

The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

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

Michigan Public
Policy Survey July 2018

Rising confidence in Michigan's direction among local leaders, but partisan differences remain

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 2018 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 investigates local officials' opinions and perspectives on a variety of important public policy issues. Respondents for the Spring 2018 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 1,372 jurisdictions across the state.

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Key Findings

- For the second straight year, the percentage of Michigan's local leaders who are optimistic about the state's direction has increased. Statewide, over half (56%) believe Michigan is headed in the right direction, up 9 percentage points from last year and 12 points from a recent low in 2016. Meanwhile, a third (33%) say the state is off on the wrong track. These views continue to be strongly correlated with party identification.
 - » Optimism has increased among officials of all partisan affiliations, though wide gaps remain across partisan identification categories. Among self-identified Republican officials, 72% say the state is headed in the right direction, up from 64% last year. Among Independents, less than half (46%) express optimism about the state's direction, yet this is up significantly from 31% last year. Meanwhile, Democratic officials' optimism increased to 30%, up slightly from 26% in 2017.
 - » When looking by jurisdiction population size, the percentage of officials saying Michigan is headed in the right direction increased in communities of all sizes. However, among officials from urban jurisdictions, less than half (43%) say the state is headed in the right direction in 2018.
- Local leaders' positive job approval ratings for Governor Rick Snyder have risen for the second year in row, although sharp partisan differences exist here as well. Statewide, a majority (52%) rate his performance as either "good" (42%) or "excellent" (10%), compared with 46% who said the same last year, and 41% two years ago. Meanwhile, 13% rate his performance as "poor," down from 20% in 2017 and 26% in 2016.
 - » Positive ratings for Governor Snyder are found among 68% of Republican local leaders, compared with 49% of Independents and 23% of Democrats.
- Job evaluations of the Michigan Legislature's performance remain significantly lower than those for the Governor, though they have improved slightly since last year. Just over a quarter (28%) of local officials say the Legislature's performance is good or excellent, up slightly from 25% in 2017. And, while 29% of local leaders rate the Legislature as "poor," this is the smallest such rating since MPPS tracking started in 2009.
 - » Positive ratings for the Legislature are found among 38% of Republican local leaders, compared with 17% of Independents and 12% of Democrats.

Local officials' confidence in Michigan's direction up in 2018 among all partisan groups and all jurisdiction sizes, though sharp partisan differences remain

The Spring 2018 MPPS once again asked Michigan's local leaders whether they feel the state is generally going in the right direction, or if they feel things have gotten off on the wrong track. Overall, government leaders from over half (56%) of Michigan's local jurisdictions say the state is now headed in the right direction, the highest percentage since the survey began tracking this assessment in 2011, and back in line with views found in the years from 2012 to 2014 (see *Figure 1a*). Meanwhile, 33% of local leaders currently believe the state is on the wrong track, down slightly from 2017. In addition, only 11% say they don't know, indicating a greater sense of certainty compared with the past several years.

One important way to break down the overall percentages on this assessment is by officials' partisan identification. This is critical because partisanship plays a key role in evaluations of a state's direction, and because Michigan's executive and legislative branches are currently controlled by the Republican Party. Partisanship is also important here because the bulk of local government officials in Michigan come from rural 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 in typical public opinion polls in the state.

Overall, in the 2018 MPPS, approximately 60% of local official respondents self-identify as Republicans compared to 24% as Democrats and 16% as Independents. By comparison, according to Gallup polling in 2017, 38% of Michigan citizens identify themselves as Republicans, while 45% self-identify as Democrats, and 17% identify as Independents.¹

When breaking out local officials' attitudes by their partisanship, optimism about the direction the state is taking has increased among all partisan groups. Among local officials who self-identify as Republicans, 72% believe the state is currently headed in the right direction, up from 64% last year (see *Figure 1b*). Independent officials saw an even bigger jump in their optimism, with nearly half (46%) saying the state is currently headed in the right direction, up from 31% in 2017. By comparison, self-identified Democratic local officials are the least optimistic about Michigan's direction, though the percentage who say the state is headed in the right direction increased from 26% in 2017 to 30% this year, the highest percentage among Democrats since 2014.

Figure 1a
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the 'right direction' or is off on the 'wrong track,' 2011-2018

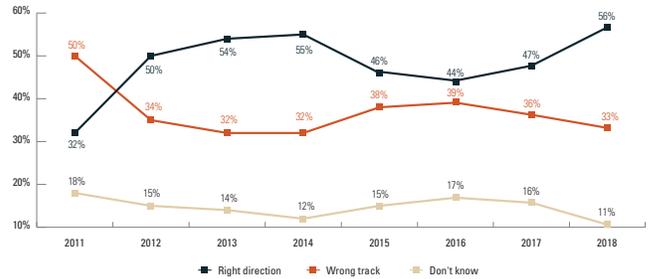
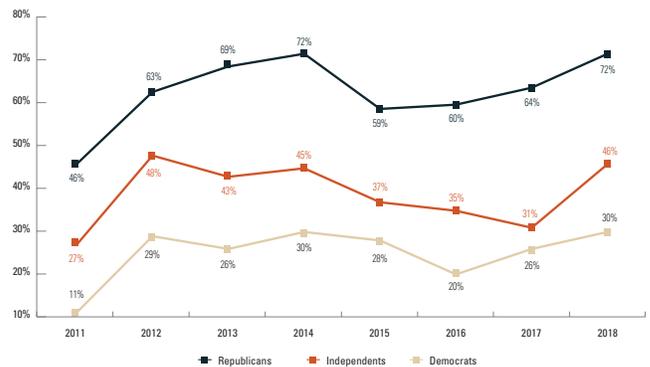


Figure 1b
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the 'right direction' in 2011-2018, by partisan identification





When looking at assessments of the state’s direction by jurisdiction population size, it is clear that optimism has increased among officials from every size of jurisdiction, in some cases quite substantially. For the first time since the MPPS began measuring, over half (52%) of officials from the state’s smallest jurisdictions—those with fewer than 1,500 residents—say Michigan is currently on the right track, up from 45% in 2017 (see *Figure 1c*). Optimism among officials from jurisdictions with between 10,001 and 30,000 residents saw the largest increase, with 62% saying they believe the state is on the right track in 2018, compared with 44% last year. And among officials from the state’s largest jurisdictions, half (50%) say the state is headed in the right direction, while 43% say Michigan is off on the wrong track (the largest negative rating among the various population groupings).

Last year, in spring 2017, the MPPS asked local officials for the first time to characterize their jurisdiction on a spectrum of rural, mostly rural, mostly urban, and urban. As shown in *Figure 1d*, optimism has increased among local officials from all types of communities in 2018. This is particularly true in places that the officials identify as “mostly urban,” where the percentage saying Michigan is headed in the right direction increased to 56% today from 43% last year. Meanwhile, among the state’s fully urban jurisdictions, the percentage of optimistic officials has increased since last year, but still less than half (43%) say the state is headed in the right direction today.

Figure 1c
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the ‘right direction’ in 2011-2018, by population size

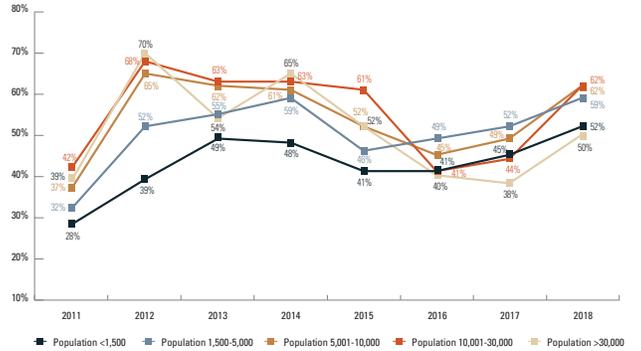
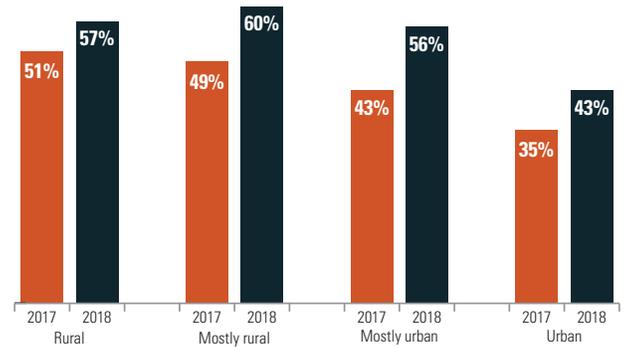


Figure 1d
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the ‘right direction’ in 2017-2018, by urban-rural self-assessment



Note: calculation for “urban-rural self-identification” does not include county responses

Ratings of Governor Snyder’s performance continue rebound

Local leaders’ assessments of Governor Rick Snyder’s job performance mirror improvements in perceptions of the state’s direction, both of which have risen for two straight years. After suffering a precipitous decline in the wake of the Flint Water Crisis, ratings of either “good” or “excellent” for the way Governor Snyder performs his job increased to 46% last year from 41% in 2016. Now, in 2018, a majority (52%) of local leaders say he is doing a good (42%) or excellent (10%) job in his final year in office (see *Figure 2a*). By contrast, the percentage assigning “poor” ratings to the Governor’s performance has dropped by half over the last two years, from 26% in 2016 to 13% in 2018.

The improved ratings for Governor Snyder’s performance come from officials of all partisan stripes, though significant differences remain. In 2018, 68% of local officials who self-identify as Republicans think the Governor is doing a good (53%) or excellent (15%) job, up from 62% overall last year (see *Figure 2b*). Nearly half (49%) of Independent officials rate the Governor’s performance positively today (44% good, 5% excellent), while in 2016 only 26% did so. Meanwhile, although less than a quarter (23%) of Democratic officials in 2018 say the Governor is doing a good (21%) or excellent (2%) job, this is up from 10% who said the same in 2016.

Local officials of all partisan groups tend to be more supportive of Governor Snyder’s performance than are Michigan citizens in the general population. In the Winter 2018 State of the State Survey (SOSS) of Michigan citizens conducted by Michigan State University’s Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, just over a quarter (26%) of citizens statewide gave Governor Snyder’s performance a “good” or “excellent” rating, compared with over half of local leaders who say the same on the MPPS.² This trend holds true when looking among partisans, with 68% of Michigan’s Republican officials giving a thumbs up to Governor Snyder’s performance compared to just 52% of Michigan’s Republican citizens. Similarly, among Independent officials, 49% give positive marks to the Governor compared with 27% of Independent citizens. And among Democratic officials, 23% have favorable evaluations of the Governor, compared with only 14% of Democratic citizens. These same patterns were found in 2016 when comparing local leaders’ views against the opinions of Michigan’s citizens, using MPPS and SOSS surveys at that time.

Figure 2a
Local officials’ evaluations of Governor Snyder’s performance, 2011-2018

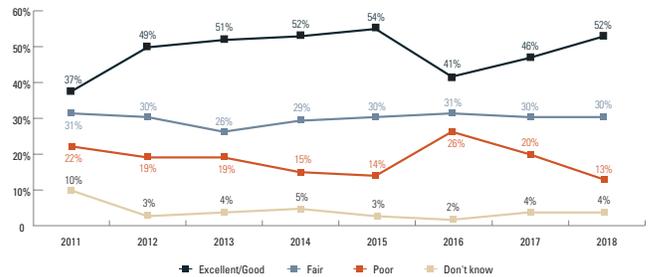
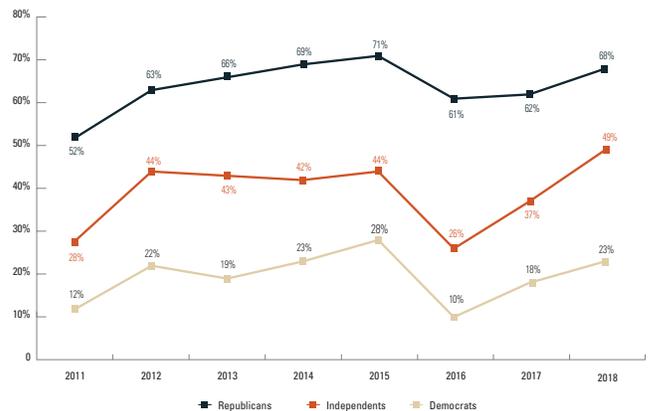


Figure 2b
Percentage of local officials who say Governor Snyder’s performance is “excellent” or “good” in 2011-2018, by partisan identification





Small increase in evaluations of the Legislature’s performance

Local officials continue to be significantly more critical of the Michigan Legislature than of the Governor in 2018, with just over a quarter (28%) of local officials statewide saying the state Legislature’s performance is either good (26%) or excellent (2%), as seen in *Figure 3a*. However, as with the Governor, local officials’ positive opinions of the Michigan Legislature’s performance (28%) in 2018 have increased, up from 25% in 2017 and 20% in 2016. And although 38% of local officials rated the Legislature’s performance as “poor” back in 2016, that percentage dropped to 30% in 2017 and to 29% this year.

Assessments of the Michigan Legislature’s performance have increased slightly among officials from all partisan affiliations. Among self-identified Republican local leaders, 38% say the Republican-led Legislature is doing a good (34%) or excellent (4%) job in 2018, up two percentage points since last year and up seven points since 2016 (see *Figure 3b*). Meanwhile, though no Independent or Democratic local officials give the Legislature “excellent” ratings in 2018, assessments of “good” job performance are provided among 17% of Independent officials and 12% of Democrats, up from 8% and 5% in 2016, respectively.

Figure 3a
Local officials’ evaluations of the Michigan Legislature’s performance, 2011-2018

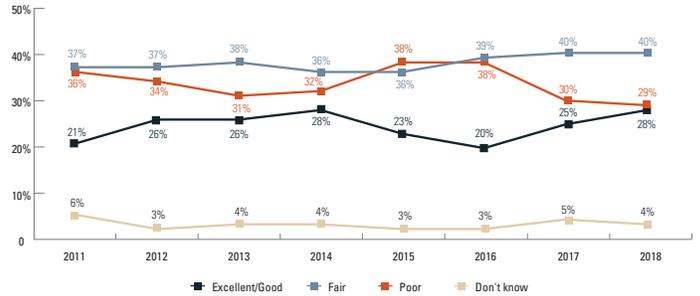
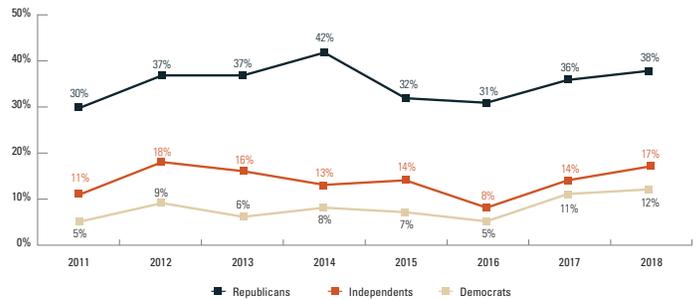


Figure 3b
Percentage of local officials who say the Legislature’s performance is “excellent” or “good” in 2011-2018, by partisan identification



Conclusion

Although less than half of Michigan's local leaders gave positive assessments regarding the direction in which Michigan was headed from 2015 to 2017, the 2018 MPPS finds a majority with optimistic outlooks. While 47% of local leaders felt the state was headed in the right direction in 2017, this has increased to 56% today. This increase in support is found among local officials of all partisan stripes, although sharp differences exist among Republicans, Independents, and Democrats. The improved assessments are also found among officials from every size jurisdiction, from the state's largest to the smallest places, and every type from fully rural to fully urban.

Similarly, local officials' assessments of Governor Rick Snyder's performance in office have become more positive in the past year. In 2017, less than half (46%) rated the Governor's performance as either "good" or "excellent," but now, in his final year in office, 52% of local leaders give him a positive job rating. And while evaluations of the Michigan Legislature's performance have not seen a matching bounce, positive ratings for the Legislature are still up slightly statewide, from 25% last year to 28% today.

Notes

1. Gallup Organization. (2017). *2017 U.S. party affiliation by state*. Washington, D.C.: Gallup Organization. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/226643/2017-party-affiliation-state.aspx>
2. Ballard, C. L. (2018). *State of the State Survey [winter 2018]*. East Lansing, MI: Institute for Public Policy and Social Research at Michigan State University. Retrieved from <http://ippsr.msu.edu/sites/default/files/soos/soos75pres.pdf>

Survey Background and Methodology

The MPPS is an ongoing survey program, interviewing the leaders of Michigan's 1,856 units of general purpose local government. Surveys are conducted each spring (and prior to 2018, were also conducted each fall). The program has covered a wide range of policy topics, and includes longitudinal tracking data on "core" fiscal, budgetary, and operational policies designed to build-up a multi-year time-series.

In the Spring 2018 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, 280 cities, 253 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan.

The Spring 2017 wave was conducted from April 9 – June 8, 2018. A total of 1,372 jurisdictions in the Spring 2018 wave returned valid surveys (65 counties, 237 cities, 177 villages, and 893 townships), resulting in a 74% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.35%. 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

- Michigan local government officials weigh in on housing shortages and related issues (June 2018)
- Approaches to land use planning and zoning among Michigan's local governments (May 2018)
- Workforce issues and challenges for Michigan's local governments (January 2018)
- Local leaders' views on elections in Michigan: accuracy, problems, and reform options (November 2017)
- Michigan local government officials report complex mix of improvement and decline in fiscal health, but with overall trend moving slowly upward (October 2017)
- Michigan local leaders want their citizens to play a larger role in policymaking, but report declining engagement (August 2017)
- Michigan local leaders' views on state preemption and how to share policy authority (June 2017)
- Improving communication, building trust are seen as keys to fixing relationships between local jurisdictions and the State government (May 2017)
- Local leaders more likely to support than oppose Michigan's Emergency Manager law, but strongly favor reforms (February 2017)
- Local government leaders' views on drinking water and water supply infrastructure in Michigan communities (November 2016)
- Michigan local leaders say property tax appeals are common, disagree with 'dark stores' assessing (October 2016)
- Local officials say Michigan's system of funding local government is broken, and seek State action to fix it (September 2016)
- Michigan local governments report first declines in fiscal health trend since 2010 (August 2016)
- Michigan local leaders' doubts continue regarding the state's direction (July 2016)
- 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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