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First Impressions Tourism Assessment

City of Hart, MI



Summary of Results

October 2022

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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 from West Virginia University Extension Community, Resources, and Economic Development (CRED) team via a multi-state grant provided via 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 20 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 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 small town tourism development across Michigan. For more information on FIT, please visit - https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism_first_impressions/index

The Michigan Economic Development Corporation provided funding for the City of Hart to undergo the FIT program as part of their Redevelopment Ready Certification effort. The City of Hart, Michigan began their participation in the FIT program beginning of 2022. The results of their FIT assessment and key findings were presented to the Hart community in October 2022.

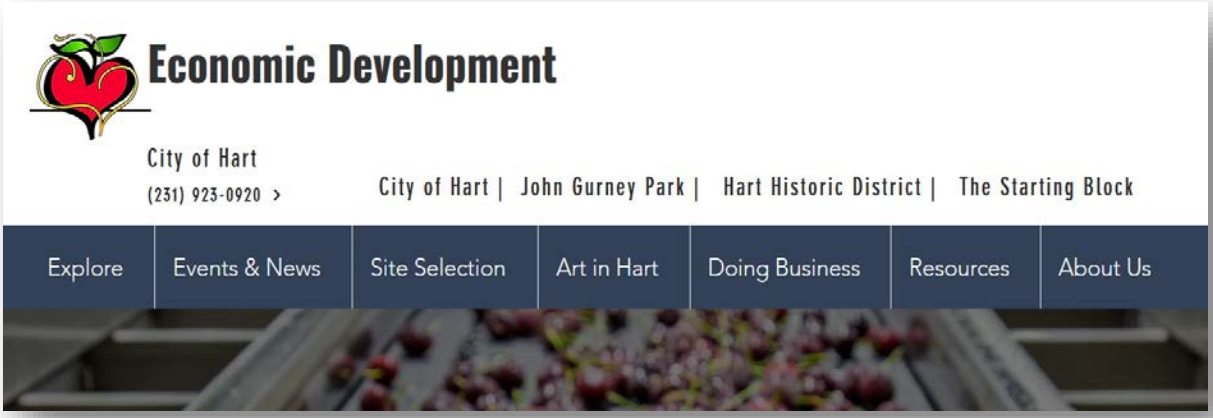
II. Summary of Results for City of Hart, MI

The City of Hart (CH) received five visitors during early Summer 2022, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors". All assessors are currently MSU Extension employees of different expertise. Three assessors were male and the other two female. Two assessors identified as Millennials while the other three Generation X. Four assessors visited CH alone while the remaining assessor visited with their spouse/partner. To generate diverse perspectives and experiences, assessors visited CH at separate times during different times between June and July. One assessor conducted a day trip to CH while one stayed in a local hotel and the remaining three camped. All assessors are residents of Michigan and spent between 6-24 hours visiting CH's wide range of assets within the downtown and surrounding area that contribute to the local visitor/tourism economy. In addition to onsite visits, visitors also spent between 1-4 hour researching CH through the internet visiting various websites and social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, and TripAdvisor. This report is a general summary of highlights collected from assessors' data, photos, discussions, and surveys.

Pre-Visit Web-based Research of Hart, MI –

- *"Based on what I researched, I felt Hart was going to be fun and engaging."*
- *"Without web research, I might not have stayed as long as there were hidden gems I was determined to find."*
- *"I knew it was important to bring a bike based on the marketing of the rail-trail park."*
- *"Surrounding assets lowered my expectations of Hart, but the city websites did a good of listing every retail establishment which gave a good impression before visiting."*
- *"I expected a bit more, including walking paths, maps to orient visitors, and a town that likes history."*

Most Helpful Websites - https://cityofhart.org and takemetohart.org



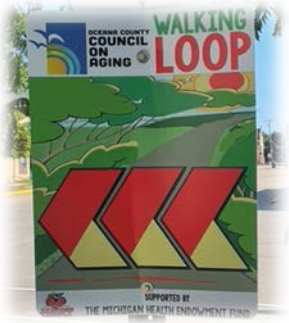
- *"Information was well presented, visually appealing, and easy to find."*
- *"Webpages loaded without delay."*
- *"Great 'Explore' Tab, most useful for 'Eat,' 'Play,' and 'Shop'."*

Challenges with most helpful website(s)

- *"Takemetohart.org was buried and difficult to find," and most assessors discovered it via Facebook first.*
- *"Could this website heading be renamed from Economic Development to something more inviting to visitors, such as 'Visiting Hart Soon?'"*

First Five-Minute Impressions -

- *"Initial impression was this is a nice little town and one I'd like to stop in for a walk!"*
- *"Coming in from 31N I saw very little marketing of Hart. The sign at the exit was hard to read while having ample time at the stop to actually read it. The cursive font in particular was challenging."*
- *"It was hard to know when I actually entered 'Hart,' was it when I got off the highway or when I arrive downtown? I initially thought the historic district was, in fact, the downtown."*





Visitor Motives – Assessors were asked to select presented with a list of 15 reasons visitors would visit the destination. They were asked to select the top three reasons someone might visit Hart, MI.

• Seek adventure	3
• Visit historical sites	3
• In transit to somewhere else	2
• Relax	1
• Be in nature	1
• Get entertained/for entertainment	1
• Visit friends and family	1
• Enjoy the weather	1
• Shop	1
• Other	1
• Experience the nightlife	0
• Get away from people	0
• Engage in business activities	0
• Engage in sports activities	0
• Engage in religious activities	0
• Experience a unique culture	0



Eat at local restaurants

Destination Asset Highlights and What Would Bring You Back to Hart?

- Hart Bike Trail
- Silent Movie Theatre
- Hart Historic District/Museum
- La Probadita
- Hart Pizza
- La Fiesta Mexican Restaurant
- Pink Elephant Diner
- Hansen Foods
- Rennhack Orchards Market
- La Mexicana de Pancho
- William Field Memorial H-M State Park
- Silver Lake State Park-Little Sable Lighthouse

Hart's Downtown Business Area (Best = 15, Worst = 0)

Parking charges are reasonable	15
There are areas of green space	14
The grounds have been landscaped with flowers	13
Walking sidewalks are well maintained	13
Parking is centrally located	12
Parking is secure	12
There is pedestrian traffic (foot and bike)	12
People are smiling	12
There is a mix of ethnic groups	12
Flags/banners are displayed on the exterior of businesses	11
Additional walking paths are available	11
Customers are greeted warmly when they walk through the door	11
There are walker/biker friendly signs	10
The downtown business area is handicapped accessible	10
This is a welcoming place	10
Hanging baskets are displayed on the exterior of businesses	8
Vehicle traffic is managed to encourage pedestrian movement	8
There is a mix of ages	8
The main downtown business area feels distinct or special	8
There is a gateway point to enter/leave town (mural, sign, etc.)	5
The main downtown business area is a major tourist draw	5
Bike lanes exist on roadways	3

General First Impressions and Ideas for Downtown Hart:



- *"The Hart Commons made for a unique gathering place in the evening."*
- *Downtown has ample parking, a surprise electric vehicle charging station, and is nice as sidewalks are shaded by overhangs."*
- *"Areas of downtown could use more brightness to make things stand out."*
- *"There is unique artwork and sitting areas behind downtown, but these are hidden from visitors."*

Downtown Infrastructure:

- **Waste receptacles** were ranked "good" by majority of assessors.
- **Public restrooms** were ranked either "good" or "excellent" by all assessors.
- **Benches** were ranked "good" or "excellent" by majority of assessors.
- **Recycling receptacles**, if they existed, were ranked "poor" or "fair" by all assessors.







Hart's Waterfront Area

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- 100% Fair – Good
  - *Good – Seemed updated and something the community is investing in and offers great fishing options.*
  - *Fair - There are no access points and downtown feels very separate from the lake.*
  - *Good – Hart Commons was excellent for sitting and overlooking the lake, but I wanted more!*
  - *Fair – Can you swim, fish, and/or kayak? I saw no signs on this.*
  - *Hart Lake and ample public lake frontage was amazing.*
  - *Fair – I didn't have access other than at JGP, but the views were fantastic!*





Destination Attributes (Rankings: Best = 15, Worst = 0)

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

Comments on Overall Destination

- *Definitely noticed the community buy-in for branding; the Hart logo was everywhere!*
- *Distance to Hart necessitates more directional signage, specifically to attractions.*
- *Can Hart define itself other than a "historic downtown" and separate from Silver Lake?*
- *I think people come from all over to shop for food and eat in Hart. I was blown away by the international selection of food…*



Sense of Welcoming -



All assessors always felt welcomed.

- *"Staff at all establishments were happy to answer questions about things to do and places to see."*
- *"I felt welcomed at businesses and by people I met walking around."*
- *"Everyone was friendly, and people were smiling."*

Sense of Safety –

Two assessors did not feel safe and secure on account of different experiences during their assessments.

- *"An off-leash dog at the State Park prepared me for a possible dog attack – twice!"*
- *"The closed Historical Park gave me an eerie feeling while visiting on a Sunday."*

FIT Assessor Identified Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities -

Strengths:

- Strong cohesion around branding (Hart Logo)
- Variety of history
  - Pre-settlement
  - Post-settlement
- Wide-range of diversity
- City assets-
  - Campground, disc golf
- The lakes and trails
- Sunrise over Hart Lake
- Well-marked bike paths
- Great food options
- Authentic Mexican food
- Proximity to a major highway
- State Parks nearby
- Artists and community artwork
- Alley Grotto
- Walkable downtown
- Wineries
- Oceana County
  - Agriculture powerhouse

Challenges:

- Attracting area vacationers
- Getting people to stay longer
- Identifying Hart's niche
- Strengthening Hart's story in marketing material
- Unearthing Hart's wide -range of history
- Feeling welcomed at historic district
- Knowing how a person can use Hart Lake.
- Orientating cyclists into town from bike path
- Distinguishing downtown Hart from Historic District
- Improving signage on state roads and land
- Exiting the highway to Hart
  - Geographically challenging
  - Visually challenging

Opportunities:

1. Built Infrastructure
2. Outdoor Recreation
3. Art and Culture
4. Community Branding







Built Infrastructure

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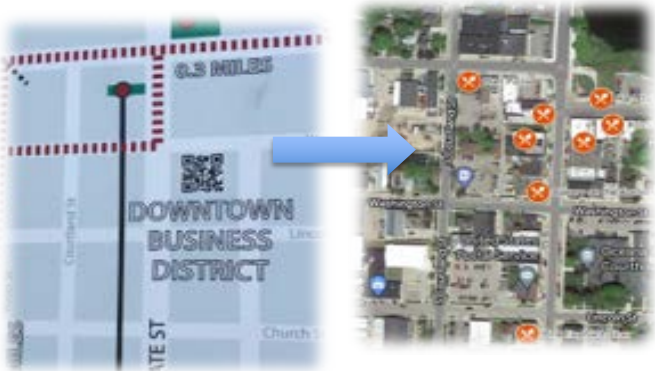
- Direct trail users to go that extra mile into Hart
- Increase wayfinding for downtown businesses and assets
- Distinguish Downtown Hart from Historic District
  - Signage at H-M Trail distinguishes











- *I assumed the historic district was the downtown.*

- Current wayfinding devoted to the Hart Historic District
- Clarify the location of the downtown business district for visitors
- Opportunity at Polk/State St. for clear wayfinding to downtown, and other locations.

- Distinguish Downtown Hart from Historic District
- Historic district
  - Create additional experiences with QR codes
- Downtown Hart (Business/Social District)
  - Encourage local businesses to participate
  - Create downtown kiosk/map
  - Highlight downtown walking loop
    - Give walking distances,
    - Provide a QR code/map
    - Add directional signage
- Rework the crosswalk by Hart Commons
- Relocate Hart Brewery on/near Hart lake





Outdoor Recreation

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- Strengthen crosswalk on Polk Road
  - Flashing lights, Stop traffic button
  - Enlarge signage
- Expand bike trail going North
- Disc Golf Course
  - Inform users where they can buy/rent
- Establish gear rental at library
  - Kayaks, fishing poles,
  - disco golf discs, and/or bikes







- Create more accessible activity focused on the lake
- Modify waterfront areas to encourage more use
  - Swim (small dock/floating raft access)
  - Kayak (ADA access)
  - Fish (rod holders)
  - Walking path (map)
- Establish signage for
  - Swim depths (or not?)
  - Kayak trails distance(s)
  - Fish species
  - Emergency supplies



Art and Culture

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Community Culture

- Foster a strong relationship with existing diverse community
- Connect to and highlight agricultural heritage
- Tell the story of the Hart migrant workers and settlement in the area
- Work with local tribes to improve “Indian Artifact Collection” and the Native American story in the area



Community Artwork and Placemaking

- Unearth more local art, vibrant landscaping, and events
- Replicate professional alley artwork to the front of town
- Incorporate art in place of graffiti on state park trail
- (New) art/murals could depict Hart story with creative visuals







Community Branding

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- Highlight Hart's "Entire" History/Culture
  - Unearth the museum's content into community
  - In published promotional material
  - Embrace wide range of stories and cultures
    - Agriculture
    - Entrepreneurial
    - Immigrant
    - Native American





Community Branding

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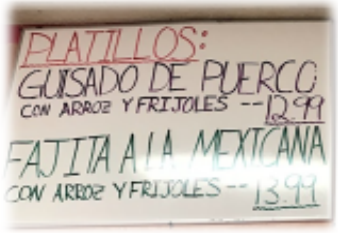
- Create a "Hart Food Trail" and tie into local restaurants and food themes
- Expand on NAF story as part of a trail
- Capitalize on becoming a "Foodie" destination
  - Food origins
  - Cooking classes
    - Mexican cuisine
    - Seasonal harvest items on menus
    - Jams, jellies, salsa, wine
- Could Hart become a known destination for authentic Mexican food and/or other cuisine?









- *The information is fascinating! I was left wanting to know more about the local agriculture – past and present!*

- Add interpretive signs along the Hart – Montague Trail pointing out the occurrence of specific agricultural bits of information
- More structured agri-tourism opportunities could be an amenity – especially on bad weather days at the nearby Dunes.
- Agriculture could be an overlooked opportunity for tourism. Could tours be offered here?

Tourism Assets Visited During City of Hart FIT Assessment

Along with a qualitative review, each asset identified is given a rating of poor, good, very good, and excellent. Some assets were visited multiple times resulting in several reviews. Reviews of individual assets are available. Please contact the City of Hart for more information. Red stars indicate which assets would encourage assessors to return to Hart.

Visited Assets:

- Hart Veterans Park
- ★ Hart Bike Trail
- Hart Ramp and Rails
- Downtown Hart
- ★ William Field Memorial Hart-Montague Trail State Park
- MSU Extension Office
- Hart-Montague Trailhead
- ★ Silver Lake State Park-Little Sable Lighthouse
- Boat launch at John Gurney Park
- State Park Bike Path/Parking Area
- John Gurney Park & Campground
- Dunes Express Inn & Suites
- ★ Hart Historic District/Museum
- Gales Pond County Park
- Dolittle Park
- Hart Lake Canoeing
- ★ Silent Movie Theatre
- Hart Commons
- Hart Hydro Disc Golf

Restaurants:

- ★ La Probadita
- Big Hart Brewing Company
- Corner Bakery
- ★ Hart Pizza
- Hart Dairy Delight
- ★ La Fiesta Mexican Restaurant
- Kristi's Pour House
- ★ Pink Elephant Diner
- Downtown Ice Cream Shop
- Stella's Coffee House

Shopping Place

- ★ Hansen Foods
- Cup of Kindness
- Thrift/Antique shop downtown
- ★ La Probadita Grocery
- Resale Shop
- Reflections Upscale Resale
- Antique Market
- Treasures Antiques & Collectibles
- ★ Rennhack Orchards Market
- ★ La Mexicana de Pancho
- Larsen's Ace Hardware

City of Hart's 2022 FIT Community Leadership Team

1. Scott Beal – Chamber/CVB Director
2. Paul Cutter - Natural Resources, Bio Pure Superintendent
3. Paul Erickson - Historical Representative, Fairground Chair, County Commissioner, Business Owner
4. Nichole Kleiner – Economic Development Director, City of Hart
5. Maria Rosas – Restaurant Owner, La Probadita
6. Jake Tufts - Business Owner, Economic Development Board Chair



Funding for Hart's FIT assessment was provided by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation as a benefit of the City of Hart's status as a certified Redevelopment Ready Community. Further information can be found by visiting - https://www.miplace.org/programs/redevelopment-ready-communities/

Next Steps for FIT Communities:

- Consult the FIT Community Next Steps manual provided to your Community Leadership Team (CLT).
- Learn from other FIT communities as to what is achievable by reviewing "FIT Successes Report-April 2021 Edition" - https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/fit-successes-report-april-2021-edition
- Consider exploring the raw data further and identifying parts of the results to act.
    - Facilitate discussions with private sector assets visited during the assessment and share asset reviews with each stakeholder and/or department.
- Schedule a public discussion meeting between the CLT, local leaders, and active citizens of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds.
- Review your community's result and discuss strategies to work together.
- Search out low-hanging tourism-related projects from list of results, picking one or two items that can be accomplished immediately and ensure their completion.
- Schedule a follow-up discussion with MSU Extension Government and Community Vitality/Tourism educators to facilitate your next steps if you need assistance.
    - Contact MSU Extension Statewide Tourism Educator, Andy Northrop – northro5@msu.edu

Available Funding and Grants

- MI Economic Development Corporation – Public Spaces Community Places - https://www.miplace.org/programs/public-spaces-community-places/
- Match on Main - https://www.miplace.org/small-business/match-on-main/
- United States Department of Agriculture-Rural Development Grants https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs
- Michigan Arts and Humanities, Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs (MCACA)
- Arts Midwest (Touring Gig Fund), National Endowment for the Arts
- Community Foundations and/or individual Foundation funds (example: Dow in Midland)
- Business/Corporate sponsorships (example: MI Sugar Trails - http://www.sblc-mi.org/michigan-sugar-trails.html)
- Crowd Funding, Individual donations / sponsorships (Lions Club, Rotary Club, etc.)

Summary of MSU Extension tourism development programs:

The following programs are available statewide to guide decision making around tourism development and implementation.

Understanding Tourism for Michigan Communities (UTMC)

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

- https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism/programs/understanding-tourism-for-michigan-communities

Planning for Tourism-Preventing Destination Decline

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

- https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism/programs/planning-for-tourism

First Impressions: Assessing Your Community for Tourism (FIT)

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.

- 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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