First Impressions Tourism Assessment

Grand Blanc, MI

Summary of Results

October 2023

Compiled by:

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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 via a multi-state grant provided by 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

II. Summary of Results for City of Grand Blanc, MI

The City of Grand Blanc began their participation in MSU Extension's FIT program in early 2023 as part of their Redevelopment Ready Certification effort with Michigan Economic Development Corporation. The key findings summarized in this report were presented to the Grand Blanc community in October 2023.

Visitor/Assessor Profiles:

The City of Grand Blanc and surrounding area (GBA) received six visitors in the Summer 2023, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors". To generate diverse perspectives, a wide range of assessors were recruited across multiple disciplines within MSU Extension. All assessors are currently residents of Michigan and had minimal to no knowledge of GBA prior to participating.

Three assessors were male and three were female. One assessor identified as Generation Z, two assessors identified as Millennials, two as Generation X, and one as a Baby Boomer. Assessors were non-parents or parents. Assessors identified in their personal lives as either retired, artists, bicyclists (or mountain bikers), entrepreneurs, non-profit leaders, hikers, and/or world travelers. Five assessors visited GBA alone while the remaining assessor visited with their family (3+ people). To generate diverse experiences, assessors visited GBA separately during different days of the week between late May and early July. GBA received two visitors on Thursday, one on Friday, two on Saturday, and one Sunday. Five assessors stayed in a local hotel and the remaining one assessor made two separate day trips. All assessors spent between 18-24 hours visiting

wide range of assets that contribute to the local economy. In addition to onsite visits, visitors also spent between 1-4 hour researching GBA using mobile devices and/or personal computers visiting various websites and social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, TripAdvisor, and YouTube. This report is a general summary of data collected highlighting assessors' experiences captured before, during, and after via survey data. Results are separated by Pre-Visit, The Visit, and Post-Visit Reflections.

Pre-Visit:

First Impressions based on web research (Italics are direct quotes)

- *I visualized a lovely, quiet bedroom community (suburban) that would be great in which to raise a family, or possibly do business. But I could not really find anything much that would serve as a reason for tourists to visit Grand Blanc.*
- *Overall, I had a somewhat negative impression based the minimal information found on multiple digital resources.*
- *I had trouble visualizing the city, as I saw only parks on the city website and no other images on the chamber website.*
- *Frankly, just based on the information that's out their Grand Blanc seems like a nice place to live but there's probably not any real reason for someone not from there to make a point of visiting per se.*
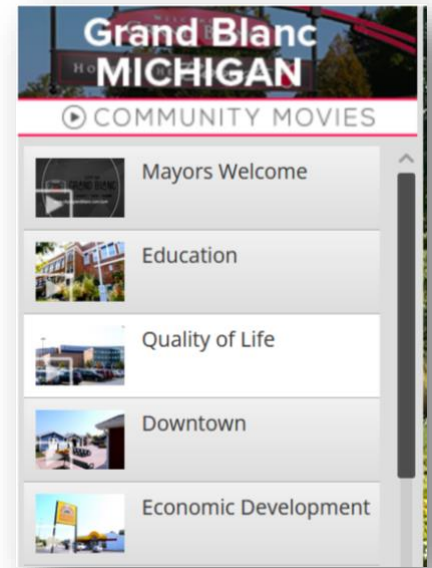
Most Helpful Website- City of Grand Blanc - cityofgrandblancmi.gov/

- *It provided information on the various parks, recreation areas, as well as news and visitor information.*
- *The official community website was most useful for understanding the community overall, and its services. But nothing was really useful as related to "tourism things to do."*

Second Most Helpful Website- Chamber of Commerce - grandblancchamberofcommerce.com/

- *Chamber of Commerce's calendar seemed to be the most up to date for events and had links to other websites that helped me plan my visit.*

- **Most Helpful Website Challenges –**
    - *Four assessors (67%) thought information was well presented.*
    - *Three assessors (50%) stated information was useful for a trip.*
    - *Five assessors (83%) stated that more information is needed on both websites.*

Social Media –
- *I used Facebook, YouTube, and TripAdvisor because there was no other way of learning of what might be happening there. Facebook and YouTube have surprisingly good info for visitors!*
- *I heavily utilized Instagram in researching the community prior to my visit; since Instagram is pictures and videos, it provides a look at different restaurants, shops, attractions, etc. in the community.*

Based on website research, what attractions and/or events is this community is known for?
- *Golfing*
- *Parks*
- *Youth sports tournaments*
- *Large high school football field*
- *Professional visits (GM Plant)*
- *Seasonal Events*
    - *Renaissance Festival*
    - *Mt Holly*
    - *Rotten Manor*
    - *Food Trucks*
    - *GB Family Fun Fest*

The Visit:

First 5 Minute Impression(s) – (r*esponses are direct quotes*)

- *The community is "neat, green, full of flowers and mural art," with nice residential areas, a LOT of strip malls, and the vast majority of businesses located on the various roads that bisect the city.*

- *I was impressed! There were a few vacant lots/buildings, but all of the buildings that were occupied looked like they had great upkeep and nice landscaping all around… I was, however, concerned with the main drag (Saginaw Rd), the speed limit was 35 MPH rather than 25 MPH which is more typical for downtowns… I was a little worried about walking on that as a pedestrian and would have liked a little more space in between me and the road.*

- *My very first impression was quite positive. Driving in on E Grand Blanc Rd towards Saginaw Rd there was clear signate, streets/sidewalks were clean, bike lanes were present. They are felt welcoming to pedestrians with things like benches, hanging flower baskets, painted electrical boxes. It felt like a nice, small-town downtown area.   My first impression suffered as soon as I turned on to Saginaw Road. Despite clear effort to make the area look nice and present a place people would want to visit/hang out, 4 lanes (plus turn lane) of relatively fast-moving traffic made it suddenly feel like a place to pass through, rather than a place to go.*

Community Information Available to Visitors –

- It was easy to find information for visitors –
  - *2 Agreed, 4 Disagreed*
- Info available was useful for visitors –
  - *2 Agreed, 4 Disagreed*
- It was easy to find a community/tourist brochure –
  - *1 Agreed, 2 Neutral, 3 Disagreed*

Visitor Motives — Assessors were presented with a list of 14 visitor motives. They were then asked to select the top three motives someone might have to visit this community and surrounding area.

In transit to somewhere else	6
Visit friends and family	5
Engage in business activities	3
Other	3
Outdoor recreation (MTB, Hiking, etc.)	2
Other	1
Relax	0
Be in nature	0
Get away from people	0
Visit historical sites	0
Experience a unique culture	0
Shop	0
Agritourism	0
Get entertained/for entertainment	0
Engage in religious activities	0
Total	20

- ☐ Visit one of many salons
- ☐ Obtain healthcare
- ☐ eat at a restaurant
- ☐ attend school sports activity

Grand Blanc's Downtown Business Area (Best = 18, Worst = 0)

Parking charges are reasonable	18
The grounds have been landscaped with flowers, trees, shrubs, and bushes	15
Parking is centrally located	14
Parking is secure	14
There are areas of green space	13
There is a gateway point to enter/leave town (piece of art, mural, sign, etc.)	13
Business information is displayed on the exterior of businesses	12
Walking sidewalks are well maintained	12
Inviting signs are displayed on the exterior of businesses	10
The downtown business area is handicapped accessible	9
There is a mix of ages	9
There is a mix of ethnic groups	9
Additional walking paths are available	5
This is a welcoming downtown	5
The main downtown business area feels distinct or special	5
There are walker/biker friendly signs	4
Bike lanes exist on roadways	3
There is pedestrian traffic (foot and bike)	2
The main downtown business area is a major tourists draw for the area	2
Vehicle traffic is managed to encourage pedestrian movement, via foot or bike	0

Downtown Impressions and Ideas:

- *Did you feel welcomed in the community? – Five assessors said, Yes!*
    - *Absolutely. Every single person I encountered was friendly, the businesses by and large all had great customer service and were welcoming, and I also particularly loved the LGBTQIA+ welcoming sticker on the door to R & B Used Books.*
    - *I didn't feel welcome or unwelcomed… There was so much restriction on my mobility that it really prevented me from interacting with anyone.*
    - *All customer service was very pleasant, and folks were friendly. Not much organic meeting of other people while out and about walking though…*
- *Did you feel safe at all times?*
    - *In terms of crime, totally fine. But walking around on S. Saginaw is a little hair raising with five lanes of traffic and so many driveways.*
    - *I felt unsafe walking near and around their downtown going from North/South, but West near the municipal building was more comfortable.*

Destination Attributes (Rankings: Best = 18, Worst = 0)

Attribute	Score
Cleanliness	14
Communication infrastructure	14
Customer service	12
Road conditions	12
Hospitality and friendliness of residents	11
Safety and security	11
Activities for children	11
Variety and quality of restaurants	11
Community involvement	11
Conveniently located	10
Accessibility of destination	9
Nature-based activities	9
Variety and quality of shopping options	8
Special events	8
Visitor accessibility to attractions	7
Shopping facilities	7
Value for money in tourism experiences	7
Authenticity of attractions	7
Variety of activities to do	5
Directional signage	5
Well-marked roads/attractions	5
Pedestrian travel infrastructure	5
Variety and quality of accommodations	4
Well known landmarks	4
Historic/heritage attractions	3
Cultural attractions	3
Adventure-based activities	2
Interesting architecture	2
Dedicated tourism attractions	1

Arts and Culture

- *I was impressed with the active art mural scene and utilizing public utilities as canvas. This is helpful and inviting to the visitor with the creative eye.*
- *Local arts council looks to do a good job supporting local artist based on website information.*
- *Public mural art on buildings and electric control boxes were creative and aesthetically pleasing and galleries/art shops…*
- *Loved the story trail provided by the area library along the river at Rust Park… Loved the murals!*
- *Presence of Master Gardeners was impressive!*

Post-Visit Reflections:

What will you remember most about Grand Blanc six months from now?

- Friendly and welcoming staff
- Grand Blanc Commons
- Quality Parks
- Rust Park
- Few nice shops
- Yemeni Coffee
- Very large football stadium
- Returning for Ren Fest and Rotten Manor
- Odd intersection near McDonalds
- Poor walkability and mobility options for visitors
- Saginaw Road discouraging visitors to stop
- Nearly getting hit twice while walking in the strip mall parking lot by drivers going to Firehouse Subs

FIT Assessor Identified Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities –

Strengths

- Friendliness
- Welcoming
- Helpful services
  - Residents
- Community-minded sentiment
- Active public sector leaders
- Natural areas
- Rust Park
- GB Commons
- Strong outdoor recreation options
  - (parks, MTB, skiing)
- Green spaces
- Well-kept
- Clean sidewalks
- Healthy storefronts
- Diverse food options
- ADA accommodating curbs
- Obvious beautification
- Foundations to support community
- More resident driven
- Walkable neighborhoods
- Nice place to live

Challenges

- Downtown
  - safety
  - speeding
  - traffic
  - walkability
- Lack of signage
- Community sprawl
- Dangerous parking areas
- Large tracts of parking
- Digital presence
- Little info for onsite visitors
- Virtually no marketing
- No "open doors" on main street
- Rear access to business
- Disconnection of assets
  - Historical, natural
- Lack of info
  - (maps, brochures, etc.)
- Buried Parks/Rec plan
- Little to draw in visitors
- Lack of identity to visitors

Opportunities:

1. Arts and Culture
2. Business
3. Community Development
4. Community Marketing/Web
5. Outdoor Recreation

Arts and Culture

- Make more information available as to who painted the murals and why
- Increase present of local artists work in the community, as highlighted on local arts council website

- The interpretive signs around the pavilion,
  - Text heavy, improve with digestible blocks,
  - Add a QR code and link to audio podcast
  - Elevate this history elsewhere (web)

- Tie public artwork/murals together as a system
  - Create a map, develop a story,
  - Implement a walking trail/tour in safe route
  - Strengthen the connection across history and artwork through story telling

Business

- The experiences at the Shopaholic and Grafted Root were great.
  - *"It would be great to have these downtown and walkable"*

- The access point to this set of shops was
  - *"challenging and dangerous with the shared drive to the McDonalds exit and the traffic signal."*

- Improve signage to these shops
  - *"was ineffective"*
  - *"hard to find for outsiders"*

Community Development

- Use a road diet to slow traffic
- Invest in larger GB city limits signs
- Invest in directional signage
- Connect parks with downtown using signage
- Highlight pop-up retail
- Develop concrete lots into pocket parks
- Fill empty parking lots with creativity activities
  - Directional maps
  - Chalk the lot
  - Local artwork
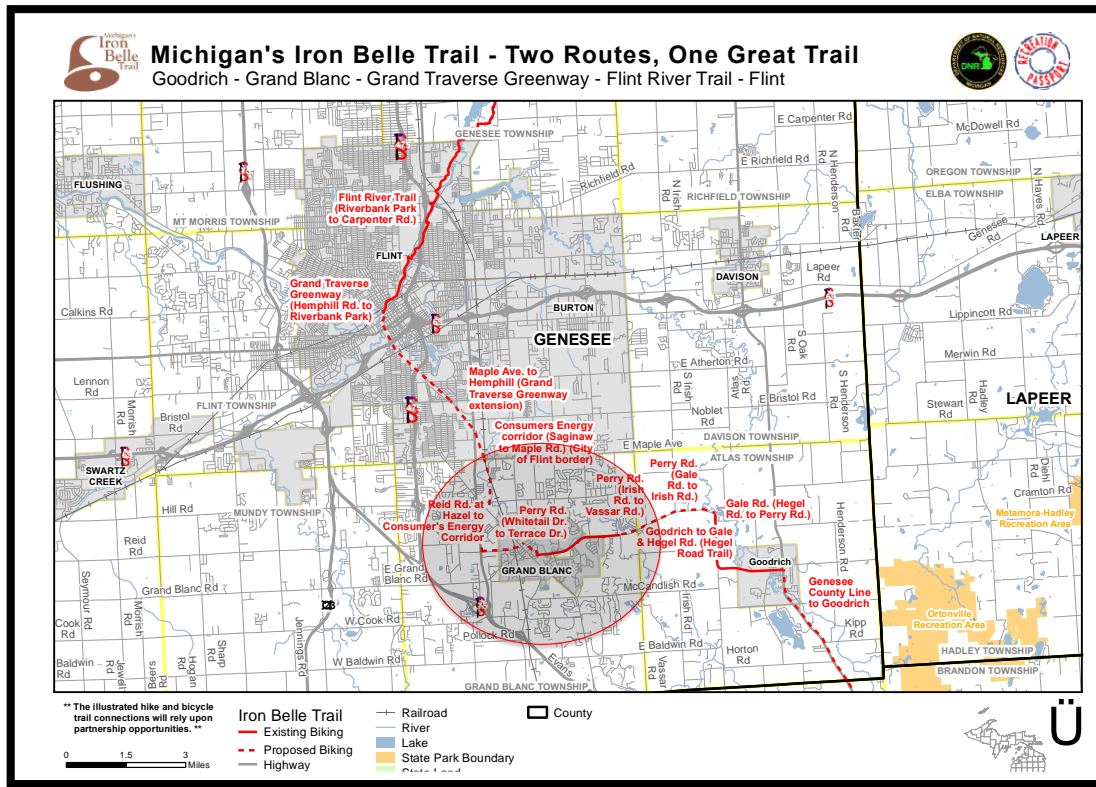 - Lot murals

Community Marketing & Web

- Increase info on main websites
  - City – link to partnering orgs
  - DDA – model from other DDAs
  - Chamber – places to visit/things to do
  - and, if feasible…
- Partner with Flint/Gen CVB to –
  - Specifically highlight GB as a community
  - Generate Top Ten List and Itinerary
- Build out website using
  - the Parks/Rec plan, Mobility study
  - FIT report/results ☺
- Develop community maps, brochures,
  - Digital options exist / QR codes

- Pay a social media influencer to make content
  - Different food options, events, parks
  - Elevate (floral) murals via social media

10 Things to Do in Grand Blanc This Weekend

Outdoor Recreation

- Position GB as an OR hub for
  - Mountain biking,
  - Skiing,
  - Hiking
  - Parks/Trail
    - Elevate *Iron Belle Trail*
    - *This is not visible*

- Increase directional signs to parks connecting them with the community

- Increase (paved) accessibility to ADA picnic tables

- Restore park signage

Michigan's Iron Belle Trail - Two Routes, One Great Trail
Goodrich - Grand Blanc - Grand Traverse Greenway - Flint River Trail - Flint

What are "Must See" assets for you?

CLT Identified "Must See" Assets
- Physician Park (x3)
- Rustic Park
- Art Fair Chalets
- Chalet Shoppes
- Museum
- Ziggy Ice Cream
- Welcoming and Safety

Assets Visited

Assessors intentionally experience a variety of public and private assets during their FIT assessments. Along with a qualitative review, each asset is given a rating of poor, good, very good, and excellent. Some assets are visited multiple times by assessors separately resulting in several reviews. Reviews of assets are available. Contact the City of Grand Blanc or Chamber of Commerce for more information. Orange stars indicate which assets would inspire assessors to return to Grand Blanc.

Tourism Attractions/Activities:
- ☐ Fairfield Inn & Suites Grand Blanc
- ☐ Quality Inn
- ☐ Holiday Inn Express
- ☐ Comfort Inn & Suites (GB/Flint)
- ☐ Atlas County Park
- ☐ Grand Blanc McFarlen Library
- ☐ GB Heritage Museum
- ⭐ Grand Blanc Commons
- ☐ Heritage Park (Commercial Area)
- ☐ Physicians Park

- ☐ Red flower mural underneath "Welcome to Grand Blanc" big sign
- ☐ Grand Chalet Shoppes
- ☐ Creasey Bicentennial Park
- ⭐ Rust Park
- ☐ City Hall/Heritage Center
- ☐ NCG Cinema Grand Blanc
- ⭐ Iron Belle Trail
- ☐ Physicians Park
- ⭐ Prana Yoga Center
- ☐ Great Lakes National Cemetery

Eating & Drinking Establishments
- ☐ Italia Garden
- ☐ Bangkok Peppers
- ⭐ Grafted Root
- ☐ The Hot Dog Stand
- ☐ Ziggy's Ice Cream Stand
- ⭐ Little Joe's Tavern
- ☐ Taboon
- ☐ Nuevo Vallarta
- ☐ McDonald's
- ☐ Dawn Donuts
- ☐ GB Health
- ☐ A&K Dawn Donuts
- ☐ Bubble Bee Tea
- ⭐ Qamaria Coffee

Shopping Places
- ⭐ JJ Cardinal's Wild Bird & Nature Store
- ⭐ R & B Used Books
- ☐ The Grand Chalet Shops
- ☐ Mainstream Boutique
- ☐ Shopaholic
- ☐ Treasure Baskets Gift Shop
- ☐ Markee Home
- ☐ Mainstream Boutique
- ☐ Grand Blanc Board and Brush

Grand Blanc's FIT Community Leadership Team

- Wendy Jean-Buhrer, City Manager
- Christina Irwin, Assistant City Manager
- Brian Borden, Safebuilt, Planner
- Jamie Weasel, Oakland County Parks, Deputy Director
- Leigh LaForest, Chamber Executive Director
- Don Becker, Historian/Parks Committee Member
- Julie Nielsen, City Council/Parks Committee Member
- John Creasey, City Council Member
- Sue Purdy, Grand Blanc Arts Council
- Paula Nas, UM-Flint EDA

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 Tourism (FIT) Assessments

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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