



First Impressions Tourism Assessment



First Impressions Tourism Summary Report Grayling, Michigan December 2021

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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 continued to provide Michigan communities with a plethora of data and suggestions based off first-time visitor perspectives and experiences.

This report is a general summary of raw data generated from visitor assessment surveys, photos, and discussions. Information presented in this report reflects the exclusive perspectives of five visitors to the City of Grayling and surrounding region.

The result of Grayling's FIT assessment and key findings were presented to the City of Grayling in December 2021. Additional information used to craft this report is available via the City of Grayling and/or MSU Extension.

II. Summary of Results

City of Grayling received five visitors during August and September 2021. All visitors are residents of Michigan and spent between 8-24 hours visiting a wide range of assets that contribute to Grayling's visitor/tourism economy. Visitors primarily visited Grayling alone or with a friend during a weekday. Three visitors stayed overnight either in a hotel/motel, bed and breakfast, or with friends/family. The remaining two visitors conducted day trips. In addition to onsite visits of Grayling, visitors also spent between 1-4 hour researching the community through the internet using various search engines and social media.

Pre-Visit Research via Web - Most Helpful Website(s)

1. Grayling Convention and Visitors Bureau was designated as the most helpful because it was considered highly informative, contained info on "Special Places to Visit" and encompasses a wide range of history and outdoor recreation.
 - o <https://grayling-mi.com/>
2. City of Grayling was designated the second most helpful because it has a decent organization of things to do under the "Community" menu and an impressive list of tourism assets.
 - o <https://www.cityofgrayling.org/>



Initial Impression

What is your initial “five-minute” impression after arriving?

- Entering from I-75 heading north into community feels like a drive-thru community. 4 lanes of traffic as you enter town, lots of parking lots with stores set back in plaza style. Curved sidewalks do line both sides of the 4-lane divided road, as well as sitting benches and flowers. Would be hard to relax and enjoy the area with the traffic but nice to provide decent resting spots for those walking through. Walkable business district on Michigan Av is not obvious and could be missed by most as they drive thru. M-72, that runs through Grayling, is the main connector of I-75 and the Grand Traverse/Sleeping Bear Dune area (LOTS of traffic on Fridays in the summer).
- Rough around the edges, the first impression coming from 75 from either direction is unremarkable, about like you'd expect in rural Michigan, not a place you'd really want to stop. Unfortunately, the way the downtown is oriented it's easy to miss if you catch a green light at Michigan Ave. I did appreciate new streetscaping and lighting on BL75 south of downtown, but more is needed.
- Though entries to town don't convey much sense of place, once I reached Michigan Avenue, was pleasantly surprised by the walkable retail environment!

Community Information

- Three visitors felt it was not easy to find a visitor center.
- Three visitors agreed it was easy to find a community/regional tourism brochure.
- Three visitors disagreed that the local regional newspaper was informative.
- Four visitors disagreed that information booths/kiosk exist to help locate attractions/services.

Visitor Motives – Assessors were presented with a list of 15 reasons visitors would come to a destination. They were asked to select the top three for the City of Grayling.

Be in nature	5
Seek adventure	3
Engage in sports activities	3
In transit to somewhere else	2
Get away from people	1
Visit friends and family	1
Relax	0
Enjoy the weather	0
Visit historical sites	0
Experience a unique culture	0
Shop	0
Experience the nightlife	0
Get entertained/for entertainment	0
Engage in business activities	0
Engage in religious activities	0
Total	15



Destination Attributes (Visitors were asked to rank each attribute.)

• Nature-based activities	15	Variety and quality of shopping options	11
• Adventure-based activities	15	Special events	11
• Customer service	14	Tourism management policies	11
• Conveniently located	14	Community involvement	11
• Value for money in tourism experiences	14	Activities for children	10
• Dedicated tourism attractions	13	Road conditions	10
• Shopping facilities	13	Variety and quality of accommodations	10
• Authenticity of attractions	13	Well known landmarks	10
• Hospitality and friendliness of residents	12	Pedestrian travel infrastructure	10
• Safety and security	12	Well-marked roads/attractions	9
• Variety of activities to do	12	Variety and quality of restaurants	9
• Historic/heritage attractions	12	Crowd management	9
• Cleanliness	11	Cultural attractions	8
• Accessibility of destination	11	Communication infrastructure	8
• Visitor accessibility to attractions	11	Directional signage	6
		Interesting architecture	6

Destination Asset Highlights:

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

- Hartwick Pines; Hansen Hills, Au Sable River and less so, the Manistee River
- Hartwick Pines, Camp Grayling
- The AuSable River, of course!
- The Au Sable River (Canoe, Kayak, Fly Fishing), Hartwick Pines State Park
- Au Sable- which seems to overshadow just about everything else

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

- Hansen Hills.. Au Sable River:
- Wellington Farm
- Lovells Museum of Trout Fishing History and Hartwick Pines
- Restaurants and Breweries
- Wellington Farm, Canoe/Kayaking, the big donut shop, I'd revisit the historical museum.



Destination Downtown Business Area:

1	Hanging baskets are displayed on the exterior of businesses	15
2	Parking charges are reasonable	15
3	There is pedestrian traffic (foot and bike)	15
4	The grounds have been landscaped with flowers, trees, shrubs, and bushes	14
5	Flags/banners are displayed on the exterior of businesses	14
6	This is a welcoming place	14
7	Walking sidewalks are well maintained	13
8	Parking is centrally located	13
9	Customers are greeted warmly when they walk through the door	13
10	People are smiling	13
11	The main downtown business area feels distinct or special	12
12	Parking is secure	11
13	The downtown business area is handicapped accessible	11
14	The main downtown business area is a major tourist draw for the area	11
15	There is a mix of ages	10
16	There are areas of green space	9
17	Additional walking paths are available	8
18	Vehicle traffic is managed to encourage pedestrian movement, via foot or bike	8
19	Bike lanes exist on roadways	6
20	There are walker/biker friendly signs	4
21	There is a gateway point to enter/leave town (piece of art, mural, sign, etc.)	4
22	There is a mix of ethnic groups	3

Lasting Impressions:

The assessors identified their **most positive experiences** while visiting Grayling:

- *Interacting with the historic society folks at the museum and the man running it!*
- *I really enjoyed the downtown area! Busy and friendly, it was very pleasant!*
- *I really enjoyed Artisan Village. I was very impressed with the quality and diversity of local art!*
- *New developments in town and seeing such a small town be able to sustain three breweries!*

The assessors also identified their **most negative experiences** while visiting Grayling:

- *Navigating traffic*
- *Probably entering the community unfortunately*
- *I was disturbed by the speed and volume of traffic streaming through downtown. I know this is an MDOT business route, but additional traffic calming would enhance the visitor experience and the tranquil, natural sense of place that is promoted.*
- *Not knowing there was a park/river access downtown until I was about to leave!*



Strengths:

- Cultural/Historical gathering place
- It's "the big city" centered in rural Michigan.
- Different food, night life and arts
- Regional tourist draw is strong with lots of offerings.
- Proximity to the Traverse Bay
- Central location that is proximate to downstate population and easily accessible.
- The town has a terrifically complete street grid
- Very walkable and bikeable
- The residential neighborhoods
- Great little business district
- Hanson Hills EV charging stations!
- The connection to nature and outdoor recreation is huge!
- The Au Sable river is considered one of the better fly-fishing rivers east of the Mississippi, four-season outdoor activities.
- Rail line and potential for passengers
- Outdoor recreation opportunities and growing reputation

Challenges:

- Getting people passing through to stop and/or choose this location for a jumping off place
- The gateways to the community are still very long, unattractive, hard streetscapes of sprawl especially at the south end of BL75. It's very easy to just keep driving without realizing there was anything to miss.
- The intersection of M72 and M93/75BL is a community gateway as well and needs to be softened up, cleaned up and traffic slowed.
- Business route traffic through downtown.
- Commercial property maintenance. Available quality lodging.
- I think they are challenged with more unique lodging offerings in town, more Airbnb options, and other ways for tourists to create authentic and unique experiences.
- 75 business drive and strip malls overshadowing the uniqueness of downtown.
- Driving foot traffic to the other side of main street.
- Maintaining/sustaining the ecology of the region should Grayling explode with development and more tourism.



Community Branding

After visiting the destination and reflecting on their assessment, assessors best described the destination as:

- “Gateway to the north!”
- “A rustic, artisan, recreational small-town”
- “A small Up North town to get away from it all and enjoy the outdoors”

Senses and Safety

- 100% of visitors did NOT experience unpleasant *smells* in the community of Grayling.
- 60% of visitors did experience unpleasant *sounds* in the community.
 - *Loud noise generated from traffic, large vehicles, and speedy cars were recognized as the main contributor to this unpleasant experience while visiting Grayling.*
- All five visitors felt *welcomed at all times* in Grayling and two provided additional comments to support this experience:
 - *I was extremely impressed with the customer service I received!*
 - *All business that I visited were welcoming and never did I feel unwelcomed!*
- When asked if there was *anything related to Covid-19* that impacted your perception of safety and security while in the community, visitors said –
 - *I appreciate the presence of sanitizer stations in the community, and that businesses were still requesting masks be worn and providing masks/sanitizer too.*
 - *The community was proactive with developing a social zone during this pandemic, though I was not sure if the entire community was designated as such or only certain areas.*

Trip Reflections

Assessors provided responses regarding what they will remember most about Grayling after six-months:

- *The Crawford County Historic Museum*
- *The pleasant downtown*
- *The Artisan Village*
- *Canoeing the Au Sable River*
- *Breweries, outdoor recreation, fishing, and variety of things to do.*
- *That I want to return to fish during a more productive time of year!*



Tourism Assets Visited During Grayling 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 individually resulting in multiple reviews of one asset. Reviews of individual assets are available. Please contact the host community or MSU Extension for more information.

- **Attractions and Activities**

- Crawford County Historical Museum
- Crawford County Sports Complex
- Hanson Hills Recreation Area
- Au Sable River – Several Public Access Points
 - (Town to Stephan Bridge Canoe Paddle)
 - Thendara Rd.
 - Thunder Bird Rd.
- Wellington Farms
- Gates Lodge (Accommodation)
- Borchers B&B (Accommodation)
- Au Sable Artisan Village
- Au Sable Park
- Main Branch Gallery, LLC
- Grayling Farmers Market and Park
- Hartwick Pines
- Pavilion Park
- Good Creek Trail Camp
- Upper Manistee State Forest Campground
- DNR Beach near McIntyre Landing
- Manistee River Bridge State Forest Campground
- Lake Margrethe State Campground
- Beal Plantation

- **Eat and Drinking Places**

- Northbound Food Truck
- Michigan Brew
- Spike’s Keg o Nails
- Grayling Restaurant
- Gates Lodge Restaurant
- Dirty BBQ at Brewery
- Goodales Bakery
- Paddle Hard Brewing
- Rolling Oak Brewery
- Wimpys
- Coffee by Steph

- **Shopping Places**

- Tip of the Mitten
- The Curator
- Artisan Village
- The Old Lumbar Yard Shoppes
- Sweet Life
- Ron’s Fly Shop
- Gates Fly Shop
- Au Sable Gifts
- North Country Corner



III. Suggestions

As part of the FIT program, visitors provide suggestions for improvements to participating communities. These suggestions typically group into four categories: art, business, community, and recreation. The suggestions provided in this report are usually direct quotes from assessors. Some information presented in the suggestions may be inaccurate due to the assessors' lack of historical knowledge and/or familiarity of the community's entire assets.





There's too much of this in downtown... Could Artisan Village artists paint these facades to bring them to life until a new owner or tenant comes along?



- Several public parking lots are NOT welcoming - despite what the sign says!
- Public parking lots are a bit austere could use maintenance, maybe some asphalt, public art (murals).
- These need to be improved with paving, curbs, plantings, and public art (murals).



These are real eyesores!

- This corner needs a prominent (at least 2 story) building to give the street some definition and to help signal to motorists they are arriving downtown...
- Perhaps pocket parks would suit the corner of 72/93



Soften this streetscape would be welcome, such as signage to prepare drivers passing through for the cool stuff in downtown like: Brewery, coffee, art galleries ahead. If this exists, I missed it!



“This is a rather unique built form for a Michigan main street. I could see the city working with business owners to expand the use of the arcade to more properties to protect shoppers during wet, hot, and winter weather.”



“This could then be leveraged as a 'wild' or 'rustic' theme/sense of place.”



- I would like to see a theme like this carried throughout town to really help build a brand.
- Welcome sign from the North could use more plantings, beautification.
- Additional signs are needed West and East



- Continue to explore the logging history of the area and highlight it
- Elevate the Native American history of the area too (accurately).



Inside the history museum is where most of the historical/recreational culture is confined, unfortunately. Seems Grayling needs to open Pandora's Box and let some of that filter into the community.

- Elevate this history/recreation as part of your identity
- Weave into the downtown/community in appropriate place highlighting historical recreational significance



Could a pedestrian tunnel be placed here under BL75? I would love to see a Riverwalk from the hatchery all the way to the county building. At least from here to the county building as a first step...I think it should be a long-term goal.



- Approach the State Police with a land swap deal to take this property over as a city park.
- Build or reuse facilities on top of the hill with limited parking,
- Retain the river launch and build an amphitheater into the side of the hill”

Visitor Motives

Be in nature	5
Seek adventure	3
Engage in sports activities	3
In transit to somewhere else	2
Get away from people	1

Destination Attributes

• Nature-based activities	15
• Adventure-based activities	15
• Customer service	14
• Conveniently located	14

Establish Grayling as Eco / Sustainable Tourism Destination

- Build from existing ecology/nature-based tourism industry
- Establish set of sustainable tourism protocols/principles
 - Social, Economic, and Ecological
- Incorporate principles into community narrative and actions via public and private sector partnership(s)
- Be one of the first in Michigan!





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 take action.
 - 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.)

Funding for this assessment was provided in part by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation as a benefit of Grayling’s status as a Certified Redevelopment Ready Community. Further information can be found by visiting - <https://www.miplace.org/programs/redevelopment-ready-communities/>



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>.

