First Impressions Tourism Assessment

Bay Mills Indian Community

Summary of Results

December 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 Bay Mills Indian Community

The Bay Mills Indian Community began their participation in the program in early 2023. The key findings summarized in this report were presented to the Bay Mills Indian Community in November 2023.

Visitor/Assessor Profiles:

The Bay Mills Indian Community and surrounding area (CLA) 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 very minimal knowledge of CLA prior to participating.

Three assessors were male and three female. Five assessors identified as Millennials, one as a Baby Boomer. Assessors were non-parents or parents and/or grandparents. Assessors personally identified as artists, community developers, planners, social workers, marketers, activists, and teacher. Two of the assessors were members of Michigan Federally Recognized Tribes. Two assessors visited CLA alone while the two visited with their spouse/partner, and two visited with a friend or relative. To generate diverse experiences, assessors visited CLA separately during different days of the week in August and September. Assessors visited on assorted days between Thursday and Sunday, and all spent the night. Three assessors stayed in a local hotel, two camped, and one stayed in a vacation rental. All assessors spent between 24 hours or more visiting CLA'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 CLA using mobile devices and/or personal computers visiting various websites and social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, and TripAdvisor. 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:

Web Research & Digital First Impressions
- *The tourism assets identified on tribal websites were really only the casino and the golf course. Other tourism assets I found online to visit came from places identified on Google Maps.*
- *Internet presence is not great. Need a BMIC non-casino tourism website. Businesses need non-Facebook web presence with current hours/menu/etc.. Need to update TripAdvisor and Yelp as well.*
- *It is hard to find out how to navigate the community which is a mix of tribal lands (Bay Mills) and other governments (Brimley township, national forest, state forest). Without a centralized tourism info website it was hard to know how non-tribal individuals should and can interact in the community. Pure MI was good for what to do but may have given me an overinflated expectation of how much history was going to be on display.*

Attractions and/or events this community is known for?

Casino and Resort
Golf Course
Point Iroquois Lighthouse
Boating
Biking
Fishing
Pow Wow
Soo Locks
Whitefish Point
Tahquamenon Falls

Most Helpful Websites: https://www.baymills.org/, Google Maps

- *The Bay Mills website was the most helpful, sharing many bits of information on parks and recreation options, links to accommodations, community plans and news, and more.*
- *The Bay Mills Indian Community government website was most helpful because under the About Us tab then the Parks and Recreation link there were links to various activities. The website was informative.*
- *Google Maps is by far the website/app I used the most to find things to do in the area…. Above and beyond the most comprehensive information.*

Challenges for most helpful website(s)

- *The BMIC website has lots of good information, but it is not currently in a format that a visitor can easily access.*

The Visit:

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

- *It's hard to know when you are "in" Bay Mills per se, it sort of appears and ebbs and flows as you drive through it. That said, in intersection of 221 and Lakeshore is kind of the point where you feel "there", and it does seem like a place you'd want to stop. I wish there was more there to encourage casual stopping. I think the Township Park is a tremendous opportunity for this.*
- *My initial impression was a community focused on nurturing its culture and youth to build a more resilient and authentic future, while tied to the western dominance of the recent past.*
- *Upon entering the area I saw marketing for the casino resort, the tribal college farm and Brimley. I saw farms, agriculture, forests, open fields, and sporadic housing. There was also much wildlife. I didn't see any signage for Bay Mills Indian Community Government.*
- *I drove in at night, and was worried I would get turned around when trying to locate/run the risk of losing cell reception, but that didn't end up being a problem! It is incredibly convenient to get there from the Mackinaw Bridge, and I appreciated the directional signage closer to the community for the resort which made it a breeze.*

Community Information Available to Visitors –

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

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.

Get entertained/for entertainment	4
Relax	3
Be in nature	3
Visit historical sites	3
Outdoor recreation (MTB, Hiking, etc.)	2
Other	2
Experience a unique culture	1

Bay Mills Indian Community's Downtown Business Area

There isn't too much of a "downtown" here. The closet would be the Resort / Farmer Market area and then the BMCC / Riverview Campgroudn / PowWow grounds area. Brimley has a bit more of a downtown.

Where there is pedestrian access, it is in good shape and well signed.

The 'branded' trash and recycling bins are very cool and unique and an excellent placemaking feature. More could be done with this design/motif to create other public amenities throughout the community. More benches are neede along the bike path. The restrooms at Memorial park were very nice and clean. Can't say that I remember a public water fountain anywhere.

Sidewalks/water fountains were minimal to none throughout Brimley and BMIC. There seems to be more recycling receptacles at the parks, and at BMIC.

Thoughts and Ideas for Downtown:
- *More branded public amenities like the waste receptacles.*
- *Continue to improve pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure and safety wherever possible.*

Destination Attributes (Rankings: Best = 5, Worst = 0)

Attribute	Score
Hospitality and friendliness of residents	3.67
Customer service	3.67
Nature-based activities	3.67
Value for money in tourism experiences	3.5
Historic/heritage attractions	3.5
Safety and security	3.33
Cleanliness	3.33
Authenticity of attractions	3.33
Adventure-based activities	3.17
Cultural attractions	3.17
Well known landmarks	3
Community involvement	3
Visitor accessibility to attractions	2.83
Dedicated tourism attractions	2.67
Conveniently located	2.67
Well marked roads/attractions	2.67
Road conditions	2.67
Variety and quality of accommodations	2.67
Variety and quality of restaurants	2.67
Accessibility of destination	2.5
Variety of activities to do	2.33
Directional signage	2.17
Interesting architecture	2.17
Special events	2.17
Communication infrastructure	2.17
Variety and quality of shopping options	2
Activities for children	1.83
Shopping facilities	1.83
Pedestrian travel infrastructure	1.83

Build on strengths

Did you feel welcomed in the community at all times ?

*All persons I spoke with where helpful, friendly, and professional.*

The only pause I felt was whether or not it was appropriate to go in the Cultural Center.

Friendly staff at most places. Nice atmosphere at farmers market. Not a lot of "comunal" areas, mostly private buisnesses and small parks.

Everyone was very friendly, customer service uniformly very good.

MSU Extension was asked to evaluate the ways in which visitors moved around the community. The assessment team identified key Gateway Areas and key Community Nodes/"Downtowns" for enhancement.
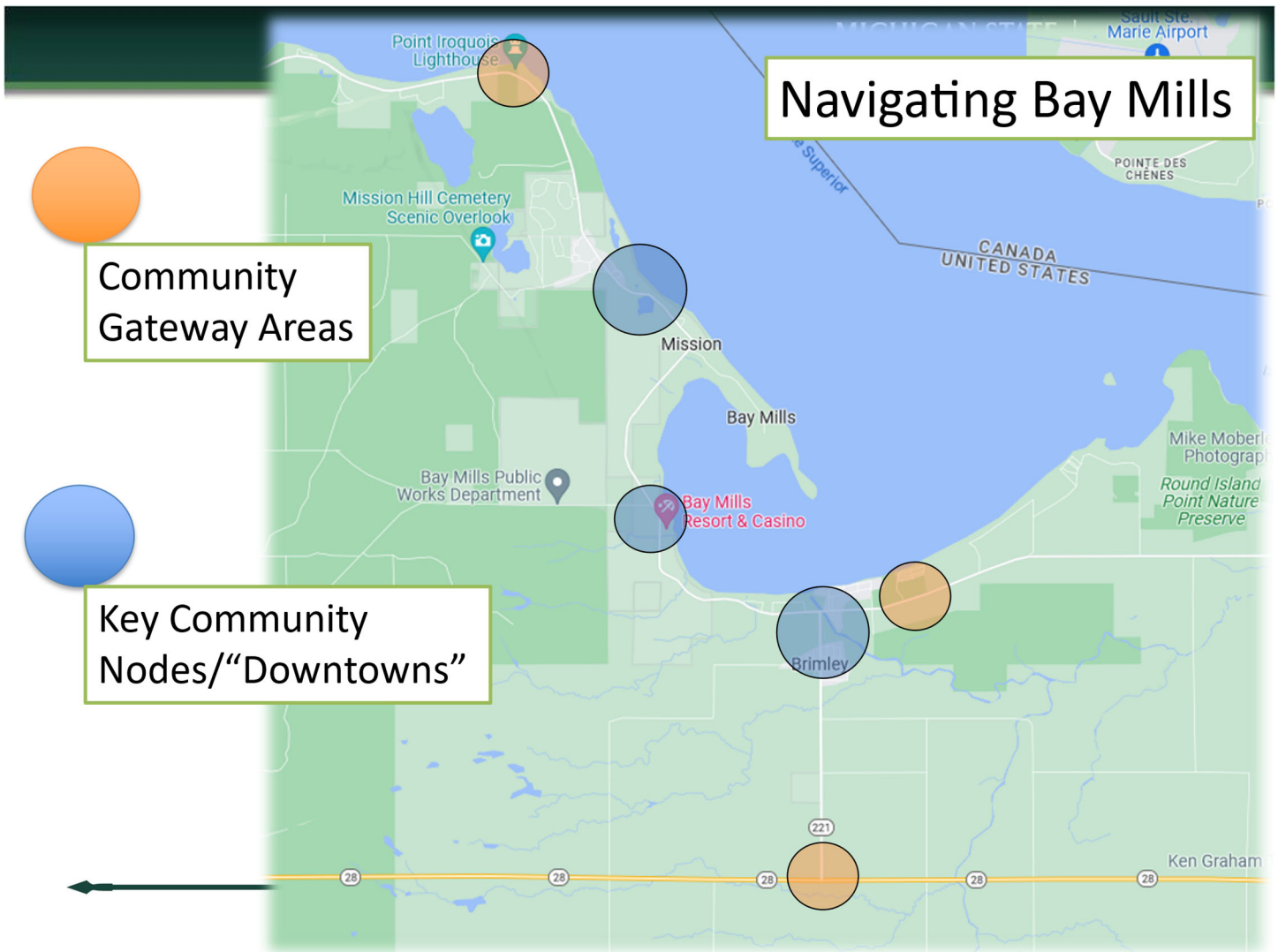
Post-Visit Reflections:

What will you remember most about Bay Mills six months from now?

How windy it was when I went kayaking in the bay! Also the overlook and the visit to Pendills Creek National Fish Hatchery.

Definitely Mission Hill Cemetery, an incredible and humbling place.

The view of Lake Superior/St. Mary's from Mission Hill Cemetery Overlook. The bluff here above the water is a significant geographic feature and there is a natural and human history to learn that I feel was an incomplete experience for me.

I will look back and remember the sunlight and clear skies, the amazing amount of stars we saw on our night walks to and from our campsite, and the wings from the Back Bay.

The strong preservation of the area's characteristics. It was a comfortable and relaxing trip. There are places for coffee and baked goods. That the Tribal Nation cares about activity and agriculture.

Question	Definitiely	Maybe	Probably Not
I would feel compelled to stop in this community if randomly passing by?	1	3	1
I would recommend the destination to my friends and family?	5	0	0
I would visit the destination on a pleasure trip in the future?	5	0	0

Key Recommendations

- **Develop a tourism website focused on assets other than the casino-resort. This is also an opportunity to tell the Tribe's story to newcomers.**

- **Develop a physical visitor or welcome center (or two). Possible locations identified:**
    - **Point Iroquois Lighthouse**
    - **Superior Township Park, Brimley**

- **Consider the creation of a dedicated Destination Marketing Organization/CVB for Bay Mills.**

Key Recommendations

- **Specifically market the Whitefish/Curley Lewis Scenic Byway. It is the definition of a "hidden gem".**

- **A Tribal Museum and Cultural Center focused on external audiences would be most welcome.**

- **Look for opportunities to expand interpretive signage to tell the Tribe's story.**

- **Spruce up community gateways, especially the intersection of M28 and M221.**

- **Due to tight lodging market stemming from Soo Locks expansion, there may be an opportunity for more low-overhead lodging, e.g. glamping vacation rentals.**

- **Tour and guide services focused on ecological, cultural, and agritourism.**

- **Focus overall on pedestrian and cyclist safety.**

Recommendations: Outdoor Recreation

- **Continue to build out trail network focused on connectivity.**

- **Focus on pedestrian safety, e.g. crossing from RV campground to casino.**

- **Kayak rental opportunities, possibly at the resort?**

- **Expand public access to Lake Superior wherever possible, including kayaking, shoreside fishing, and other uses.**

Recommendations: Art, Culture, and History

- Expand public art in the area wherever possible and leverage as an opportunity to tell the Bay Mills story.

- Develop and expand Tribal interpretive signage where appropriate. Ex: Old Indian Burial Ground.

- Use culturally-unique imagery (e.g. the pike) wherever possible. Waste receptacles are a great example of this.

Recommendations: Community Business & Marketing

- Work regionally to market Bay Mills as a "base of operations" for visitors to the Eastern UP region.

- Develop more tribal enterprises attractive to visitors, examples might include shopping, food trucks, tours and guide services, lodging.

- Focus on Tribal tourism to differentiate Bay Mills from other lakeshore UP communities.

- Engage with neighboring CVBs/DMOs and regional organizations to collaborate on regional tourism, visitors are not thinking about borders.

Recommendations: Community Development

- **Focus on pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure including lighting, crosswalks, etc.**

- **Keep building out community nodes, give those passing through places to stop and stay awhile.**

- **Focus on full-spectrum accessibility across ages and ability levels.**

- **Clarify some safety questions, ex. can visitors seek care at BMIC clinic?**

Recommendations: Websites and Social Media

- **Every organization and business with a website should take some time to work on Search Engine Optimization.**

- **Please don't use Facebook as a primary business website.**
  - **Not everyone has Facebook, and for those that don't getting access to a page is a barrier.**
- **Make sure your website includes *up to date***
  - **Location**
  - **Hours Menu/Products/Services (as appropriate)**

- **Double-check your website hosting is working properly and the site displays well on both computers, phones, and tablets.**

- **Try it on multiple browsers (Chrome, Firefox, Edge, Safari) on both desktop and mobile.**

- **Consider a general brushing up if time allows**
    - **Better, higher-resolution photos inside and out**
    - **Consider how readable your site is**
    - **Text color on background, etc.**

- **If your website includes a directory, give it a once-over for correct links and listings that are no longer relevant. Try to include as much info as possible, more than just a phone number. Hours and a live link of some kind would be ideal.**

- **If you have a social media presence, make sure your basic information is shared and *up to date.***

- **If you have not, claim your listings on Google, TripAdvisor and/or Yelp!**
    - **Offers another venue to tell your story and get correct info out there.**
    - **Respond to negative reviews.**

Assets Visited in Bay Mills and The Region

- Tourism Attractions (lodging, activities, festivals, museums, parks, etc.)
  - 30 unique assets visited
- Eating and Drinking Places
  - 10 unique assets visited
- Shopping Places
  - 6 unique assets visited
- ***Forty-six total tourism assets evaluated!***

Tribal Community Assessment

Developed from "Compendium of Good Practices in Indigenous Tourism"

United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2023

https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/book/10.18111/9789284424184

- **When you were planning your visit, were you able to find information about: Tribal History**
  - **Yes**
    - I follow many Bay Mills social media pages, and specifically Googled "Bay Mills Indian Community" in order to find such information.
  - **Somewhat**

- The website for the tribe has some info, but it is mixed in with info for residents and government functions, so it is hard to navigate.
- The info is there, but you do have to dig a bit for it. Easy area to improve quickly!

- **When you were planning your visit, were you able to find information about: Tribal Arts and Culture**
  - **Yes**
    - BMIC Parks and Recreation Information website provided information about the Spirit Stone Trail and Art and History Walking Tour.
  - **Somewhat**
    - I was able to find this information because of my prior involvement with Bay Mills crafters and the Culture Dept.
  - **No**
    - Not really anywhere. The best is the Facebook pages for the farmers market, tribal environmental department, a few other departments.
    - I did not stumble upon any cultural information (besides the meaning of Gnoozhekaaning)

- **When you were planning your visit, were you able to find information about: Tribal Assets and Events**
  - **Yes**
    - BMIC Tribal Government website calendar, Bay Mills New FB Page, Bay Mills Community College FB Page.
  - **Somewhat**
    - Google Maps shows some of them.
    - The casino and the golf course are promoted, but not much more.
  - **No**
    - I did not find events listed for the weekend we were planning to visit, there were some fliers that we found on site at the Market, but they were past events.

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.