

August 4, 2011

<http://detnews.com/article/20110804/POLITICS02/108040425>

Poll: Many local leaders say Michigan on wrong track

KATHY BARKS HOFFMAN
/ Associated Press

Lansing— After lawmakers cut their funding and gave financial managers sweeping new powers earlier this year, half of local government leaders now think Michigan is on the wrong track, according to a survey released Thursday. Only a third said it's headed in the right direction, while a fifth were undecided.

The county administrators, mayors, city managers, township supervisors and other leaders surveyed by the Center for Local, State and Urban Policy at the University of Michigan also gave Republican Gov. Rick Snyder and the GOP-controlled Legislature poor marks.

Just 37 percent gave Snyder a positive job rating while 53 percent gave him a job rating of fair or poor. Ten percent were undecided. In addition, 21 percent gave the Legislature a positive job rating while 73 percent gave it a job rating of fair or poor, with 6 percent undecided.

The ratings were better than the marks local leaders gave Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the last Legislature in a fall 2009 survey, according to Thursday's report. It noted that the latest responses "do represent a positive shift in opinions compared to those toward the end of Governor Jennifer Granholm's tenure."

Center administrator Thomas Ivacko said local government officials are trying to cope this year with new laws giving state-appointed financial managers the right to take away local officials' powers in certain circumstances and requiring local governments to cut spending and consolidate services to win a larger share of revenue sharing payments from the state.

"My sense is the types of policy changes that are coming out of Lansing this year are so high-profile and such high impact" that they're causing concern about the direction the state is headed, Ivacko said.

The changes are "reshaping the state-local government relationship in pretty significant ways," he added.

Snyder says he doesn't think state officials are stepping on local governments' authority, even if some officials feel that way.

"These are difficult times. We're just going to continue to work hard, build great partnerships and be a good team," he told reporters Thursday.

His communications director, GERALYN LASHER, noted "the status quo hasn't worked for Michigan."

"We certainly understand that some local officials may not fully understand or may not have embraced the cost-saving measures we are asking them to undertake, but we remain committed to work with them ... to help them understand why it is so crucial to move forward with items like shared or consolidated services to ensure we have financially sound communities," Lasher said.

Local governments that heed Snyder's call to cut spending and consolidate public services — meeting what the governor calls "best practices" — will be eligible to share \$100 million of the \$200 million set aside for revenue sharing in the budget that starts Oct. 1. But all will be receiving less money, since the 2011-12 revenue sharing budget will be nearly \$100 million smaller than the current one.

Local governments still will share in nearly \$660 million the state constitution requires be given to them. But faced with smaller property tax revenues because of falling home prices and less state money, many local governments are laying off workers, closing parks or reducing services.

Despite the challenges, most local officials are optimistic about how their local communities are doing, according to the survey. Eighty-six percent said their own governments are going in the right direction and just 9 percent said they're on the wrong track, with 5 percent undecided. Eighty-two percent gave their local city councils or township boards a grade of excellent or good.

Political affiliation played a role in the survey, with Republicans significantly more likely to give the GOP governor a positive job rating than Democrats. Yet even then a bare majority of Republicans surveyed — 52 percent — said the governor was doing an excellent or good job.

"It's not surprising that some of these local officials think this is taking us down a track that isn't going to be good," Ivacko said. "On the other hand, there are some local officials who think they've done everything they can and their local jurisdictions are still in fiscal straits, and it may require some pretty drastic changes to be effective at this point."

The biannual survey was conducted from April 18 to June 10 and is based on responses from 69 percent of the 1,856 local government units in Michigan. The margin of sampling error was plus or minus 1.5 percentage points.