



First Impressions Tourism Assessment



First Impressions Tourism Summary Report Village of Cassopolis, Michigan February 2022

Compiled by:

Andy Northrop, Michigan State University Extension



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.

The Village of Cassopolis, Michigan participated in FIT beginning in 2021 and into the first half of 2022. The result of Cassopolis' FIT assessment and key findings were presented to the Village's FIT Community Leadership Team (CLT) in early 2022 via Zoom. Those results were later shared in May 2022 at a public event organized by the CLT as part of the final step to the FIT program.

The Michigan Economic Development Corporation provided funding for the Village of Cassopolis to undergo the FIT program as part of their Redevelopment Ready Certification effort.

II. Summary of Results

The Village of Cassopolis (VC) received five visitors during August 2021, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors". All assessors are currently MSU Extension employees. Three assessors were male and the other two female. Two assessors identified as Millennials while the other three Generation X. Three assessors visited VC alone while the remaining two assessors came either with their friend or spouse/partner. To generate diverse perspectives, assessors visited VC at separate times during weekdays and/or weekends. Three assessors stayed overnight in a hotel/motel while the other two assessors conducted day trips into VC. All assessors are residents of Michigan and spent between 6-24 hours visiting VC'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 VC through internet using various search engines and social media. The report here is a general summary of highlights collected from raw data, photos, discussions, and assessor surveys.

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

1. *Village of Cassopolis website – <https://cassopolis-mi.us/>*
 - o *This website had the most amount of information of websites that popped up when googling Cassopolis. Although it really wasn't that helpful in finding specific things to do when visiting. It was really geared more towards local residents than people that were visiting from out of town.*



- o This city's website was helpful, but not set up to orient the tourist/visitors to the area.

The image shows two screenshots. The left one is the Village of Cassopolis website homepage, featuring a navigation menu, a welcome message, and descriptive text about the village's location and history. The right one is a newsletter titled 'CASSOPOLIS CURRENT' for July 2021, containing various community news items and event announcements.

- Information was well presented – 60% agreed
- Web pages were visually appealing – 20% agreed
- It was easy to find information – 80% strongly disagreed/disagreed
- More information is needed on the site – 100% strongly agreed

Digital Resources:

Majority of assessors found TripAdvisor to house the most useful information when visiting the Village of Cassopolis.

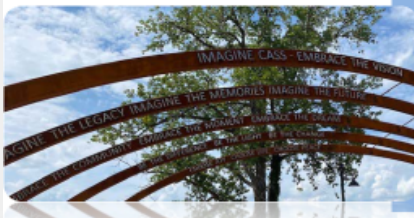
The image shows a screenshot of the TripAdvisor website for Cassopolis. It features the TripAdvisor logo, search filters for hotels, vacation rentals, things to do, restaurants, and tour operators, and a map of the area with red location pins.

1. Trip Advisor was most helpful for finding restaurants and accommodations (or affirming that there were no accommodations in Cassopolis).
2. Trip Advisor provided information on attractions.
3. A combination of Trip Advisor and Yelp were most useful. They both had lists and maps of places/activities in the area with a smattering of reviews. The biggest help about these sites compared to other was that by using the map I could narrow the focus to what was in Cassopolis,



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

- I thought this was an interesting little town. The downtown had some buildings that were in very good shape and had unique architectural finishes. The lake being right in downtown, and the beach area were attractions that I wasn't expecting but inclined me to want to stop and explore more. Overall, a nice little town with lots of potential.
- Underwhelmed could describe the initial impression. Seemed like I was entering any small town along any MI road.



There are not many open businesses, and I am looking around for a place to shop. The city has done so much work recently on sidewalks, garden spaces, and murals. It seems like a monumental effort on the city's part and the business community has not caught up.

Community Information

- All five assessors felt it was not easy to find a visitor center
- All five assessors disagreed it was easy to find a community/regional tourism brochure
- All five assessors disagreed the local regional newspaper was informative

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 reasons someone might visit the Village of Cassopolis.

Visit friends and family	5
Relax	4
In transit to somewhere else	3
Be in nature	1
Visit historical sites	1
Engage in business activities	1
Enjoy the weather	0
Seek adventure	0
Engage in sports activities	0
Get away from people	0
Experience a unique culture	0
Shop	0
Experience the nightlife	0
Get entertained/for entertainment	0
Engage in religious activities	0



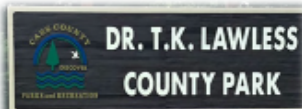
Destination Attributes (Rankings: Best = 15, Worst = 0)

Customer service	13	Activities for children	6
Hospitality and friendliness of residents	12	Adventure-based activities	6
Community involvement	11	Historic/heritage attractions	6
Safety and security	9	Communication infrastructure	6
Interesting architecture	9	Accessibility of destination	5
Authenticity of attractions	9	Special events	5
Dedicated tourism attractions	8	Well known landmarks	5
Cleanliness	8	Conveniently located	4
Value for money in tourism experiences	8	Variety of activities to do	4
Cultural attractions	8	Variety and quality of restaurants	3
Crowd management	8	Shopping facilities	2
Visitor accessibility to attractions	7	Tourism management policies	2
Road conditions	7	Well-marked roads/attractions	1
Nature-based activities	7	Variety and quality of shopping options	1
Pedestrian travel infrastructure	7	Directional signage	0
		Variety and quality of accommodations	0

Destination Asset Highlights:

Are there other places that you did not visit that you would feel compelled to visit if you returned?

1. Dr. Lawless Dark Sky Park and all the trails
2. The Bonine and Newton Houses
3. Underground Railroad History
4. Holden Green Tavern
5. Dussell's Farm Market
6. CC Historical Library
7. Pioneer Log Cabin
8. Swiss Valley Ski Area
9. The dual lakes





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

- Carnegie History Library, Diamond Lake, Stone Lake Beach (x2)
- The Ed Lowe Foundation...I was elated to see it on the map and check it out but had no idea it was near Cassopolis!
- Clearly the dual lakes are something they might or could be known for, but there is so much more they could be known for, such as the history in the area, ag-tourism, Swiss Valley, etc. I

Are there specialty shops or attractions that would bring you back?

- The beach area,
- Pioneer Log Cabin
- The Village Floral
- Bonine House, Newton House, and area's history,
- Swiss Valley Ski Area,
- Dr. Lawless Dark Sky Park
- Farmer's Market and Dussel's



Destination Downtown Business Area: (Best = 15, Worst = 0)

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



Lasting Impressions:

The assessors identified their **most positive experiences** while visiting Village of Cassopolis:

- *Visiting the beach area and taking my C1 racing canoe out onto Stone Lake for a few laps in the afternoon...I really enjoyed walking around the beach area and exploring the water*
- *Breakfast on the swings at the beach.*
- *Jumping off the pier at the park on a very hot day and going to the Holden Green Tavern--*
- *The murals downtown were fantastic and rare to see.*
- *The historical diversity offered in the area around slavery/emancipation.*
- *Downtown music and Wi-Fi*
- *The drive between Cass and Dowagiac was quite pleasant*
- *The significant potential for agritourism*
- *Renting a kayak for cheap and getting out on the water. Interactions with the staff at the rental/snack booth were very positive.*

The assessors also identified their **most negative experiences** while visiting Village of Cassopolis:

- *I think overall it was driving into town and seeing some of the chain stores, marijuana dispensaries and not having that gateway feeling when coming into the downtown.*
- *Finding lunch.*
- *There was a real lack of retail options in the downtown and nowhere to stay within Cassopolis. The accommodations in Dowagiac were such that I would not want to return to that hotel.*
- *Seemed to be distinct disconnect between VC/Stone Lake and Diamond Lake.*
- *No accommodation options of any kind*
- *No signage for parking, the lakes, murals, etc.*
- *Very poor website presence for the wide range of assets in the area*
- *Finding that places were closed once I got to the village and nothing online about places*



Strengths:

- History:
 - African-American
 - Freedom Seekers
 - Native American
- Parks:
 - TK Lawless Park
 - Dark Sky
 - MTB Trails
 - Cass County Parks
 - Trails
- Downtown:
 - Available space
 - Inexpensive activities
 - Streetscape attractiveness
 - Downtown landscaping and sidewalk detailing
 - Wi-Fi
- Two lakes
 - Diamond Lake
 - Stone Lake & Beach
- Proximity to other lake-based communities
- Number of visitors to the area
- Location:
 - State highways
 - Chicago, major cities
- Sense of pride
- Dedicated residents
- Agri-tourism opportunities
- A (hidden) ski resort
- Potential for bike trails



Challenges:

- Poor internet presence and marketing of regional assets
- Convincing people to visit
- Attracting people
- Highlighting the history
- Highlighting the mural artists
- Understanding the
 - permanent,
 - seasonal,
 - and episodic visitors/residents
- Lack of accommodation in and nearby to VC
- Vacant storefronts and buildings
- Lack of identity, brand
- Lack of signage
- Capturing the lake(s) crowds into downtown
- Clear disconnect from Diamond Lake (and neighboring communities)





Community Branding - After visiting the destination and reflecting on their assessment, assessors best described the destination as -

- “History, culture, and nature on the shores of Stone and Diamond Lakes”
- “A historic place that is trying to come back”
- Great destination for a girls day out!

Senses & Safety

- Four assessors felt always welcomed in the community. Comments included:
 - *I felt very welcome in all spaces of the community*
 - *People were friendly, attentive, and ready to wave or talk at any moment. Nice folks!*
- However, outside of Cassopolis area one assessor felt they should not be visiting Diamond Lake unless invited.
- Two assessors did experience unpleasant sounds in the community.
 - *Truck traffic rumbling through and youth at the pier using inappropriate language.*
- Did you feel safe and secure at all times? Three assessors said “No”. Comments as to why include:
 - *Underpass/Railroad bridge connecting to Diamond Lake seemed unsafe*
 - *Parking and walking along M-62 generated unsafe feelings when exiting personal vehicles and at pedestrian crosswalks.*
- When asked if there was anything related to Covid-19 that impacted your perception of safety and security while in the community, assessors had even mixed responses
 - *I didn’t notice anything that was Covid-19 related that impacted my safety and security.*However, other assessors said –
 - *I know as a traveler this is something I would have liked to see taken more seriously.*
 - *I did not feel like the places I visited were putting safety first.*

Trip Reflections

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

- Mural of the 1847 Kentucky Raid and area’s history
- Paddle boarding and the beach on Stone Lake.
- Jumping in the lake on a very hot day and the Holden Green Tavern experience.
- The historical connection in the area to Native American/African history, a ski resort, and mountain bike trails and a dark sky part 20 miles East of town.
- As cheesy as it is, that darn lake monster paddleboat.



Tourism Assets Visited and Experienced

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 on assets visited.

Attractions and Activities

- Stone Lake
 - Waterfront
 - Canoeing
 - Beach
 - Paddle board
- Parks
 - Don Horne Park
 - Russ Forest Park
 - Howell Point Park
- Old Village Hall
- Broadway Café
- Dr TK. Lawless Park
 - Mountain Biking Trail(s)
 - Dark Sky Park
- Village Hall
- Edward Lowe Foundation Visitor Center
- Diamond Lake/DNR Access
 - Marina
- Veterans Memorial Park
- Pioneer Log Cabin/Lewis Cass
- Kincheloe Memorial Park
- Cass County Fairgrounds
- Bonine and Newton Houses
- Cass District Library Historic Local Branch

- Historical Tour
- Sinclair Station
- Swiss Valley Ski and Snowboard Area

Eating and Drinking Places

- The Twirl
- Broadway Café
- Diamond Lake Ice Cream Parlor
- Holden Green Tavern
- Taqueria Food Truck
- Marcello's Pizza
- Biggby
- Pigs by Big-Food Truck
- Wood, Stock, and Grill Food Truck

The Shopping Places

- Dussells Market
- Community Mills
- Village Floral
- Hayden Hardware
- Marathon
- On the Mantle
- Porky's Party Place
- Restoration Station Thrift Store
- Antique Stores



Village of Cassopolis FIT Community Leadership Team



RE: Updated list of CLT members

Dave Allen

Midwest Energy & Communications
Vice President of Regulatory Affairs
Dave.Allen@teammidwest.com

Ted Gogol

The Lodges at Stone Lake
Stone Lake Family Adventures, LLC
Owner/Operator
ted@thelodgesatstonelake.com

Monica McMichael

Cass County Elected Official
Cass County Clerk
monicam@cassco.org

Denise Bradley

Sinclair Station
144 Broadway
Owner/Operator
info@dbidesigns.com
thedinoprojectllc@gmail.com

Billie Hires

Cass/Vandalia Chamber of Commerce
President
bhires@gwjonesbank.com

Mark VanDusen

Cassopolis Main Street Committee
Cressy & Everett Real Estate
markvandusen@cressyeverett.com

Roseann Marchetti

Cass County Economic Development Committee
Cass County Board of Commissioners
roseannm@cassco.org

Emilie La Grow, Esp.

Village Manager
121 N. Disbrow
Cassopolis, MI 49031
manager@cassopolis-mi.us



III. Suggestions

As part of the FIT program, assessors provide suggestions for improvements to participating communities' small-town tourism/visitor economies. 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.



FIT Assessor Suggestions for Village of Cassopolis, MI



There was so much discovered after spending a day or two there that was not anywhere to be found on the web. Not even TripAdvisor! Clearly there is an abundance of local and regional assets that would aid this community in becoming more than they are currently. Many local assets are overlooked, but even several regional assets that are in neighboring towns could and should be highlighted. It would be a win-win for them and other towns too.



- Create a community newspaper/newsletter and place at popular locations (Porky's, Dussel's etc.)
- Paint and add signage explaining the quotes on the archways.
 - *Was there a contest for the quotes?
How were they selected?*
- Improve gateway signage coming from East and South
- Strengthen awareness of and connection to the Village, Stone Lake, and Diamond Lake
- Develop (parking) signage for Lakes
- Elevate/restore/open the train depot





The Village will need to continue to fund maintenance operations for these varied landscape features and the park....Daily maintenance or every-other day cleaning will be required at the waterfront park as it becomes more popular.



A directional sign at this corner that directs people to parking lot at the bottom of the hill would have been helpful. It was not clear to a first-time visitor that there is a public beachfront at the end of the shopping district. This sign would be helpful for pedestrians and bikers as well.

- Use FIT identified assets to populate a “Things to do” in Cassopolis
 - *What to do, where to go, how to, etc.*
- Indicate that the downtown light posts are sources of wi-fi
 - *I heard the music from the lights right away, but it wasn't until chatting with a resident that I learned they also provided Wi-Fi.*
- Establish and monitor social media
- Add a widget to the Village’s webpage to show social media posts on the main page.
- Use Trip Advisor to your advantage
- Create a comprehensive community calendar and post online
 - *The current calendar on the Village’s website only lists public meeting/government business type events. I had to go to the newsletter or hunt on Facebook to find all the other happenings.*





- Highlight the Chamber better, if there is one that truly represent Cassopolis or the area.
- Increase outdoor seating via zoning ordinances, if necessary, downtown will breathe life into town
- Edward Lowe Foundation:
 - Invite Edward Lowe Foundation into public/private strategic planning sessions.
 - Partner to include Cassopolis Visitor Information at their Information Center/to visitors

Agri-business

- Highlight the local/regional food system through maps, brochures, and events
- Expand the Farmer's Market by increasing vendors and crafts
- Due to the abundance of agriculture on the periphery of VC, leverage this culture for what could become a robust agritourism industry.



The west side of Broadway is more architecturally uniform than the east side. The facade design of the building (with the rock face and smaller windows) is eye catching but is not cohesive with the rest of the downtown. When a building is significantly remodeled, the village should have consistent design elements to support a more cohesive architectural look to the downtown. In some cases, a remodel could also trigger removal of elements that were added to or cover the original architecture of the building.



While most of the town is well maintained, there are a few pockets here and there of either accumulated junk or building maintenance issues. As the community has invested so much time and energy to redesign the downtown and waterfront- similar energy may be needed for blight, junk clean up days, and other building/façade improvement grants.



Due to the strong internet presence of the log cabin/history museum, this was the first place on the itinerary. While I could see some effort to make the bathrooms nice (fancy mirrors) the bathrooms need maintenance and repair. Minor upgrades such as purse hooks could help. This was not a good visitor experience or first impression.



To the visitor, the entire area between Cassopolis and Diamond Lake appear on the map as one community. Diamond Lake is dominated with private access only, so it makes sense that people don't go there. This bridge under the railroad feels like it has a heavy history of exclusion. I am left wondering if the newly paved boulevard leading to the bridge and the bridge itself can become a positive linkage between the two communities and signal to visitors that they are welcome on both sides.

Reopen Pioneer Log Cabin

Continue to raise awareness of the "Freedom Seeker" history that is already prevalent

- Partner with Bonine House and Underground Railroad to elevate this important history
 - QR codes, Brochures, etc.
- Elevate this history and incorporate as part of VC identity and "things to do"

Art Murals:

- Use QR codes to highlight ALL the murals via web
- Give their story
- Link to Village website with history page

Link murals to a historical/art trail

- Highlight history, artists,

Showcase art and history in vacant stores





With several empty storefronts on the main street, it seems there is an opportunity for improved window dressing. Some of these large glass windows could be used to display work of local artists, kids art, historic items, images, or stories. How about a window describing the Master Plan, Fugitive Slave Law, public engagement, streetscape design, and park—that might be an interesting story for visitors to know about.



This is an image of Don Horne Park, located to the south of the Family Clinic Community Health Center and adjacent to the Little League fields. One example of the many parks available to residents and visitors in Cassopolis.

Not pictured were the many trash receptacles lined up to serve the Little League fields. Recommend corralling the trash receptacles into one place or replace them with one dumpster for a more organized appearance.



Outdoor Recreation Assets Identified in/near Village of Cassopolis

- Highlight and link up to the Cass County parks that offer:
 - Dr. Lawless Park
 - Dark Sky and Mountain Bike Trail
 - Events
 - Russ Forest Park
 - Walking/Hiking trails
 - Highlight these unique assets as “Things To Do”
- Link to Discovercasscounty.com –
 - Not working as of mid-August
- “To Do”
 - Highlight the Swiss Valley Ski area
 - Local camping options
- Trails:
 - Walking/biking trails of the area
 - North/South from Cassopolis to Dowagiac - it is a beautiful drive!
 - The hill across from new the new village hall for winter activities (sledding).



View all facilities
Dr. T.K. Lawless Park



Admission Fee	\$1 for county resident \$3 for non-county resident
Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📄 T.K. Lawless Trail Map (PDF) 📄 Bike Trail Map (PDF) 📄 T.K. Lawless Disc Golf Course (PDF) 📄 Dr. T.K. Lawless Park Map (GIF)



IV. 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 reviews of private sector assets visited during the FIT assessment and leverage reviews to make improvements.
 - Share asset reviews with each stakeholder and/or department.
- Schedule a public discussion around FIT results 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 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/>
- Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Recreation Grants
 - https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79134_81684_79209---,00.html
- 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.

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.

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>.