



First Impressions: Youth Tourism Assessment



First Impressions Tourism Summary Report City of St. Clair, Michigan September 2019

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I. Introduction

The First Impressions (FI) program was introduced to Michigan 4-H youth development in 2018. Youth served as first-time visitors/assessors to the towns of Houghton and Bessemer in Michigan's western Upper Peninsula in the summer of 2018. An opportunity to pilot the program in the Lower Peninsula was made available in the spring of 2019.

This summary report is based on the observations of six young visitors, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors." Youth who served as assessors were referred to the Michigan State University (MSU) Youth Extension Educator responsible for coordinating the program. They were referred based on their interest in the project and prior leadership experience. Prior to conducting the community assessments, the youth participated in a 2 hour on-line interactive training session to prepare for their visit and to meet one another. During this training it was emphasized they needed to spend time online, researching the city and tourist destinations prior to the visit. This research helped plan and shape the visit based on personal interests and activities in the community. Due to transportation and safety, the assessment was done in a group and took place on June 1st, 2019 from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm. With 2 chaperones, on many occasions the larger group was divided into two smaller teams each exploring different aspects of the city and tourist destinations. Assessors recorded their experiences conducting visitor research, maneuvering through and around the City of St. Clair, visiting stores, restaurants, outdoor spaces and additional tourism-related sites. Each assessor evaluated community characteristics by completing a multi-page assessment focused on initial and lasting impressions, community information, visitor motives, the destination and its downtown, and tourism assets. They also provided input on the quality of information relative to City of St. Clair found online. The assessment results and photographs of the community were downloaded into a data management program called Qualtrics. The compiled results were extrapolated to create this written report and public presentation. Key findings were presented at a public forum on September 19, 2019. For additional information, a copy of the PowerPoint public presentation and Qualtrics data accompany this report.

II. Visitor Profile

Of the six assessors who visited City of St. Clair, we had one male millennial chaperone and 5 females age 20 or younger belonging to Generation Z. Prior to their visit, all six assessors noted they spent between one and two hours doing online research about the community. Two of the assessors were juniors attending a university, three were high school students, and the male chaperone works full time in youth development for MSU Extension. One assessor lives in Sanilac County, four in Macomb County, and one was visiting from Indianapolis, Indiana. Five assessors identify themselves as Caucasian and the other as African –American.

Key Findings

The key findings outlined below reflect the general structure of the assessment tool used by each assessor before, during and after the visit.



Pre-Assessment

To foster a true tourist experience, the assessors were required to conduct online research prior to visiting the City of St. Clair. A separate pre-assessment tool was sent to them directly after their initial training on how to be assessors held two weeks prior to visiting. They were asked to return their pre-assessment surveys prior to the trip to the City of St. Clair. Initially, two of the assessors evaluated St. Clair Shores web pages, since <https://www.scsmi.net> came up first in their search. This is noteworthy since this error can happen easily with similar city names and with individuals not familiar with the area. The other site which was sited often was www.cityofstclair.org. Although assessors found this site useful, they felt it could be more attractive to the eye and have more detailed information. One assessor recommended having a “slide show of pictures of what the city offers on the home page” rather than one stand-alone photo. One assessor commented, “based on the website it looks as if the city of St. Clair only has two forms of social media that they communicate with: Facebook and Vimeo. If they want to reach the younger demographic, they need to start advertising accounts for Instagram or Twitter on their website.”

In their web search, assessors used social sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Their research gave the impression that the City of St. Clair is very “community oriented”, “open and involved,” active with many different attractions and “gave a sense that there is a lot to do in the city and that I would not get bored if I were a tourist there.” Overall, the impression was the community seems nice and “the people seem kind and friendly and there was a lot going on because they had an up to date Facebook page.” Some of the things they learned about the City of St. Clair is they “host championship powerboat races, host a variety of local bands, have various forms of entertainment and the community has good schools that do fun activities.”



Visualizing St. Clair:

Assessors were asked to visualize the City of St. Clair prior to visiting. Assessors anticipated the City of St. Clair to be a “cute little town to visit for a weekend getaway” with “lovely neighborhoods”, and “welcoming people with cool attractions”. One assessor thought it might be busy because it is close to the water. Another assessor thought it might have many “quaint shops that sell knick-knacks and desserts in the hopes of a tourist walking in their shop.” This assessor also “visualized cars on the side of the road in metered parking.” Another assessor visualized “it as being somewhere between urban and small town feeling, with lots of small businesses and shops.”

Initial Impression

Upon arriving, assessors were asked to give their initial impression within the first five minutes.



Positive comments included, “Very relaxing, calm atmosphere, lovely homes. I found the entire area very homey and serene feeling. The lake was a lovely atmosphere-setter. I can imagine relaxing by the lake.” Other assessor commented. “Seems like a cute town. The parks look really nice and the landscaping around the town make the town look a lot nicer and cleaner.” “The community would have nice attractions, pretty houses, lakes and nice places to shop and eat. The community looks very clean and put together.” Another assessor felt the city was “well maintained, highlighting the waterfront, glad they did not build on the waterside, boat town.”

Some of the negative comments included, “it is a very small town oriented around the boating industry. The city seems to be asleep for the most part until late morning, leaving the impression of a relaxing environment.” “Smoke stacks south of town visible, shops look a little dated but well maintained, not many shops, but nice little downtown.”





Visitor Motives

Assessors were presented with a list of 15 reasons visitors come to a destination and asked to select the top three reasons someone might visit the City of St. Clair. The top choices included:

- Enjoy the weather (4*)
- Relax (3*)
- Shop (*3)
- Visit friends and family (2*)
- Be in nature (1*)
- In transit to somewhere else (*1)
- Engage in sports activities (1*)

* indicates number of times that motive was selected

Destination/Downtown Attributes

- Hospitality and friendliness of residents
- Customer Service
- Safety and security
- Cleanliness
- Variety of activities to do
- Variety and quality of restaurants
- Nature-based activities
- Historic/heritage attractions
- Special events

Destination/Downtown Weaknesses

- Activities for Teenagers
- Directional signage
- Variety and quality of shopping options
- Adventure based activities
- Lack of Cultural activities
- Interesting architecture
- Lack of well-known landmarks
- Pedestrian travel infrastructure

Worthy Comments on Downtown Area

“The city had many fun things to do. Great food had nice vegan and organic food options. The shopping places were very vintage.” Everything within the city was beautiful and well-maintained. I always felt as if there was something to do and I was never bored. The city did a good job of preserving the lakefront.” “Very nice town, however I feel it is geared for a middle age or even older type of audience didn't have a ton to do for teenagers, saw a lot of activity but it was mostly middle age or older.”





Tourism Assets You Visited

During their visit assessors were asked to visit tourist attractions and assets that were of interest to them either from researching prior to their visit or after arriving. These assets included restaurants, shops, parks, trails, kayaking, horseback riding, and historical museum. A few of the tourism assets visited in City of St. Clair were the Saint Clair Boat Harbor, Pine River Stables, St. Clair Museum, Greig Park, Simply Fresh Café, Chocolate Harbor, Voyager, Drifters, Boomerang, Black Bird Home Goods, and Hers Women’s Fashion.



Bennett, 2019

Waterfront Community Assessment

Assessors were asked to give their first impressions of the city’s waterfront.

When asked to rate the overall quality of the waterfront infrastructure, five rated it excellent and one rated it good. Comments from assessors included, “the water itself was pretty, and the boardwalk and benches were nice and clean and looked brand new.” “The landscaping was absolutely excellent and you could tell they put a lot of money into it. Lovely boardwalk with music and hanging flower baskets, very well kept.”

Areas of improvement from the assessors’ perspectives included a longer boardwalk with mileage markers, a place to swim, a dock for boats or fishing, and a couple of assessors mentioned they did not like the houses right on the water, “they blocked the view for the rest of the community.”

Lasting Impressions

The assessors identified their **most positive experiences** while visiting City of St. Clair:

- Going horseback riding
- Chocolate Harbor
- Eating at Simply Fresh Café
- Kayaking
- Walking along the boardwalk
- Going to the museum
- Going to Greig Trail and seeing how well kept the area was.



Photo taken by Pine River Stable

However, the assessors also identified their **most negative experiences** while visiting City of St. Clair:

- Lack of shopping options and the building on the lakefront.
- The town consisted of mostly older people and the lack of vegan options
- The quality of the roads and road/parking signs on the sidewalk need to be moved off the sidewalk, impedes pedestrians.
- Bridge is great but can cause traffic back ups
- Lack of diversity, geared toward older people, not enough business
- The restaurants were not great, small menus



Trip Reflections:

After the assessment was completed, assessors were asked if this is a community you would consider moving to after high school or college to live and work. The male millennial indicated “yes” because there are beautiful homes, well maintained, and a nice downtown.

All Generation Z female visitors indicated no and gave the following reasons:

- There is not enough going on in the town for me to want to come here and raise my future children
- The community is smaller than I thought, there were not many activities to do that were fun
- Because there wasn't a lot going on in the town
- Because I like constantly moving and this place is very relaxed, not for me
- I prefer a more bustling, busy atmosphere and a lot of activities. This is more relaxed.

They were asked what activities or amenities for youth exist in their community that this host community might consider adding. Their response included: ball parks, hockey rinks, park includes more play areas for children downtown, movie theatre, beach volleyball, basketball court, some games to offer outside, cheaper stores, a nice hang out area, and more shopping options.

Below are the comments when asked, “What would you tell your friends about this place?”

- To go kayaking or do something on the water
- The city is pretty small and not very open to teenagers, the water is beautiful and they have horseback riding
- It's a nice one day trip, plenty to do for the day
- There is a fantastic boardwalk that seems to be good for fishing
- Check out the boardwalk, make sure to visit the shops and cafes
- Visit Palmer Park, walk the river down past the bridge, nice community, friendly people

Using Senses and Safety:

All assessors didn't note any unpleasant smells or sounds while in the City of St. Clair. All assessors felt safe and secure at all times during the assessment.

III. Suggestions

- Add more activities like corn hole, ladder ball, or horse shoes in the town center.
- Add more shopping options like souvenir shops, update current shops
- Add more food options, like a cool coffee shop or food inspired by countries around the world
- Target the town towards the younger generation (playground, movie theatre, volleyball court, basketball court)



- Add more gardens
- Redo the roads
- Add a community center
- Have a brochure that has activities to do in St. Clair