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Next gov needs to figure out state government

BY RON DZWONKOWSKI
FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

The 47th person to serve as governor of Michigan will have his hands full.

It will be a him. No women this year went after the job that has been held since 2003 by Jennifer Granholm.

On the downside for her successor, the public has lost faith in state government to get much done for the general good. We got a smoking ban this year that was a decade in the works and, joining a parade of other states, a law against texting while driving. But on the big stuff, the fundamental, structural issues, the state still struggles.

On the upside for the next governor, expectations are low.

The latest State of the State survey from Michigan State University, a poll of almost 2,000 residents earlier this year, found just 16% saying they could trust state government "all or most of the time," the lowest confidence in Lansing since the quarterly survey began in 1994. In a survey of 1,300 local officials last year, 49% said they seldom or almost never trust the state government to do the right thing.

Talk to folks about what they want in a governor and the usual answer is along the lines of "somebody who can get something done."

As Granholm can attest, it's not that easy in the politically polarized corridors of the Capitol -- and those who would settle for just "getting something done" need to be careful what they wish for, because that something may not be to their liking.

We need a consensus

So perhaps where the next governor can start is by forging a new consensus on what state government and state-supported institutions and programs ought to be. Right now there isn't one, only an ongoing series of fights over what to cut and how to tax.

Ideally, the next governor would devote his initial energy to building relationships with the Legislature that Granholm never had and developing an agreed-upon set of facts about the state's situation that is also crystal clear to the public. That's how you build a new consensus about what should be instead of fighting over how to pay for what is.

Tough decisions part of the job

Whoever is governor next will be challenged to work "across party lines in order to make the tough decisions that will be necessary," said Doug Rothwell, president and CEO of Business Leaders For Michigan.

"Tough decisions" is another way of saying you have to do things that are going to make some people unhappy. But if you start with a solid foundation, you have something to build on.

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Big job, hard work. No reason our next governor has to do it alone.

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