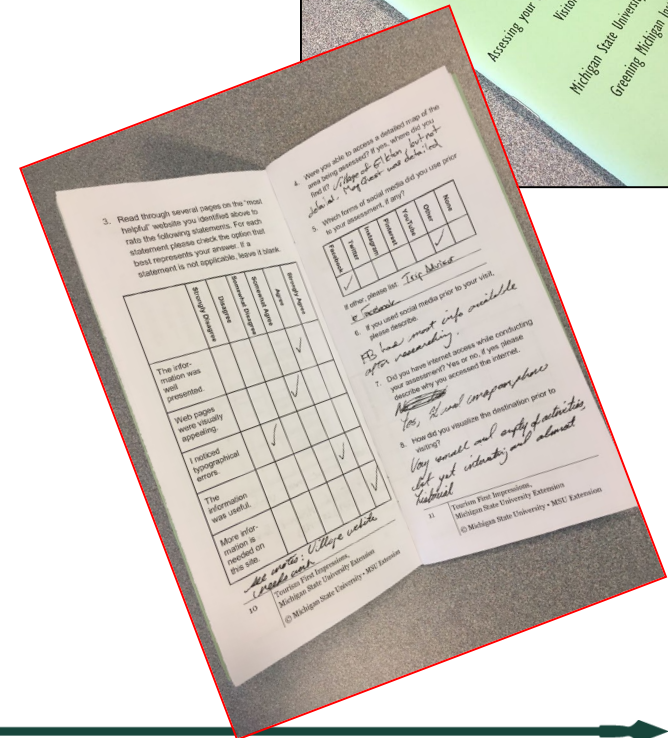
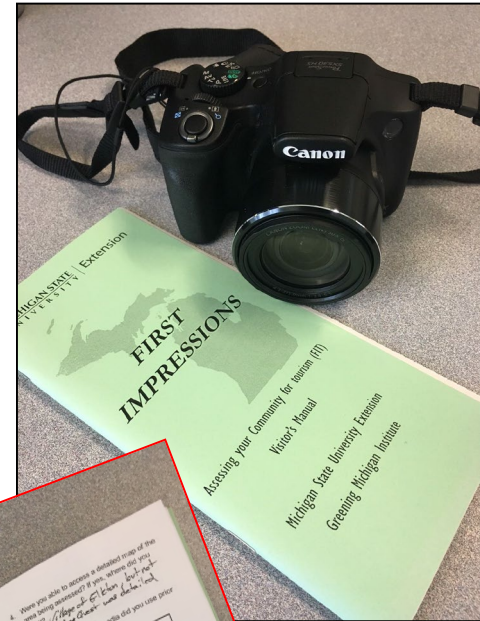
- **When?**
 - Mid-July to Early-September
 - Weekdays and weekends
 - All stayed overnight
 - All spent at least 24 hours in the community
- **With who?**
 - 1 with spouse/partner
 - 2 with family
 - 2 alone



- Conduct pre-assessment research
- Spend 6-24 hours in community
- Complete written assessment
- Submit 10 best photos
- Enter data/reflections online within 48 hours
- Provide input during a debrief and reports



1. Prior to the Visit
2. Initial “5 minute” Impression
3. Community Information
4. Visitor Motives
5. Destination Evaluation
6. Residential Areas
7. Tourism Assets Visited
 1. **Businesses not named in public**
8. Main Downtown Business Area
9. Waterfront
10. Using Senses and Safety
11. Lasting Impressions
12. Trip Reflections



1. Prior to the Visit

- Online research for 2+ hours
- Used both desktop and mobile devices.
- Social Media
- Searched for:
 - Things to do
 - Places to go
 - Events taking place
 - Shape experience/visits



1. Prior to the Visit

IRONWOOD
AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

WEBCAM

ABOUT CHAMBER VISITORS EXPLORE RESOURCES EVENTS CONTACT

WELCOME TO
IRONWOOD

VISITORS GUIDE

IRONWOOD
MICHIGAN | Find Your North

Home Live Work Play Visit Events Government Business Our Plan

Downtown Ironwood, Michigan

tripadvisor

Post Trips Inbox Search

Ironwood


Hotels Things to do Restaurants Flights Vacation Rentals Rental Cars More

1. Prior to the Visit

Which website(s) were the most helpful?

“The City and Chamber websites were both excellent, well laid out and information dense with many useful links. I'd give the edge to the City site as it was a bit more intuitive and the Chamber site had some dead links, but Ironwood is a case study in doing web presence right for a community. The app is very good, easy to use and has lots of info, though I didn't use it during my actual visit.”

“Chamber: made use of the visitors (destination) guide, but found the webpages under 'Visitors' and 'Explore' most useful with the descriptions of places to go, things to do. City: the 'Play' page of the city's website is a great - that's where I found the listing of city parks and determined how I could access the Montreal River.”



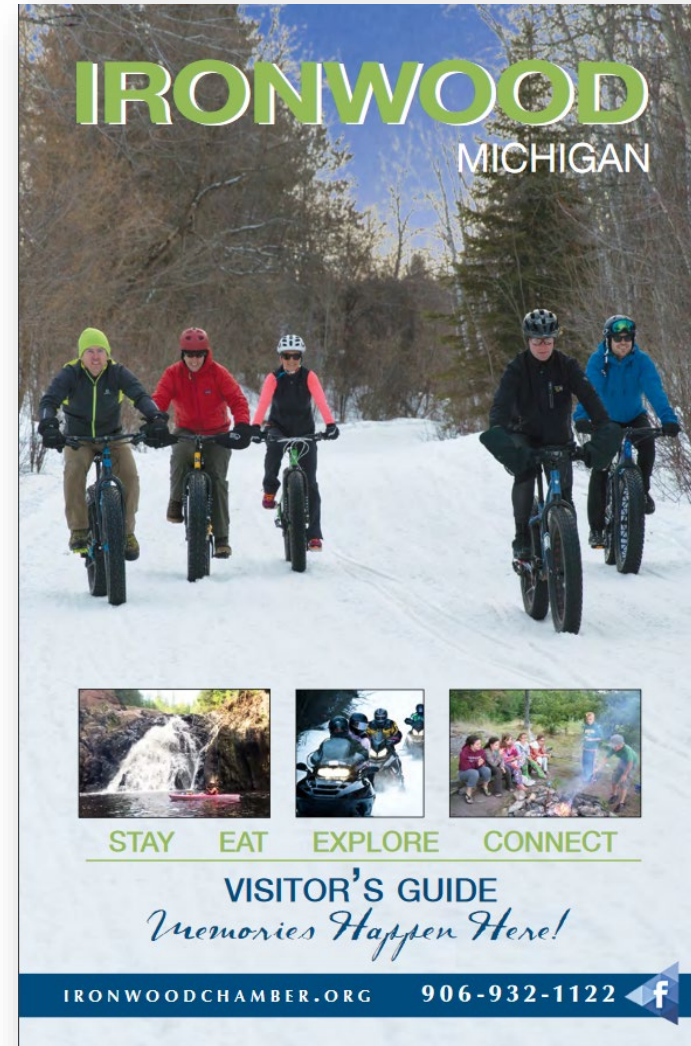
Were you able to access a map of the area?

3/5 used Google Maps

More about this later!

1 used the Visitor Guide

1 used Roadside America



1. Prior to the Visit

How did you use social media to plan your trip?

Three assessors used social media in planning their visit.

I scrolled through postings on Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest to get a "feel" for the area and the community.

Chamber Facebook page is best with updates, other pages seemed to mainly feature things that had already happened.

Tapped into Ironwood Festival's event page to see what the event was about.



1. Prior to the Visit

How did you visualize Ironwood prior to visiting?

I have passed through Ironwood on US 2 many times and have visited downtown a couple of times briefly. Those experiences gave me the impression prior to my visit for FIT that the commercial strip is more 'vibrant' than downtown. However, having purposefully explored more of downtown Ironwood during the assessment, I now have the impression that Ironwood is an up and coming outdoor recreation hub at an important gateway to the UP.

Nice and compact northwoods small city with a downtown on the rebound.

I envisioned a small UP town with lots of natural resources (forests, lakes, waterfalls, etc.).

Pristine nature, history, family friendly.



2. Initial Impression

US2 bypasses downtown entirely, looks better than most similar bypasses but that is not saying much. There is signage directing people downtown from US2, but I found it somewhat easy to miss. US2 Business from Hurley is nice, with a welcoming sign, clearly some work has been done to this area. Overall though, for people passing through on US2 I feel like downtown could be easy to miss.

A lot of sprawl was the first thing I saw. I didn't know I had entered Ironwood until I re-checked Google Maps. I would say the entrance was uninspiring. However, I loved the turnoff to and the location of the downtown. There was an air of quiet prosperity. Everything was clean. There seemed to be a lot going on, for a small town.



2. Initial Impression

The impression from US2 is very different than the impression from downtown. The five-minute impression from US2 is that Ironwood is commercial strip with little unique character - just another blur of gas stations, motels, and fast food like the rest of suburban America. The five-minute impression if a motorist can be attracted to downtown is - a small town with rich mining heritage and diverse immigrant base evolving into a diverse business community with an outdoor recreation flare.



I would feel compelled to stop if I were randomly passing by?

100% “Somewhat Disagree”



3. Community Information



Assessors overall felt that it was relatively easy to obtain community information once they arrived in Ironwood. Directions were accurate, it was easy to find an open visitors center with helpful staff, and tourist brochures and maps were readily available.



4. Visitor Motives

Top 3 reasons you think visitors come to the destination?



Be in Nature 5

In transit to somewhere else 3

Seek Adventure 2

Visit Historical Sites 2



5. Destination Evaluation

Nature-based activities	15
Adventure-based activities	13
Safety and security	12
Authenticity of attractions	12
Value for money in tourism experiences	11
Historic/heritage attractions	11
Customer service	10
Dedicated tourism attractions	10
Variety and quality of accommodations	10
Interesting architecture	10
Communication infrastructure	10
Hospitality and friendliness of residents	9
Cleanliness	9
Accessibility of destination	9
Visitor accessibility to attractions	9
Well marked roads/attractions	9
Well known landmarks	9
Conveniently located	8
Variety of activities to do	8
Road conditions	8
Pedestrian travel infrastructure	8
Tourism management policies	8
Cultural attractions	7
Directional signage	6
Special events	6
Shopping facilities	5
Activities for children	4
Variety and quality of restaurants	4
Variety and quality of shopping options	4
Community involvement	4
Crowd management	3

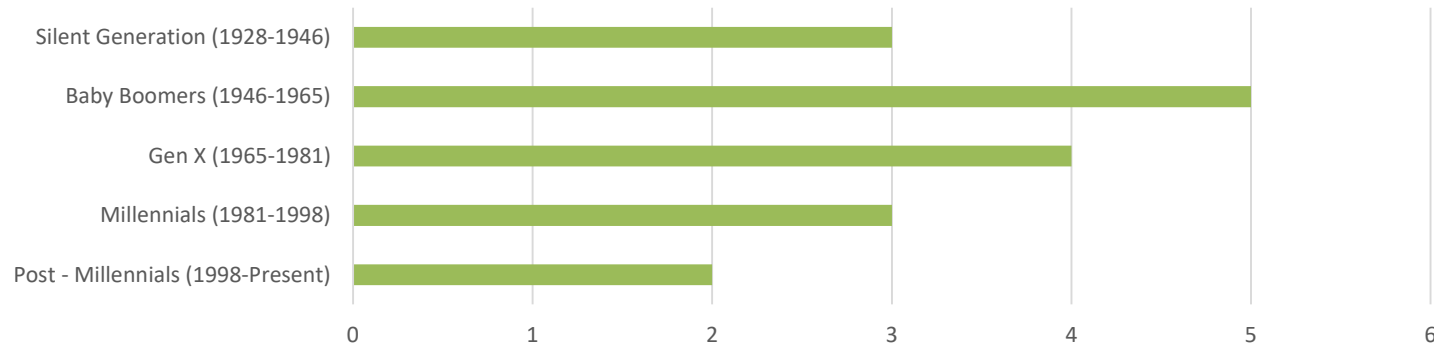
Build on These

Nature-based activities	15
Adventure-based activities	13
Safety and security	12
Authenticity of attractions	12
Value for money in tourism experiences	11
Historic/heritage attractions	11



5. Destination Evaluation

Ironwood should be attractive to the following generational cohorts:



All ages enjoy and can benefit from experiencing the unique culture, historical significance, and beauty of the region.

A good mix of activities but mainly outdoors. Something for most ability levels and interests, again as long as we're talking outdoors. Downtown Ironwood has a nice selection of shops.

Current tourism assets seem to orient more to the middle-aged to older tourist, but with more experiences (things to do) for families and young couples, the area can attract those populations eventually too.

The focus on historic features and sites appeal most deeply to those who lived closer to that time period. Can also see the appeal to Boomers who are looking for early retirement retreats.

The areas proximity to nature areas makes it more attractive to Millennials and Gen X. I would argue the downtown and historical areas are best suited to Baby Boomers.

5. Destination Evaluation

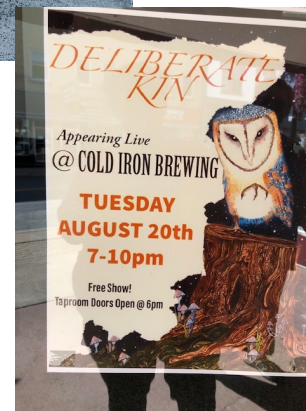
Are there attractions and/or events this destination is known for?

Copper Peak

Black River Country

Stormy Kromer

SISU Ski Fest



Any assets that would feel compelled to visit if you returned?

All said Yes!

Stormy Kromer

Copper Peak

Downtown Shops

Cold Iron

When there's snow!



6. Residential Areas

Well kept and tidy in general. There are some areas that could use attention notably E. Ayer St., if one takes this route to downtown from US2 the area looks almost intimidating in some places. There is a notable mix on the edges of downtown of very tidy homes and some pretty rough (what I assume are) rentals. Some streetscaping would help, although I realize snow issues are tough to manage.

Notably, the areas bordering downtown could use some brushing up.



Locations visited:

- *Accommodations*
- *Municipal Offices*
- *Restaurants*
- *Cultural/Historical Attractions*
- *Recreation*
- *Neighborhoods*
- *Businesses*
- *Trails....*



- The downtown feels very car-centric to me, despite being compact and really well suited to walkability. I was there on Saturday night and it was packed (show at Ironwood Theater) but there was no foot traffic. All streets in the downtown core had cars parked on both sides bumper-to-bumper, this is not very conducive to feeling comfortable walking, especially for those with limited mobility. I would love to see Aurora St. improved for pedestrians, say two lanes with parking on one side and bike lane on the other. I realize this is US2 Business however. No stores were open Saturday evening, despite a show at the theater and the County Fair.

- **High marks for pocket parks!**



- More green space could be added by planting more street trees and creating another landscaped pocket park or two at key locations downtown. There is virtually no gateway into the community from the north along US 2 (gateway at Aurora and McLeod could be enhanced) Besides the Iron Belle, can't remember any on-street bicycle facilities (route signage, painted lanes, sharrows, bike racks, etc.).



8. Downtown Business Area

Parking is centrally located	15
Parking charges are reasonable	15
Additional walking paths are available	14
Parking is secure	14
There are areas of green space	13
The main downtown business area feels distinct or special	12
Flags/banners are displayed on the exterior of businesses	11
Walking sidewalks are well maintained	11
There is pedestrian traffic (foot and bike)	11
Customers are greeted warmly when they walk through the door	11
Hanging baskets are displayed on the exterior of businesses	10
This is a welcoming place	10
The grounds have been landscaped with flowers, trees, shrubs, and bushes	9
The downtown business area is handicapped accessible	9
The main downtown business area is a major tourist draw for the area	9
There are walker/biker friendly signs	8
Vehicle traffic is managed to encourage pedestrian movement, via foot or bike	8
People are smiling	8
There is a mix of ages	8
There is a gateway point to enter/leave town (piece of art, mural, sign, etc.)	7
Bike lanes exist on roadways	2
There is a mix of ethnic groups	0



9. Waterfront Assessment

What is your first impression of the waterfront?



Little Girls Point and Black River Harbor are excellent regional assets. Ironwood should promote those too.



9. Waterfront Assessment

What is one area that could be improved?

Add handicap access to view the waterfalls at some point, if that is possible. There could be a sculpture park at the harbor with a maritime theme (they do have an historical boat there).

Wish there were some more amenities, even an ice cream truck on a summer weekend, but it is deep in the boonies.

Acquire and/or create better access to the river and promote it! Tell the story about the river and Ironwood's location along the river.



9. Waterfront Assessment



What is one area that you think is excellent?

Good access to Black River, with easy parking for viewing the Potawatomi and Gorge Waterfalls. Gorgeous location to meditate, reflect, and do some 'forest bathing' and wildlife watching.

Everything to do with the Black River is incredible. Needs marketing!

The beach at Black River Harbor honestly reminds me of places I've been in Hawaii. I can't say that about any other Michigan beach I've been to that comes to mind.

- **No unpleasant smells or sounds reported!**
- **All assessors felt welcomed in the community at all times!**
- **Two of five did not feel safe and secure at all times, however.**
 - Will discuss details with leadership team in private.





What was your most negative experience?

Most of the stores are closed when people are in town. Ironwood is an outdoors town, be open when people come back from the boonies and are looking for something to do. Would have loved to get more time with the arts community, but not open.

Trying to access the Montreal River.

Some neighborhoods in the town were seriously run-down – it is just so sad.

Cleanliness and customer service at a specific restaurant.



11. Lasting Impressions...

What was your most positive experience?

Spending time in Depot Park - we walked, talked to several people, enjoyed the fountain, visited the public restroom (thank you), and read all of the historical signs and information. It was unfortunate the buildings were closed on Sunday or we would have spent even more time there.

The beach at Black River Harbor. I'd been out there before but somehow missed the beach. In scope it is incredible. Gorgeous. My family discovered a place we will go back to for years to come.

Interacting with local families at two key social condensers - Depot Park and Cold Iron Brewing.

Watching people having fun & listening to music at the Ironwood Festival.

I enjoyed talking with the barista in Contrast Coffee, learning a bit more about the area and then following up on some different things to see.



What are the biggest challenges facing the destination?

There does not seem to be a cohesive identity for the downtown area. This can be accomplished with some creative thinking and community involvement...the very thing that has allowed the progress so far. There needs to be an assessment of local restaurants.

Need more quality and variety of restaurants, location is hard to overcome, but marketing and branding are key. So many assets to build on, need to give people activities to fill out the day.

Downtown's distance off US 2. Strip commercial look and feel along US 2 does not convey a unique community identity to the uninformed motorist passing by.

Likely the seasonality of the tourism markets & potential downturns that may threaten consistent visitation. I also overheard a few local folks talking with shopkeepers that hinted at a concern about "crowds" during the Ironwood Festival. I'm wondering if a fear of hordes of outsiders among local residents could be a deterrent to further tourism development. Overall, the lack of steady and well-paying employment for Ironwood's own residents is the biggest concern in my mind. Hard for businesses to stick around if it's tough to make a living!

The restaurant options were not great - customer service - People will go out of their way to talk with and help you personally. However, on doing things as you say and relatively quickly, customer service was lacking. - there was not a diverse mix of generations or races - Once out of the downtown, there was a lot less to see and do.



- **What would you change about the destination?**

The cleanliness of the business district...inside and out. Some general sprucing up in some areas would go a long way toward making the town more inviting.

Improve pedestrian/cycling infrastructure downtown, look at business hours (more evenings and weekends). Facades and streetscaping on the periphery of downtown.

Business Route access to downtown should be changed to a more pleasant street. Gateway signage at US 2 must be better than it currently is with emphasis on getting tourists downtown.

Two very straightforward things: 1) Local attitudes toward their own community. Those I spoke with had very little good to say about their own hometown; 2) Take advantage of the open spaces between downtown buildings. There's lots of room/potential for creativity and visual enhancement through landscaping, art promotion, gathering spaces, etc.

I would encourage, occasional, longer hours at restaurants. More diverse restaurant options would also be appreciated. I would better note outdoor attractions.

What are the destinations strengths?

Surrounding natural areas and the green space in downtown. It would be even better if the downtown spaces were developed in a way that connected them to the larger natural areas, attractions and activities.

The area is amazing for outdoor rec across the full range of interests and ability levels, I understand in winter it is similar. It is hard to find an all-in-one place like that. Comparatively many hotel rooms it seems as well. Very compact and busy downtown with shops, arts, and the like.

Depot Park - Invest heavily in this central asset to bring more people downtown, small business (pop-up retail and food?) development should follow. Outdoor recreational assets - trails, ski hills, and waterfalls at the regional scale.

Community interest in preserving/enhancing the architecture & sense of history, blended with their efforts to promote the arts. Certainly the natural assets are also a tremendous plus!

- very friendly people - good vibes downtown - neat architecture - great nature experiences - compelling history attractions



What one statement best describes the destination?

A city looking for a cohesive identity.

I like "Michigan's [Big Snow] Trailhead"

Ironwood has fantastic potential to celebrate its historic and natural beauty – visitors need to look for it.

A pleasant downtown bordering on one-of-a-kind nature experiences.

What will you remember most about the destination six months from now?

Ironwood is situated in a beautiful, scenic area.

Black River Harbor

Six months from now will be winter. I'll be thinking "Man, I need to get over there to ski some of the hills and trails that abound."

The expanses of forested hills and relaxed pace of life there.

Friendly people.





10 MINUTES!

Discussion!

1. What points caught your attention most?
2. What surprises you?
3. What needs to be addressed first, and why?
4. What is our next step?



Key Recommendations

- Work with business leaders to evaluate and revise business hours to better match visitor expectations.
 - Consider more evening and weekend hours, especially in-season.
- Highlight regional attractions in marketing.
- Make Depot Park a focus area for updates.
 - Remember the “Rule of 10”
 - Think splash pad, food trucks, playgrounds
 - Emphasize its place as the beginning of the Iron Belle Trail



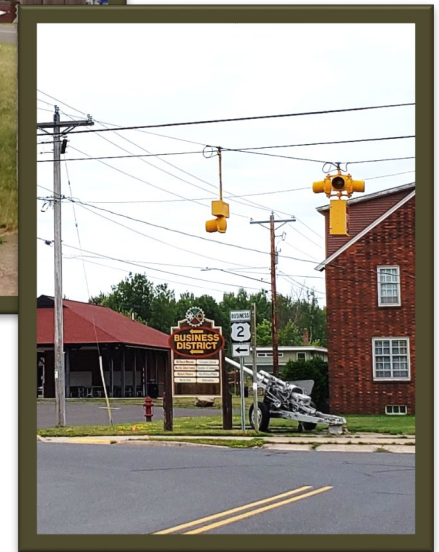
Key Recommendations

- The Montreal River is seriously underutilized with poor access. Work to activate the river as an asset by acquiring land to create access points and leveraging the river as a tourism and general community asset.
- Ironwood's authenticity, history and culture are a major asset, focus on telling your story in marketing.
- Focus on building connections and partnerships between growing arts community and the community at large.



Key Recommendations

- Slow traffic on US2 if at all possible.
 - Consider gateway signage (e.g. Escanaba?).
- There is a sign directing motorists toward downtown, but it is dated, easy to miss, and out of step with Ironwood's current brand. Refresh or replace with something more modern and in-step with the image the community is trying to create.
- Current US2 business route is unpleasant introduction to Ironwood, with a great deal of blight. If possible consider alternative (perhaps Lowell St.?).
- General refresh and expansion of all signage, both public and private.



Business:

- Hold tourism and customer service training series so businesses can learn of local tourism assets to be promoted and best practices for doing so while making visitors feel welcome and comfortable.
- Consider programs (e.g. revolving loan fund) to improve facades in downtown and the surrounding area. For vacant properties, paint the windows with a seasonal theme or cover them so visitors do not see the interior condition.
- Explore “Popup Shop” program to fill vacant storefronts during busy tourist seasons. This may help grow permanent downtown businesses as well.
- Encourage businesses to take credit/debit cards and the full line of cards (AmEx) visitors might want to use. Costs should be offset with strategic pricing.
- Encourage business to take ownership of their Yelp, Google, and TripAdvisor pages to properly market themselves in this space and curate the content (e.g. negative reviews) that others post.
- If practical, make attracting restaurant options beyond current offerings a focus area for small business development.



Community:

- Improve pedestrian and especially bicycle infrastructure in the downtown core.
- Existing murals and pocket parks are excellent, continue to develop these assets and add new ones.
- Amendments to and/or better enforcement of property maintenance code and rental code, especially bordering the downtown and on US2 Business.
- Work to incorporate the growing creative community into community and downtown planning and visioning efforts.



Recreation:

- Continue to market Ironwood regionally as an outdoor recreation destination and as a hub for regional attractions.
- With growing variety of “creative class” tourism assets (microbrews, arts, outdoor rec, antiques, unique shops, yoga studio, day spa), consider marketing program as a UP cultural/artistic destination.
- Improve promotion of Mt. Zion as a regional tourism asset (e.g. Presque Isle in Marquette).
- Activate historic downtown buildings as a tourism asset, allow some to be viewed outside of formal tours and/or better market tour availability.
- More infrastructure and positive messaging/signage supporting bicycling throughout the city, especially focusing on Ironwood as terminal of the Iron Belle.
- Even more storytelling about Ironwood's unique history within the broader region.

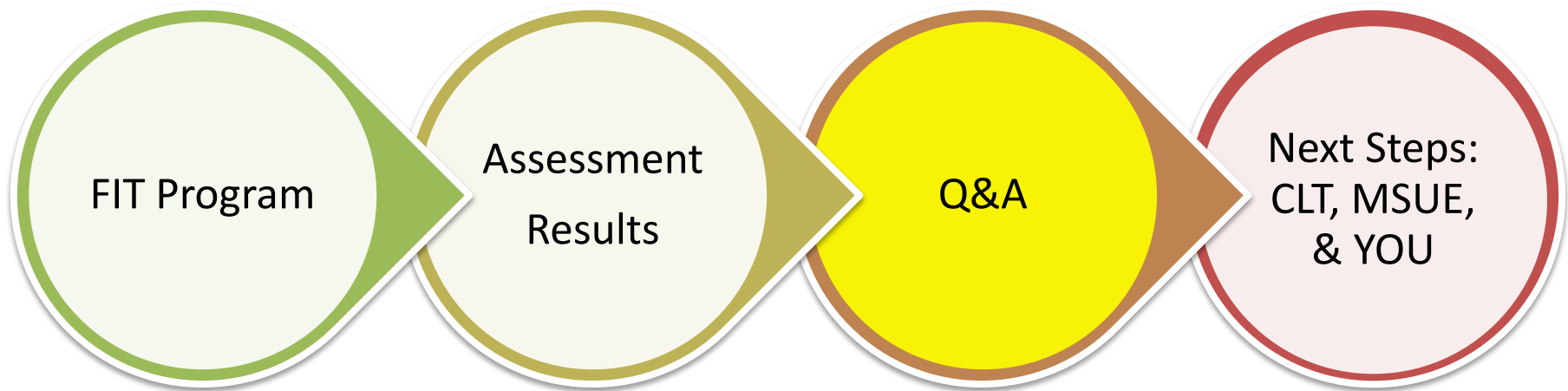


FIRST IMPRESSIONS:

Assessing your community for tourism (FIT)



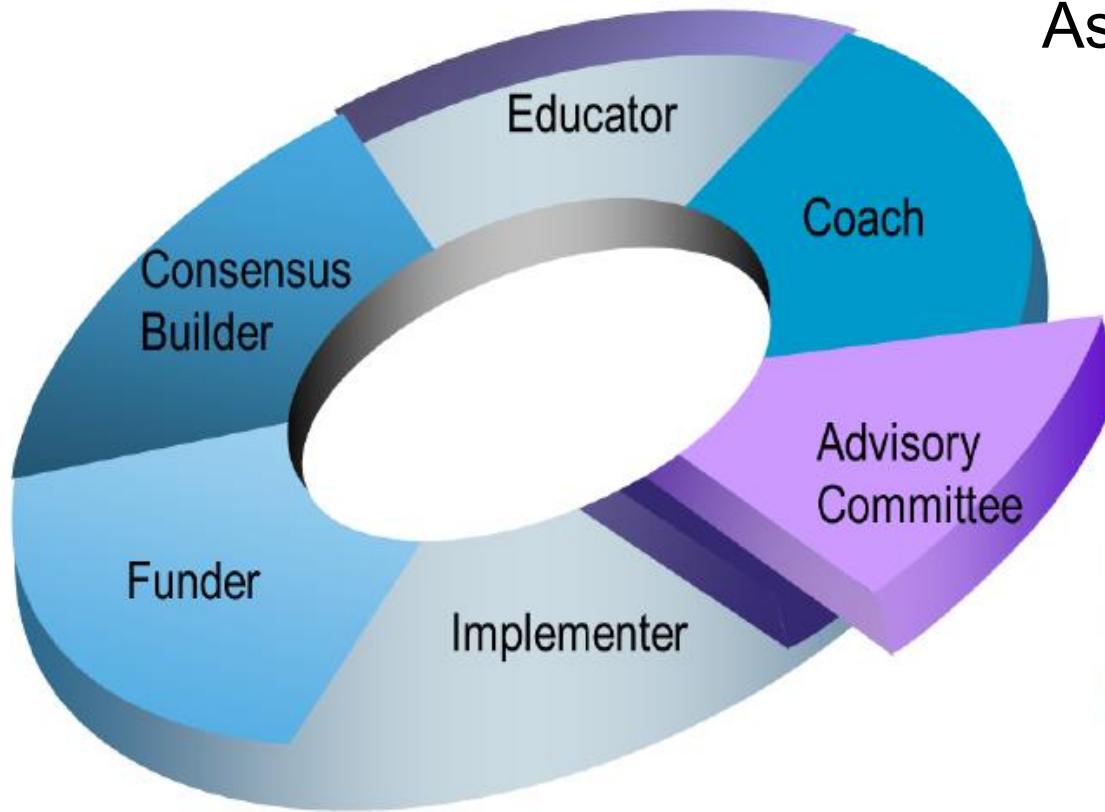
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Questions – before discussing next steps?



What Role Will You Play as an Individual?



As a community?

As a Business?

These roles are all very important! There is room for everyone to play an important role.



Your Role?

- Coach: If you do something well, commit to helping others do it to!
 - Social media, customer service, marketing and branding
- Consensus Builder: Support the Leadership Team and promote efforts within the community! Tell your neighbors why this matters.
- Funder: Provide some cash, donate materials, or give your time (valued at \$25.43/hour)!
- Implementer: Be the person on the ground who takes Leadership Team decisions and makes them real!



FIT communities will:

- Learn about their assets and opportunities from first-time visitors.
- Strengthen an existing cohort of leaders and residents by providing them an opportunity to organize on the basis of valuable feedback about their community.
- Develop a list of action items for community improvement.
- Integrate action items into community plans.
- Take action on community improvements and strengthen their image.
- Improve community well-being and quality of life for residents and visitors.



First Impressions:

Assessing your
community
for tourism

(FIT)

The results of FIT can:

- Spawn **local leadership**.
- Strengthen **community vitality**.
- Form the basis for **future development**.

Goals of our tourism programs are to:

- Increase awareness of assets and opportunities.
- Increase knowledge of best practices, trends and changes.
- Develop new leadership roles, opportunities and action items.
- Foster new collaborations and plans among stakeholders to advance community-driven tourism.

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.

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.

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.

Apply for FIT today to help your community enhance its appeal to tourists while advancing as a place where people enjoy living, working and playing.



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Please take the evaluation to help shape future *FIT* programs!

Thank you! Questions?

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