

The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy >> University of Michigan

Michigan Public
Policy Survey July 2016

Michigan local leaders' doubts continue regarding the state's direction

By Debra Horner and Thomas Ivacko

This report presents the opinions of Michigan's local government leaders regarding the direction in which the state is headed, as well as their evaluations of the job performance of Governor Rick Snyder and the Michigan Legislature. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Spring 2016 wave and comparisons to previous spring waves of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS).

>> The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) is a census survey of all 1,856 general purpose local governments in Michigan conducted by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) at the University of Michigan in partnership with the Michigan Municipal League, Michigan Townships Association, and Michigan Association of Counties. The MPPS takes place twice each year and investigates local officials' opinions and perspectives on a variety of important public policy issues. Respondents for the Spring 2016 wave of the MPPS include county administrators, board chairs, and clerks; city mayors, managers, and clerks; village presidents, managers, and clerks; and township supervisors, managers, and clerks from 1,378 jurisdictions across the state.

For more information, please contact: closup-mpps@umich.edu / (734) 647-4091. You can also follow us on Twitter @closup

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Key Findings

- For a second straight year, fewer than half of Michigan's local leaders are optimistic about the state's direction. Statewide, 44% believe the state is currently headed in the right direction (down 2% from last year and 11% from the recent high point in 2014), while 39% say the state is off on the wrong track.
 - » Among self-identified Republican officials, 60% say the state is headed in the right direction, approximately the same percentage as last year (59%). Meanwhile, 35% of Independent officials express optimism about the state's direction (compared with 37% in 2015), and Democratic officials' optimism has declined to 20% (compared with 28% in 2015).
 - » Optimism has dropped precipitously among leaders from the state's largest communities (those with more than 30,000 residents). Only 40% of officials from these communities say the state is headed in the right direction, down from 52% in 2015 and 65% in 2014. Among those from jurisdictions with 10,001-30,000 residents, 41% express optimism now, compared with 61% a year ago.
- Most local leaders who believe Michigan is headed in the right direction cite improvements in economic and business conditions, while those who think the state is off on the wrong track are likely to focus on Lansing's poor relationship with local governments, including specific concerns regarding the current system of revenue sharing, unfunded mandates, the use of Emergency Managers, and the Flint water crisis.
- Local leaders' positive job approval ratings for Governor Snyder have declined substantially over the past year. Statewide, 41% rate his performance as either "good" or "excellent," compared with 54% who said the same in 2015. In addition, over a quarter (26%) rate his performance as "poor," up from 14% last year.
- Job evaluations of the Michigan Legislature's performance remain significantly lower than those for the Governor, but have held steady compared with last year's ratings. The percentage of local officials who say the Legislature's performance is excellent or good (20%) is down only slightly from the 23% who said the same in 2015. Meanwhile, 38% of local officials rate the Legislature as poor, unchanged from last year.

Local officials' confidence in Michigan's direction remains in decline, and those from the largest jurisdictions are significantly less optimistic

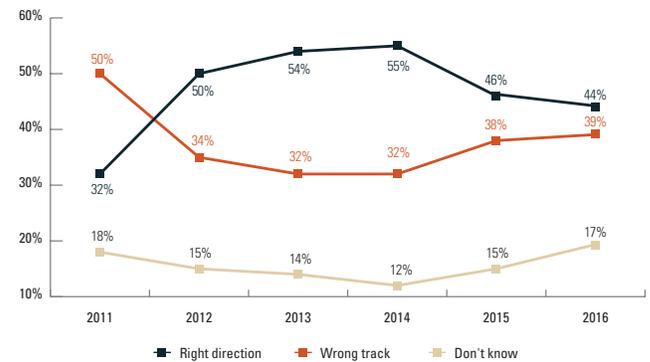
The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) tracks local government leaders' views on a variety of governance issues, including annual questions regarding their opinions on the direction in which the state is headed, as well as their assessments of the job performance of the Governor and the Michigan Legislature.

The MPPS began tracking local leaders' views on the state's direction in the spring of 2011, a few months after Governor Rick Snyder took office. At that time, a majority (50%) of local leaders felt the state was off on the wrong track, while just 32% felt it was headed in the right direction. By 2012 these percentages essentially flipped, with a majority (50%) then feeling the state was headed in the right direction and just 34% feeling it was off on the wrong track. This optimism gradually increased through the following two years.¹

However, there has once again been a significant shift in these views in the past two years, as concerns about the state's direction have increased, while optimism has declined. In 2015, fewer than half (46%) of Michigan's local officials said the state was headed in the right direction. Now, in 2016 that percentage has dipped slightly lower to 44% (see *Figure 1a*). Meanwhile, 39% now believe the state is on the wrong track, and 17% say they don't know whether Michigan is headed in the right direction or off on the wrong track.

One essential way to break down the overall percentages on this assessment is by partisan identification. Partisanship is important because it plays a key role in evaluations of the state's direction, since the state government is currently controlled by the Republican Party. Partisanship is also important to understand the MPPS results compared to public opinion surveys of Michigan citizens, because the bulk of local officials in the state come from townships (which are most often represented by Republican local leaders). In turn, this means that MPPS respondents are much more likely to be Republicans than are Michigan citizen respondents to typical public opinion polls in the state.

Figure 1a
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the 'right direction' or is off on the 'wrong track,' 2011-2016





Overall, in the 2016 MPPS, approximately 58% of local official respondents are self-reported Republicans compared to 28% Democrats and 15% Independents. By comparison, in a May 2016 statewide survey by the Glengariff Group, 32% of citizen respondents identified themselves as Republicans, while 40% self-identified as Democrats, and 24% identified as Independents.²

These partisan differences in the two survey samples help explain why, overall, 44% of local leaders believe the state is heading in the right direction, compared to just 34% of citizens in the Glengariff survey (who, again, tend to be more likely to identify themselves as Democrats, compared with the MPPS respondents).

When looking at local officials' attitudes about conditions in Michigan among partisan groups, 60% of local officials who self-identify as Republicans believe the state is currently headed in the right direction, which is similar to 2015 levels, yet down from a high of 72% just two years ago (see *Figure 1b*). Independent officials are less optimistic than their Republican colleagues, with just over a third (35%) saying the state is currently headed in the right direction, a slight drop compared with a year ago. By comparison, self-identified Democratic local officials are the least optimistic about Michigan's direction. Their optimism about the state's direction has fallen appreciably in the past year, with just 20% now saying the state is currently headed in the right direction, down from 28% in 2015.

When broken down by population size of the jurisdictions they represent, it's clear that optimism has decreased significantly among officials from the state's largest jurisdictions (those with more than 30,000 residents). Only 40% of these officials are optimistic about the state's direction, down 12 percentage points from last year and down 25 percentage points from 2014 (see *Figure 1c*). The part of this group saying the state is on the wrong track also increased by five percentage points in the past year. In addition, among mid-sized jurisdictions (those with 10,001-30,000 residents), the proportion saying the state is headed in the right direction has dropped 20 percentage points in the past year. On the other hand, there is relatively little change in views on the state's direction among leaders from the state's smallest jurisdictions.

Figure 1b
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the 'right direction' in 2011-2016, by partisan identification

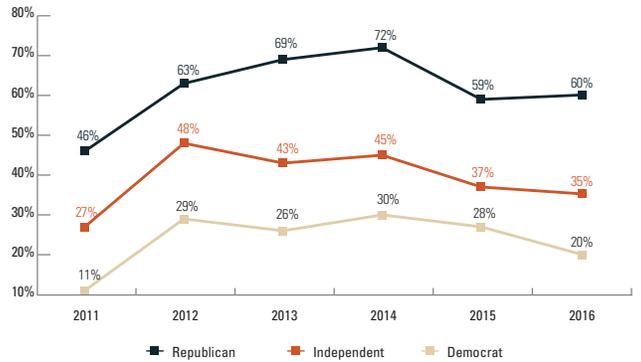
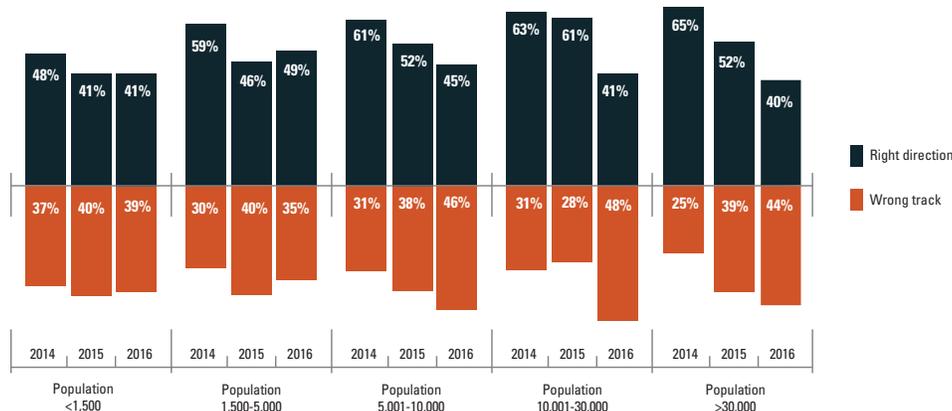


Figure 1c
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the 'right direction' or is off on the 'wrong track' in 2014-2016, by jurisdiction size



Note: responses for "don't know" not shown

Those optimistic about Michigan’s direction often cite robust economic and business conditions; those pessimistic point to poor relations between Lansing and local governments, as illustrated by the Flint water crisis

Once again, the Spring 2016 MPPS asked local leaders *why* they believe the state is either on the wrong track or headed in the right direction, eliciting over 1,300 descriptive comments from 587 local leaders, referencing a wide range of topics. This kind of open-end question allows local officials to provide more detailed information compared to a standard check-box question, and elaborates on precisely what officials are thinking of when they evaluate the state’s direction. Although these open-end responses do not necessarily speak for the entire MPPS sample, they do represent an extensive cross-section of opinions regarding what makes local officials more or less optimistic about Michigan’s future.

Among those who say the state is heading in the right direction, over half of their specific comments focus on issues related to the economy and business conditions. Their comments touch on issues such as general economic conditions, increasing hiring and lower unemployment, improving housing values and homebuilding, a healthy tourism industry, and more. Local officials with an optimistic outlook on the state also frequently credit Governor Snyder and the State’s fiscal policies, particularly the balancing of the state budget.

Among those local leaders who believe the state is on the wrong track, the most common set of remarks focuses on what some officials see as a broken relationship between the State and local governments. These comments reference problems that local officials see with the current system of revenue sharing, unfunded mandates, concerns over the use of Emergency Managers, and the Flint water crisis. Other frequently-cited concerns include comments regarding dysfunction in Lansing—and particularly in the Michigan Legislature—as well as issues with tax policies and a lack of sufficient education funding.



Voices Across Michigan

Quotes from local leaders regarding their evaluations of the state's direction

Among officials who say the state is on the right track

“At least we are becoming fiscally responsible and don't do as much overspending in Lansing.”

“Business culture is much better, state is no longer anti-business.”

“Pure Michigan, attracting business to the State of Michigan. Tourism is the key to economic growth for our area and I feel Pure Michigan has helped tremendously.”

“Have reduced debt and committed funds to improve roads and economic growth. Governor Snyder has done a good job but this whole water issue has been bad, bad, bad. The EPA, DEQ are bureaucracies that hamper progress and do not function as results have proven.

“Except for Flint the state is making strides in the right direction with debt elimination, job creation, and budget reform.”

“Northern representatives and senators are listening to the public and the groups with issues and are attempting to address the issues with research and knowledge and new bills are being put forward for discussions and votes. Seems like they want to be responsive to the citizens for the entire terms of offices.”

“I believe that many of the programs have been helping to improve the overall financial picture of the State, unfortunately in many cases at the detriment of the local jurisdictions. While I do believe that we are moving generally in the right direction, much more effort must be expended to help distressed communities to achieve financial security to continue to provide adequate services to our residents.”

“With the exception of the Flint water issue, Michigan is on the move in many positive ways. Unemployment is down, foreclosures are down, and the attitude of most residents is UP!”

Among officials who say the state is off on the wrong track

“I think the current administration has done a good job of getting the state's finances in order, but they have no doubt done so on the backs of local government. The state government reduced state shared revenue, imposes unfunded mandates, cuts funding for local infrastructure, and supports a Tax Tribunal Court that in my opinion, is an unchecked rogue entity with little to no accountability to anyone.”

“\$7.6 billion dollars reduction in State Revenue Sharing, state-wide, over the past ten years. Millions in lost revenue in [our jurisdiction]. In addition to the continuous unfunded mandates from our state legislators. That combination has put far too much fiscal stress on local governments and schools.”

“Flint water situation has destroyed confidence in the state government and the governor in particular. Detroit schools hasn't helped. If the state is taking on these management issues they should have a better track record.”

“I feel that the State needs to share more funding for road improvements. As far as infrastructure improvements, they have not shown a concern for what is happening on the local level, even though the local level is required to maintain and improve infrastructure, the responsibility is falling only on the local government with no help from the State.”

“Flint water crisis says it all!”

“Our Township is very good at managing our money, but the State has taken (stolen) so much of “our” money (revenue sharing, tax tribunals, etc.) and strapped us with so many unfunded mandates (Veterans Exemption, Property Tax Exemptions, Road Funding, etc.) because they can't manage their own money and need ours to balance their budget, that we have to continue to do more with less money as costs continue to rise.”

Ratings of Governor Snyder’s performance drop sharply

While local leaders’ confidence in the state’s direction has dropped just slightly compared with last year—at least among Republican and Independent officials—assessments of Governor Snyder’s performance, overall, have soured. In 2016, 41% of local officials statewide rate the Governor’s performance as either “good” or “excellent,” compared to over half (54%) who gave him positive marks in 2015 (see *Figure 2a*). At the same time, 26% give him a “poor” rating this year, almost double the number (14%) who rated his performance as poor last year. While the MPPS did not ask why respondents gave these answers, it seems likely that the Flint water crisis has played a role.

The decline in ratings for Governor Snyder’s performance comes from officials of all partisan stripes. In 2016, 61% of officials who identify themselves as Republicans report that they think the Governor is doing a good or excellent job, a decline of 10 percentage points since 2015 (see *Figure 2b*). Just over a quarter (26%) of Independent officials rate the Governor’s performance positively today, compared with 44% in 2015. Meanwhile, only 10% of Democratic officials in 2016 say the Governor is doing a good job (and none say excellent), which is only about a third as many who said the same (28%) in 2015.

Interestingly, local officials in 2016 tend to cut Governor Snyder a bit more slack compared with evaluations by Michigan’s citizens, as found in the Winter 2016 State of the State Survey conducted by Michigan State University’s Institute for Public Policy and Social Research.³ While 61% of Republican officials give a thumbs up to Governor Snyder’s performance, just 50% of Republican citizens in Michigan do so. The pattern is the same, though the percentages are closer when comparing Independent and Democratic officials to their citizen counterparts. Among Independent officials, 26% give positive marks to the Governor compared with 24% of Independent citizens. And among Democratic officials, 10% have favorable evaluations of the Governor, compared with 7% of Democratic citizens.

Figure 2a
Local officials’ evaluations of Governor Snyder’s performance, 2011-2016

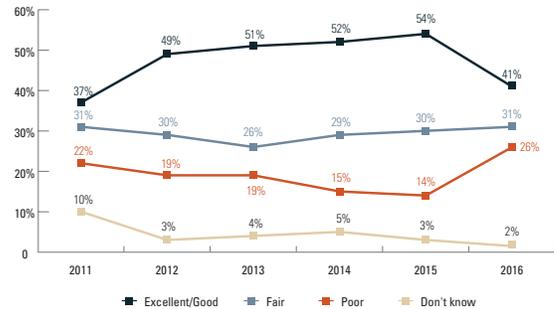
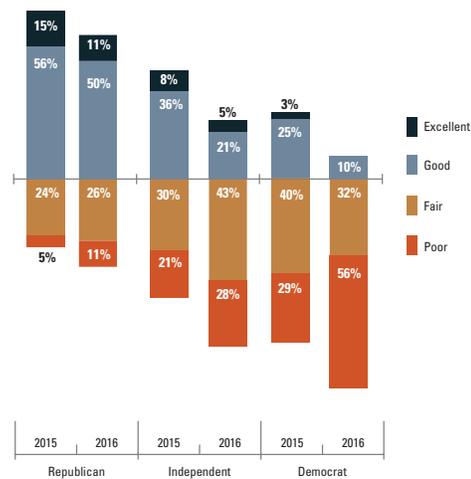


Figure 2b
Local officials’ evaluations of Governor Snyder’s performance in 2015-2016, by partisan identification



Note: responses for “don’t know” not shown



Only one in five local officials give the Legislature excellent or good ratings

Local leaders continue to be significantly more critical of the Michigan Legislature than of the Governor in 2016, with only one in five (20%) local officials statewide saying the state Legislature’s performance is either good or excellent (see *Figure 3a*). However, unlike the significantly worsening views on Governor Snyder’s performance this year, local officials’ opinions on the Michigan Legislature’s performance have dropped only slightly compared with last year’s survey responses. Ratings of excellent or good (20%) in 2016 are down slightly from 23% in 2015. Meanwhile, 38% of local officials rate the Legislature as poor, and 39% say its performance is fair, up from 36% last year.

Looking at differences by partisan identification, changes in local leaders’ assessments of the Legislature’s performance are found mostly among self-identified Independents. Positive ratings of good or excellent have declined among Independent local leaders, from 14% last year to 8% in 2016 (see *Figure 3b*). At the same time though, fewer Independent officials (51%) rate the Legislature’s performance as poor than did so in 2015 (56%).

Figure 3a
Local officials’ evaluations of the Michigan Legislature’s performance, 2011-2016

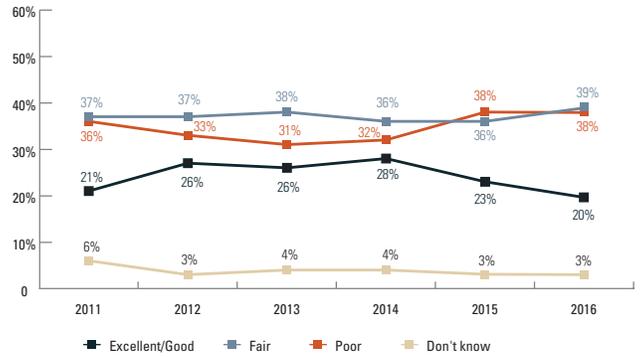
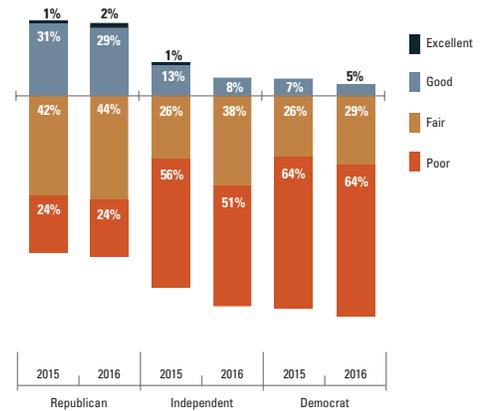


Figure 3b
Local officials’ evaluations of the Michigan Legislature’s performance in 2015-2016, by partisan identification



Note: responses for “don’t know” not shown

Conclusion

After three straight years between 2011-2014 that saw increasing optimism among local leaders regarding the direction in which Michigan was headed, the current MPPS finds the sharp decline in these views that started in 2015 continues in 2016. Whereas 55% of local leaders felt the state was headed in the right direction in 2014, this has declined to just 44% today. This decline in support is found particularly among local officials who identify as Democrats as well as those from the state's larger jurisdictions.

Among those who think the state is headed in the right direction, a majority of their comments explaining these beliefs focus on the state of the economy and business conditions, including lower unemployment and appropriate state budgets.

Meanwhile, among those who think Michigan is off on the wrong track, the most common reasons given for their views relate to concerns about the relationship between the state government and local governments, most notably the crisis over Flint's water and the role of state actors such as the Emergency Manager and state oversight agencies. Strong criticisms also center on perceived problems with revenue sharing and unfunded mandates.

While assessments of the direction in which Michigan is headed have dropped only slightly over the past year, local leaders' ratings of Governor Snyder's job performance dropped markedly in 2016, with 41% rating his performance as either good or excellent this year, compared with 54% saying the same last year. At the same time, local leaders' opinions of the Michigan Legislature's performance remained at low, but steady, levels, with just 20% rating it as good or excellent in 2016, compared with 23% in 2015.



Notes

1. Horner, D., & Ivacko, T. (2014). *Confidence in Michigan's direction holds steady among state's local leaders*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from <http://closup.umich.edu/files/mpps-spring-2014-right-track.pdf>
2. Glengariff Group, Inc. (2016). *Michigan Statewide General Election Survey*. Chicago, IL: Glengariff Group, Inc. Retrieved from http://media.clickondetroit.com/document_dev/2016/05/31/May%202016%20Statewide%20Survey_1464708076371_6539948_ver1.0.pdf
3. Ballard, C. L. (2016). *State of the State Survey [winter 2016]*. East Lansing, MI: Institute for Public Policy and Social Research at Michigan State University. Retrieved from <https://www.ippsr.msu.edu/sites/default/files/soSS/SOSS72Confidence.pdf>

Survey Background and Methodology

The MPPS is a biannual survey of each of Michigan's 1,856 units of general purpose local government, conducted once each spring and fall. While the spring surveys consist of multiple batteries of the same "core" fiscal, budgetary and operational policy questions and are designed to build-up a multi-year time-series of data, the fall surveys focus on various other topics.

In the Spring 2016 iteration, surveys were sent by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) via the internet and hardcopy to top elected and appointed officials (including county administrators and board chairs; city mayors and managers; village presidents, clerks, and managers; and township supervisors, clerks, and managers) from all 83 counties, 278 cities, 255 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan.

The Spring 2016 wave was conducted from April 4 – June 6, 2016. A total of 1,378 jurisdictions in the Spring 2016 wave returned valid surveys (62 counties, 222 cities, 190 villages, and 903 townships), resulting in a 74% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.34%. The key relationships discussed in the above report are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level or below, unless otherwise specified. Missing responses are not included in the tabulations, unless otherwise specified. Some report figures may not add to 100% due to rounding within response categories. Quantitative data are weighted to account for non-response. "Voices Across Michigan" verbatim responses, when included, may have been edited for clarity and brevity. Contact CLOSUP staff for more information.

Detailed tables of the data analyzed in this report broken down three ways—by jurisdiction type (county, city, township, or village); by population size of the respondent's community, and by the region of the respondent's jurisdiction—are available online at the MPPS homepage: <http://closup.umich.edu/mpps.php>.

The survey responses presented here are those of local Michigan officials, while further analysis represents the views of the authors. Neither necessarily reflects the views of the University of Michigan, or of other partners in the MPPS.

Previous MPPS reports

Hospital access primary emergency medical concern among many Michigan local officials (July 2016)

Firefighting services in Michigan: challenges and approaches among local governments (June 2016)

Most local officials are satisfied with law enforcement services, but almost half from largest jurisdictions say their funding is insufficient (April 2016)

Local leaders say police-community relations are good throughout Michigan, but those in large cities are concerned about potential civil unrest over police use-of-force (February 2016)

Report: Responding to budget surplus vs. deficit: the preferences of Michigan's local leaders and citizens (December 2015)

Michigan's local leaders concerned about retiree health care costs and their governments' ability to meet future obligations (October 2015)

Fiscal health rated relatively good for most jurisdictions, but improvement slows and decline continues for many (September 2015)

Confidence in Michigan's direction declines among state's local leaders (August 2015)

Michigan local government leaders' views on private roads (July 2015)

Few Michigan jurisdictions have adopted Complete Streets policies, though many see potential benefits (June 2015)

Michigan local leaders have positive views on relationships with county road agencies, despite some concerns (May 2015)

Michigan local government leaders say transit services are important, but lack of funding discourages their development (April 2015)

Michigan local leaders see need for state and local ethics reform (March 2015)

Local leaders say Michigan road funding needs major increase, but lack consensus on options that would raise the most revenue (February 2015)

Michigan local government leaders' views on employee pay and benefits (January 2015)

Despite increasingly formal financial management, relatively few Michigan local governments have adopted recommended policies (December 2014)

Most Michigan local officials are satisfied with their privatized services, but few seek to expand further (November 2014)

Michigan local governments finally pass fiscal health tipping point overall, but one in four still report decline (October 2014)

Beyond the coast, a tenuous relationship between Michigan local governments and the Great Lakes (September 2014)

Confidence in Michigan's direction holds steady among state's local leaders (August 2014)

Wind power as a community issue in Michigan (July 2014)

Fracking as a community issue in Michigan (June 2014)

The impact of tax-exempt properties on Michigan local governments (March 2014)

Michigan's local leaders generally support Detroit bankruptcy filing despite some concerns (February 2014)

Michigan local governments increasingly pursue placemaking for economic development (January 2014)



- Views on right-to-work legislation among Michigan's local government leaders (December 2013)
- Michigan local governments continue seeking, and receiving, union concessions (October 2013)
- Michigan local government fiscal health continues gradual improvement, but smallest jurisdictions lagging (September 2013)
- Local leaders evaluate state policymaker performance and whether Michigan is on the right track (August 2013)
- Trust in government among Michigan's local leaders and citizens (July 2013)
- Citizen engagement in the view of Michigan's local government leaders (May 2013)
- Beyond trust in government: government trust in citizens? (March 2013)
- Local leaders support reforming Michigan's system of funding local government (January 2013)
- Local leaders support eliminating Michigan's Personal Property Tax if funds are replaced, but distrust state follow-through (November 2012)
- Michigan's local leaders satisfied with union negotiations (October 2012)
- Michigan's local leaders are divided over the state's emergency manager law (September 2012)
- Fiscal stress continues for hundreds of Michigan jurisdictions, but conditions trend in positive direction overall (September 2012)
- Michigan's local leaders more positive about Governor Snyder's performance, more optimistic about the state's direction (July 2012)
- Data-driven decision-making in Michigan local government (June 2012)
- State funding incentives increase local collaboration, but also raise concerns (March 2012)
- Local officials react to state policy innovation tying revenue sharing to dashboards and incentive funding (January 2012)
- MPPS finds fiscal health continues to decline across the state, though some negative trends eased in 2011 (October 2011)
- Public sector unions in Michigan: their presence and impact according to local government leaders (August 2011)
- Despite increased approval of state government performance, Michigan's local leaders are concerned about the state's direction (August 2011)
- Local government and environmental leadership: views of Michigan's local leaders (July 2011)
- Local leaders are mostly positive about intergovernmental cooperation and look to expand efforts (March 2011)
- Local government leaders say most employees are not overpaid, though some benefits may be too generous (February 2011)
- Local government leaders say economic gardening can help grow their economies (November 2010)
- Local governments struggle to cope with fiscal, service, and staffing pressures (August 2010)
- Michigan local governments actively promote U.S. Census participation (August 2010)
- Fiscal stimulus package mostly ineffective for local economies (May 2010)
- Fall 2009 key findings report: educational, economic, and workforce development issues at the local level (April 2010)
- Local government officials give low marks to the performance of state officials and report low trust in Lansing (March 2010)
- Local government fiscal and economic development issues (October 2009)

All MPPS reports are available online at: <http://closup.umich.edu/mpps.php>

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The **Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP)**, housed at the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, conducts and supports applied policy research designed to inform state, local, and urban policy issues. Through integrated research, teaching, and outreach involving academic researchers, students, policymakers and practitioners, CLOSUP seeks to foster understanding of today's state and local policy problems, and to find effective solutions to those problems.

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