



First Impressions: Tourism Assessment



First Impressions Tourism Summary Report East Jordan, Michigan August 2018

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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. Michigan State University (MSU) Extension has adapted this program, adding a tourism focus to meet the needs of Michigan communities. MSU Extension's First Impressions: Tourism Assessments (FIT) is a unique version of FI for our state.

This summary report is based on the observations of five visitors, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors." Each was provided a stipend for participating. Before beginning an unannounced visit to East Jordan, each assessor conducted online research of the destination. This research helped plan and shape the visit based on personal interests and activities in the community. Each then traveled individually to East Jordan between May 15 and June 24, 2018. Assessors recorded their experiences conducting visitor research, maneuvering through and around East Jordan, and 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, the residential area and tourism assets. They also provided input on the quality of information relative to East Jordan 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 August 27, 2018. For additional information, a copy of the PowerPoint public presentation and Qualtrics data accompany this report.

II. Visitor Profile

Of the five assessors who visited East Jordan, 60% identified male and 40% female. Prior to their visit, all five assessors noted they spent between two and four hours doing online research about the community. Two of the five assessors visited East Jordan on a Thursday, one on a Monday, one on a Wednesday and one on a Saturday. More than half of the assessors belonged to Generation X, Y, or Z, one visitor identified as a Millennial and one as a Baby Boomer. Two of the five assessors stayed overnight in an East Jordan bed and breakfast, one camped and two did not stay overnight. Two visited the city with their family (3 or more people), two visited alone and one brought their spouse/partner with them. A majority of the assessors identified community/economic development as their professional background while others identified natural resources, forestry, leadership, and tourism as fundamentals to their professional roles.

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.



East Jordan has assets

East Jordan has wonderful assets including waterfront access to the Jordan River, beautiful public parks including East Jordan City Tourist Park, Memorial Park and Jordan River Sportsmen’s Park, plus a Farmers Market and several quality eating establishments including South Arm Market, Blue Smoke BBQ and North Perk Coffee. The variety of opportunities for outdoor activities and the rich history of the East Jordan Iron Works (EJ) gives visitors a unique Northern Michigan experience in a small town southeast of Charlevoix.

Assets surrounding East Jordan include its proximity to I-75, access to water-based activities and the growth of West Michigan as an ecotourism destination. The assets and experiences identified by the five assessors can serve as a base from which to capitalize and strengthen East Jordan’s image and assets for future visitors.

Pre-Assessment

To foster a true tourist experience, the assessors were required to conduct online research prior to visiting East Jordan. This prepared them for the in-person tourist experience by determining highlights in the community they intended to visit or learn more about. East Jordan assessors found it easy to find appealing web pages with helpful information about local tourism-related amenities and activities. In their web search, social sites such as Facebook and YouTube seemed to be the most beneficial for assessors. Some assessors identified that Yelp and TripAdvisor were more helpful for finding business hours and dining menus, etc. Although assessors found the East Jordan Chamber of Commerce website (<http://ejchamber.org/>) to be the most helpful site for finding information about things to do in the city, others found the site difficult to navigate because there were inactive links when searching for “things to do.” One visitor noted a lack of information on the Chamber site regarding adventure sports like canoeing, kayaking, hiking and biking.

More than half of the assessors found maps from other sources more helpful than the maps on the Chamber website. 100% of assessors accessed the internet during their assessment with 60% viewing a map and 40% browsing through business locations and hours of operation.

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

Visualizing East Jordan

Assessors were asked to visualize East Jordan prior to visiting. Assessors anticipated East Jordan to be small with a quaint downtown area and superb hiking/biking trails plus a few select places to dine and shop. Some assessors had heard negative comments ranging from a limited variety of things to do, a general foul smell in the downtown area, and the kind of place you go for one specific activity like paddling, fishing or snowmobiling. Two of the five assessors didn’t have a good understanding of East Jordan’s proximity to water. One assessor thought the community would be closer to the water, while one thought it would be farther away.



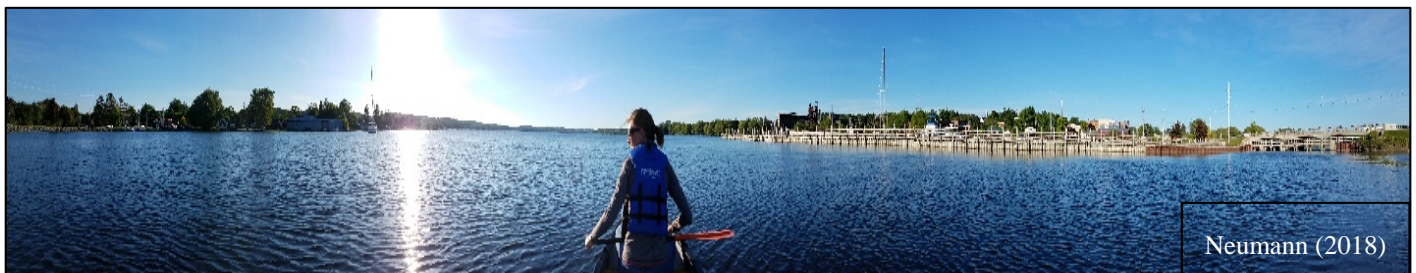
Initial Impression

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

Positive comments included, “Beautiful spot on Lake Charlevoix. Main St. has many great historic buildings. Public beach/access to the lake adjacent to downtown is great,” “I liked it! I thought it was a beautiful drive into town, somewhat off the beaten path. The downtown main street portion of town inviting and I found myself wanting to explore,” “Tidy downtown with excellent wayfinding signage,” “NICE! Water is a real asset for this area.”

Some of the negative comments included, “Disappointed at how the community looked after driving in - however, once I entered past the garages I felt the town immediately looked really cool and "outdoorsy" with a lot of access to water,” “...after seeing the water as I began to descend the hill, all the cement parking lots came into view. This was unappealing and my first assumption was, "Oh, East Jordan is no different than any other small Michigan city” however, heading toward downtown the area got nice and I loved the downtown and marina area. Much nicer than I anticipated!”

Most assessors viewed Lake Charlevoix as a great asset to the city and stated the downtown area has a lot of character and charm. However, some assessors noted that the areas surrounding downtown could use some more upkeep to make a more cohesive community. Based on their initial impression, the majority of assessors would feel compelled to stop if randomly passing by.





Community Information

Overall, assessors found community directions accurate and more than half found it easy to locate the visitor center and visitor staff to be helpful. Although many assessors said it was easy to find a community tourism brochure, 60% did not find the local/regional newsletter informative and three out of five had a difficult time finding a map of East Jordan during their visit.

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 East Jordan. The top choices included:

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

* indicates number of times that motive was selected

Assessors did identify a number of activities that are in line with tourist activities as well as day-to-day residential activities. Most identified sports and spending time in nature as possible motivations to draw tourists to East Jordan. Assessors also noted specifically that engaging in outdoor sports activities like boating, snowmobiling, hiking and fishing are motivations for visiting too. Two assessors associated boating and snowmobiling with “other” when identifying motivators.

Destination/Downtown Attributes

- Hospitality and friendliness of residents
- Safety and security
- Cleanliness
- Visitor accessibility to attractions
- Well marked roads/attractions
- Value for money in tourism experiences
- Nature-based activities
- Authenticity of attractions
- Tourism management policies
- Community involvement

Destination/Downtown Weaknesses

- Few dedicated tourism attractions
- Lack of variety of activities to do
- Few dining options
- Few shopping options
- Lack of nearby adventure-based activities





- Lack of historic/heritage attractions
- Lack of cultural attractions
- Few well-known landmarks

Residential Areas

Assessors were encouraged to visit residential areas to give them a better understanding of the community at large and provide communities with a perspective rarely evaluated by outside visitors. One assessor stated East Jordan’s residential area was “very good,” while two said “good” and two said “fair.” In summary, assessors felt the residential areas were generally tidy, with nice mature trees, green spaces and historic homes, but noted that some homes were in need of upkeep and a few neighborhoods felt rough.

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 lodging, eateries and restaurants, shops, parks, trails and other locations or businesses. Each tourism asset visited by an assessor received a review with comments and is included in Section 7 of the Qualtrics data report. Assessors chose to not share reviews of private businesses during community report public forums. CLTs are encouraged to notify businesses of their reviews whether positive or negative. A few of the tourism assets in East Jordan that were most commonly visited by assessors included Sportsman Park, South Arm Market & Cafe, Blue Smoke BBQ, Memorial Park, East Jordan City Tourist Park and Ironton Ferry.



Waterfront Community Assessment

Assessors were asked to give their first impressions of East Jordan’s waterfront. When asked to rate the overall quality of the waterfront infrastructure of East Jordan, the responses were positive. Two rated the waterfront infrastructure as “good,” two said “very good” and one said “excellent.” Comments from assessors included, “The waterfront on Lake Charlevoix seemed neat, tidy and accessible by all,” “Well maintained and cared for.”

The best assets of East Jordan’s waterfront areas according to the assessors included the bandshell, waterfront parks and opportunities for water-based activities like boating, paddling and fishing. “I loved the bandshell and the idea of concerts on the waterfront,” “I really liked seeing the benches and tables and little grills just off the marina.”

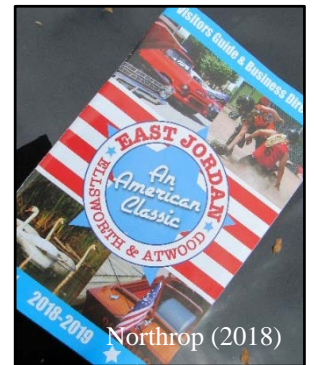
Areas of improvement from the assessors’ perspectives included expanding trails, increasing places to sit and repairing boat and kayak launches. Visitor comments included, “Tourist Park could be made more attractive and boat docs repaired, and ensure public knows they are welcome. In addition, develop additional lake viewing areas - much is blocked by houses and/or buildings,” “More trails, especially wetland interpretive/wildlife trails. There is a ton of potential here.”



Lasting Impressions

The assessors identified their **most positive experiences** while visiting East Jordan:

- The walkability and welcoming atmosphere of some business owners on Main Street.
- “Walking on Main Street and talking with the shop owners/assistants. Main Street felt very welcoming.”
- Enjoying access to the waterfront including the marina walk.
- “The water overall and specifically the city marina - I kept getting drawn back to that area.”
- Outdoor activities including camping in close proximity to the downtown and paddling the Jordan River.



However, the assessors also identified their **most negative experiences** while visiting East Jordan:

- Confusion on certain signage referencing the visitor center and it being inside the Chamber of Commerce.
- Lack of signage for attractions and locating nature areas to visit.
- “Trying to drive around to find some of the nature areas. I did give up on finding one as I don't use GPS.”
- Some of the businesses in the area were not particularly welcoming or accommodating to visitors (see raw data for more information).
- “Not great lodging in the community - this is a hindrance.”

What are the destinations strengths and challenges?

Strengths:

- Variety of retail, recreation and nature areas that are easily accessible from downtown.
- Close proximity to natural resources with wide-open access to lake and rivers.
- Walkability of the downtown and marina area.

Challenges:

- Lack of uniqueness/niche
- Hard to compete for tourism with Charlevoix and Petoskey so close by.
- Lack of tourist accommodations including lodging and dining catering to different audiences.
- The Chamber website has challenges with keeping links live and active when searching “things to do.”
- Lack of outdoor activity experiences including bike and kayak rentals, bike-friendly paths, hiking/youth tours.
- Building a connection between the industry and the city where visitors can learn.





Local Involvement

Assessors were asked if they identified organizations that are involved with tourism development. All five assessors identified the Chamber of Commerce, with three also noting the City of East Jordan as active organizations involved with tourism. Two of the five assessors noted that East Jordan Iron Works could play a larger role in East Jordan's tourism development, management and marketing.

Community Branding

After visiting the destination and reflecting on their assessment, assessors provided single-sentence statements best describing the East Jordan destination.

1. "An authentic northern Michigan coastal small town"
2. "A hydrologic paradise"
3. "Something for everyone"

One assessor felt the current slogan on the banners and doors at City Hall were good enough. Assessors also provided suggestions when asked what two items should appear on a visual logo for East Jordan. Four of the five assessors stated that water (river/lake) should appear on a visual logo for the community and three out of five noted that the iron works should be included as well. Assessors concluded that six months from now they will remember the scenery, the Iron Works building, paddling the Jordan River, the downtown beaches and nearby parks and that it's a lovely place. All five assessors stated they would either "likely" or "definitely" recommend East Jordan to friends and family and nearly all said they would visit on a pleasure trip in the future.

Using Senses and Safety

Most assessors didn't note any unpleasant smells or sounds while in East Jordan. Of the five assessors, one noted the flowering lilac bushes throughout the city and smell of BBQ coming from Blue Smoke and two noticed factory smells like plastic and sulfur coming from the industrial areas of the city. One visitor noted the pleasant sounds of birds in Sportsman's Park and one said the sounds coming from the iron works were unpleasant.

Regarding safety and security, the assessors were divided. While 2/5 felt safe and secure at all times, 3/5 did not. One felt safe and secure around town, but noted their room door at the Bed & Breakfast where they stayed did not lock. Another noted the lack of crosswalks and pedestrian signage to alert drivers to be more aware of pedestrians. One was a little apprehensive about hiking alone around the city.

III. Suggestions

Art:

- Tap local artists to conduct more downtown artwork.



- Develop walking or cycling tour in downtown highlighting local art around the city.

Business(es):

- Consider exploring pop-up retail options along waterfront or expanding farmer markets.
- Share Section 7 of the raw data in an organized meeting with local businesses visited by assessors.
- Invest in more lodging and dining options
 - Explore Airbnb as an accommodation option and community income generation tool.

Community:

- Expand maps/signage to direct visitors to attractions/welcome them to the area.
 - Strengthen East Jordan gateway signs to say “welcome” and “thank you for visiting” (including on South entrance and West entrance of town).
- Promote regional activities as well as local ones by working together with surrounding communities.
- Strengthen visitors understanding of “the Breezeway” by highlighting it with signage and perhaps themes and mile-markers.
- Identify niche/reason for tourists to visit by identifying agricultural, natural, and cultural resources, which could foster the development of a flagship destination.
- Incorporate East Jordan Iron Works partnership into tourism efforts with a museum or interpretive center.
- Review Section 8 in the Qualtrics data report and consider graphic/visual logo suggestions.
- Consider surveying visitors using portions of the FIT Visitors Manual that you would like a larger sample of opinions on (i.e. customer service, downtown, etc.).

Recreation:

- Develop and promote more outdoor recreational experiences.
 - Increase available amenities in parks like bike rentals, more benches/seating areas and designated bike paths.
 - Leverage Sportsman and Tourists parks as reasons for visitors to stop and stay.
- Develop specific walking tours highlighting history of the area, such as the marina, residential areas, and natural resources.
- Connect both sides of the river through thematic signage, banners, streetscape treatments, etc.

Additional Suggestions:

- Consider developing a “Be a Tourist in Your Own Community” event or activity (for example, the Alcona County Bus Tour).
- Use the stories of people who have made your community their home to weave a narrative that informs a sense of place and exemplifies what makes the community a great place to live, work, play and visit.
- Update all websites regularly (daily or weekly), ensuring business hours and other pertinent information is always accurate, such as links to “things to do.”
- Use social media to your advantage by engaging already active groups (students and adults) that are promoting your community already.



- Encourage monthly or quarterly business “after hours” at downtown businesses, and create downtown as a gathering place.
- Continue downtown improvements including sprucing up façades, making parking easy and available, filling vacant storefronts, creating visible business signage, creatively using vacant building window space, using sandwich boards and making other changes where needed.
- Improve marketing by involving downtown businesses, increasing cooperative marketing, utilizing regional guides and Pure Michigan branding, applying for state matching funds via the Downtown Development Authority and using other methods.
- Provide training to business owners and employees on customer service skills and local event and community happenings.
- Explore agritourism as a niche and become involved with the Michigan Agritourism Association (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>).
- Ensure all businesses are aware of and promote events and attractions in your community, including information that makes each place special and meaningful to the tourist.

IV. Additional Next Steps for All FIT Communities:

- Catalog existing funding sources, and search out new funding opportunities.
- Search out low-hanging tourism-related projects, picking one or two items that can be accomplished immediately and ensure their completion.
- Schedule a discussion between the community leadership team (CLT), local leaders, and active and concerned citizens of all ages to review this document and discuss opportunities to work together.
- Consult the FIT Community Next Steps manual provided to your CLT.
- Consider exploring the raw data further and identifying parts of the results to take action with; tap into MSU Extension Leadership and Tourism educators to facilitate your next steps.





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.

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.

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

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

Custom Tourism Programs

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