



First Impressions Tourism Assessment

City of Allegan, MI



Summary of Results

September 2022

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 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 from first-time visitor perspectives and experiences.

FIT is a comprehensive community assessment conducted by unannounced visitors in a host community. FIT helps participating communities learn about their strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of first-time visitors. It empowers leaders and stakeholders to develop an action plan to improve their communities based on new perspectives and suggestions from first-time visitors. These action plans ultimately strengthen the quality of life for residents and visitors. FIT has proven to be the catalyst needed to launch and expand small town tourism across Michigan. Launched in 2017 as a solution to encourage community-driven tourism, FIT has provided rural leaders and their stakeholders opportunities to collaborate around suggestions from first-time visiting tourists.

The Michigan Economic Development Corporation provided funding for the City of Allegan to undergo the FIT program as part of their Redevelopment Ready Certification effort. The City of Allegan, Michigan began participation in the FIT program in early 2022. The results of FIT assessment and key findings were presented to the Allegan community in September 2022.

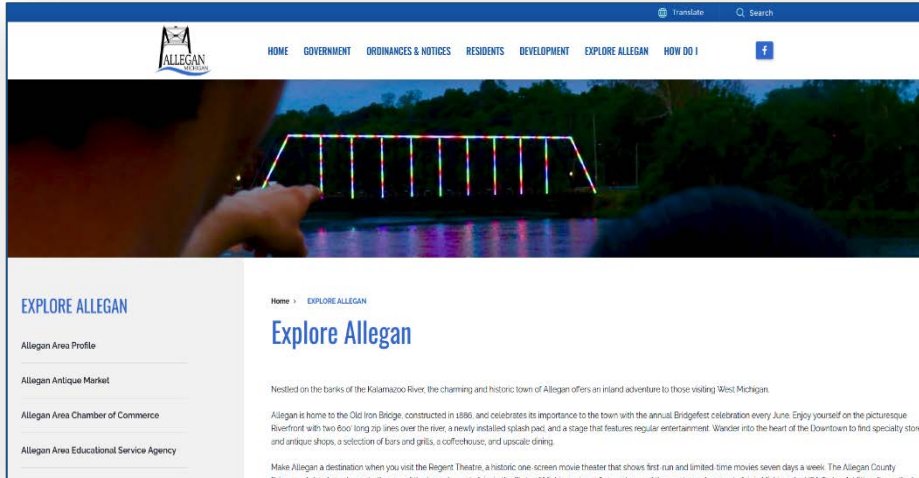
II. Summary of Results

The City of Allegan (CA) received five visitors during early Summer 2022, who from this point forward will be referred to as "assessors". All assessors are currently MSU Extension employees and residents of Michigan. Three assessors were male and the other two female. Two assessors identified as Millennials while the other three Generation X. Four assessors visited CA alone while the remaining assessors were accompanied by a spouse/partner. To generate diverse perspectives and experiences, assessors visited CA at separate times during the week. Two assessors stayed overnight in a hotel/motel or bed & breakfast while the other three assessors conducted day trips. Assessors spent between 6-24 hours amongst CA'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 1-4 hour researching CA using various search engines and social media. The report here is a general summary of direct quotes and highlights collected from raw data, photos, discussions, and assessor surveys.



Pre-visit Research -

Most Helpful Website - https://www.cityofallegan.org/explore_allegan/index.php



- “Quality of information matched the town and provided ideas of what to do”
- “Web info showed Allegan is a destination” and “gave a good impression”
- *Allegan Area Profile* was inviting to “new people and ideas”

General Comments and Areas of Improvement -

- Most helpful website for pre-visit research
- Nicely designed
- Scrolling pictures highlighted community well
- **More information is needed on website for visitors**

Five-Minute Impressions – responses are direct quotes from assessors

1. *Initially confused by the layout of streets and angles...After parking and walking around downtown I thought it matched the quaint vision I had...*
2. *...Loved the “District” signs as I approached downtown.*
3. *Interesting town...love the preserved twoways streets, ample parking, park, concert venue, murals, and library tell me this town is loved.*
4. *...was immediately reminded of lovely Vermont as I descended into town..*
5. *Clearly tourism focused, but the trick is just getting into town and figuring out where long-term parking is allowed.*



Visitor Motives – Assessors were presented with a list of 15 reasons visitors would come to the destination. They were asked to select the top three reasons someone might visit Allegan, MI.

• Shop	4
• Get entertained/for entertainment	4
• Other	3
• Engage in business activities	2
• Relax	1
• Seek adventure	1
• Visit friends and family	1
• Enjoy the weather	0
• Engage in sports activities	0
• Be in nature	0
• Get away from people	0
• Visit historical sites	0
• Experience a unique culture	0
• Experience the nightlife	0
• In transit to somewhere else	0
• Engage in religious activities	0



- Others:**
- Eat downtown, meet for coffee
 - Kayak, events, breweries
 - Waterfront and splash pad!





Destination Asset Highlights and What Would Bring You Back?

- Allegan Mountain Bike Trail
- Allegan State Game Area
- Baker Allegan Studios
- Comic Book Shop
- Heritage Tour
- Old Country Jail Museum
- Old Iron Bridge
- The Breweries
- The Mill District
- The Riverfront

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

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



Downtown and Waterfront Impressions and Ideas -

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Downtown Impressions and Ideas...

- Loved the abundance of water fountains and filling stations.
- There were some areas needing TLC.
- Public restrooms were very clean, welcoming, and inclusive!
- City of Allegan gateways signs are losing their paint simultaneously.
- Downtown is a unique area and destination for visitors.
- Downtown design/layout was confusing until you are in it.
- Thrilled to see river access(es) downtown!
- Love the social district!



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Waterfront Area

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Good/Excellent<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Riverside Walking Trails• Boat Launch• Fishing Dock• Kayak Launch and Racks• Waterfront Playground• Shored-based Retail/Restaurant• Public Restrooms• Stage/Event Space• Seating Options• Sunscreen Dispenser	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improvements/Needs<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More Parking• Better Access• Kayak/Gear Rental Options• More Kayak Launch Info• Water Condition Info• More Businesses Seeing Waterfront as their "Front-Back" Door• Historical Trail Info & Displays
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Destination Attributes (Rankings: Best = 15, Worst = 0)

• Pedestrian travel infrastructure	13
• Community involvement	13
• Hospitality and friendliness of residents	12
• Customer service	12
• Safety and security	12
• Directional signage	12
• Well-marked roads/attractions	12
• Shopping facilities	12
• Value for money in tourism experiences	12
• Nature-based activities	12
• Special events	12
• Authenticity of attractions	12
• Cleanliness	11
• Visitor accessibility to attractions	11
• Road conditions	11
• Adventure-based activities	11
• Interesting architecture	11
• Tourism management policies	11
• Dedicated tourism attractions	10
• Accessibility of destination	10
• Variety of activities to do	10
• Activities for children	10
• Variety and quality of shopping options	10
• Historic/heritage attractions	9
• Well known landmarks	9
• Communication infrastructure	9
• Conveniently located	8
• Variety and quality of restaurants	8
• Cultural attractions	8
• Variety and quality of accommodations	7



Sense of Welcoming and Safety -

- 100% felt welcomed, safe, and secure all times!
 - *Business owners were forthcoming with advice*
 - *Restaurants had good service*
 - *Greeted in every business*
 - *Welcoming and Helpful!*
 - *Friendly at all times!*



Strengths and Challenges -

Strengths:

- Unique location and distinct character
- Natural amenities, parks, musical events
- Close to lakeshore and larger cities
- Riverfront focused development
- Variety of activities
- Weekly special events
- Angles of streets
- Historical buildings
- Number of breweries
- Community members
- Community involvement
- Active and aware public sector
- Community placemaking
- Vibrant murals
- Landscaping
- Wayfinding to businesses

Challenges:

- Getting people to stop
- Leveraging “All roads lead to Allegan”
- Significant competition from larger cities in the area
- Encouraging visitors year - round
 - focused on summer
- Enhancing All Trails
- Lack of signage
 - Trail maps at Parks
 - Kayak trails
 - Mill District
 - Water access
- Sustaining momentum
- Expanding improvements to the other areas of the city
- Solutions to the island issue



Opportunities -

- Mill District –
 - Housing, retail, park/recreation space, arts, and/or education
 - Consider branding this space to “Allegan’s Island” (see photo)
- Highlight “Riverfront” better in promo/website
 - Include images, maps and people
- Highlight Chamber downtown better with signs
 - Update *Chamber Visitors Guide*
- Engage local artists through more public art
- Add interpretation to existing murals
- Direct visitors with signs/art on blank commercial buildings walls to riverfront (see photos)
- Repaint Downtown Allegan signage
- Add “You are here” to downtown maps
- Highlight “Parking” better to increase walkability
- Add a community calendar to website(s)
- Increase beautification downtown
- Increase accommodation options
- Increase recycling options
- Expand on sustainability designs
 - rain and community gardens



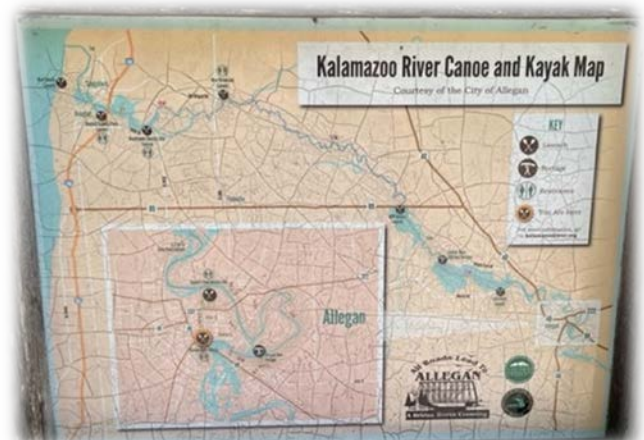
WELCOME TO ALLEGAN’S ISLAND!





Outdoor Recreation Opportunities -

- Promote regional nature-based activities across the community/county.
- Generate a must “To Do/See” list for “Most Helpful” website(s).
- Add gear rental downtown.
 - Library is one option.
 - Offer kayaks, paddle boards, etc.
- Encourage local businesses to sponsor outdoor recreation amenities.
 - Breweries supporting trails, for example.
- Trails
 - Enhance bike and hike trails and trailheads with -
 - Hard copy and/or digital maps
 - QR codes linking to trails and downtown
 - Distance markers within the trail and to downtown
 - Add a Kiosk including all this info
 - Connect Mountain Bike Trail with downtown and routes
 - Model kayak launch and maps for bike/hike trails (see below)
 - Enhance kayak launch and river with
 - Updated kayak map
 - Safety signage and additional depth markers
 - Add distances and/or float times, mile markers





- **Trip Reflection and Final Thoughts:**
- 80% (4/5) of Allegan’s FIT assessors would recommend this community to friends and family
- 80% also said they would visit Allegan on a pleasure trip in the future



Photos demonstrate creative public art and signage



Tourism Assets Visited During City of Allegan FIT Assessment

Along with a qualitative review, each asset identified is given a rating of poor, good, very good, and excellent. Some assets received multiple reviews, having been visited individually by several reviewers. Reviews of assets are available. Please contact the City of Allegan for more information.

General Assets:

1. Littlejohn Lake County Park
2. Allegan State Game Area
3. Jaycee Park
4. Perrigo Plaza Splash Pad
5. Riverfront Park
6. Hanson Park
7. Allegan District Library
8. Dumont Lake County Park
9. Mahan Park
10. Heritage Trail Stop 6: POW Camp
11. Kalamazoo River Walking Trail
12. Allegan County Fairgrounds
13. John Pahl Historic Village
14. Allegan Mountain Bike Trail
15. Mill District
16. Allegan Sports Complex

Restaurant Assets:

1. Mug Shots Coffeehouse
2. Tantrick Brewing Co (beer) & Food Motivated (kitchen)
3. Schaendorf Brewing Company

4. Sherwood's Cove
5. The Grill House
6. Allegan Farmers Market

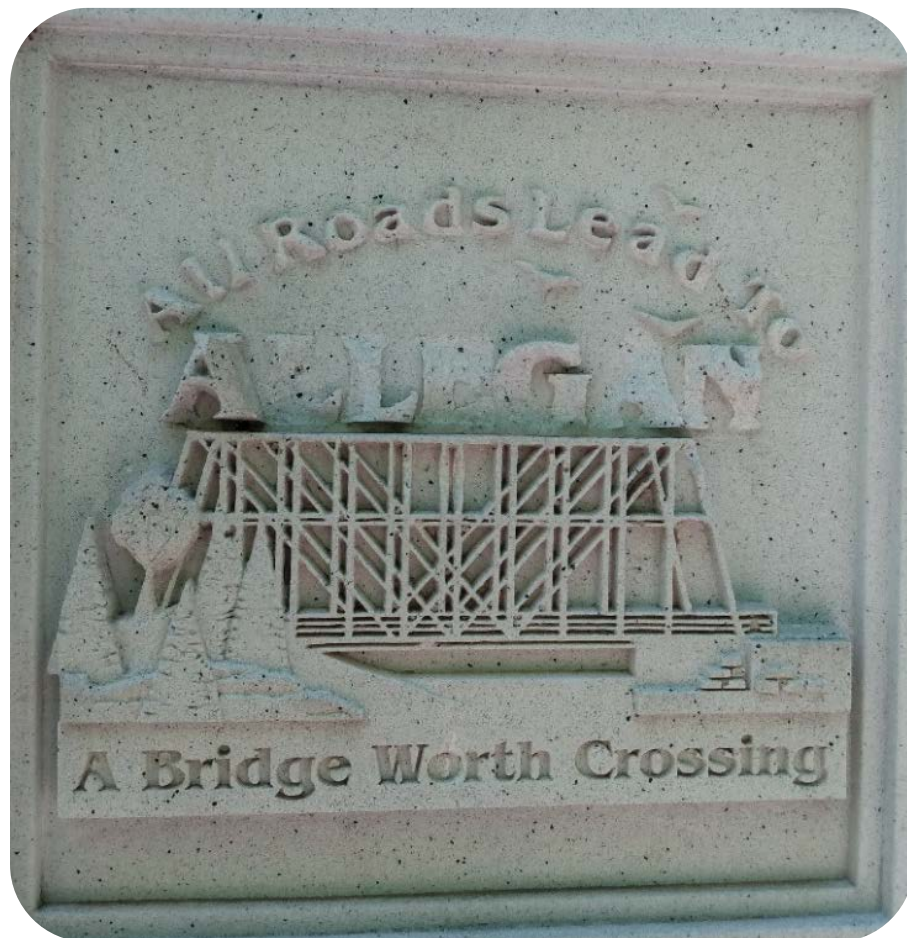
Business Assets:

1. Hathaway Cottage and Gifts
2. Flippin' Vintage
3. Perrigo Outlet Store
4. Sunset + Willow Co.
5. Aubrey's Closet
6. Rock Star Rocks
7. Hoard of the Dragon
8. Tardy's Underground Comics & Collectibles
9. Something Sweet For You
10. Let It Grow
11. The Sassy Olive
12. Rock-N-Horse Antiques & Collectibles and Rock Shop
13. Allegan Floral and Gifts
14. Baker Allegan Studios
15. Budget Host Inn
16. Allegan County Old Jail Museum
17. Allegan Country Inn
18. Ross Park Labyrinth



City of Allegan 2022 FIT Community Leadership Team

1. Parker Johnson – City of Allegan
2. James Antoine – Allegan Public Schools
3. Pamela Armstrong – Allegan District Library
4. Nicole Heslip – Schaendorf Brewing Company
5. Doug Kadzban – DPW/City of Allegan
6. Tim Perrigo – Community Member-Former Director of Allegan Chamber of Commerce
7. Joel Dye – City of Allegan





Next Steps for FIT Communities:

- Consult the FIT Community Next Steps manual provided to your Community Leadership Team (CLT).
- Learn about what is achievable by reviewing the “FIT Successes Report-April 2021 Edition” - <https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/fit-successes-report-april-2021-edition>
- Identify actionable possibilities by exploring your raw data further.
 - 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 the 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 the City of Allegan’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

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. Emphasis is placed on developing strategies to prevent destination decline and/or encourage destination growth.

- <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>.



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