

# The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

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

Michigan Public  
Policy Survey June 2016

## Firefighting services in Michigan: challenges and approaches among local governments

By Debra Horner and Thomas Ivacko

This report examines Michigan local government leaders' opinions on fire protection services in their communities, including satisfaction with fire services and funding of fire protection at the local level. The findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Fall 2015 wave 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 Fall 2015 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 1,418 jurisdictions across the state.

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## Key Findings

- Firefighting services are provided, directly or indirectly, by almost all local governments in Michigan (excluding counties). Approximately two-thirds (65%) of cities, villages, and townships report that they provide fire services *directly* by running their own fire department or running one jointly with neighboring jurisdictions. Another 32% report that they provide fire services *indirectly* by contracting with another provider such as a special authority/district or another municipality. Only 2% say they don't play any role in providing fire services.
  - » Over half (56%) of the state's smallest jurisdictions report providing fire services directly, as do 98% of the largest jurisdictions. By region, jurisdictions in the Upper Peninsula (75%) are most likely to provide their own services, while those in the East Central (39%) and Northern Lower Peninsula (37%) are most likely to contract out for fire services.
- Among jurisdictions with fire protection services, the majority (55%) indicate that their departments are comprised entirely of volunteer firefighters.
  - » In the state's smallest jurisdictions, 71% of officials say they are served by all-volunteer forces. Meanwhile, 65% of the largest cities and townships report having departments run entirely by paid firefighters.
- Local officials say recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters is somewhat of a problem or a significant problem (42%). By comparison, just 18% of local leaders report this as a problem for paid firefighters.
- Approximately a third (34%) of the state's local jurisdictions report that their fire departments (as compared to either police or emergency medical services/ambulances) are the unit most often providing emergency medical response for citizens.
- Local leaders' satisfaction with fire services is uniformly high, with 95% of officials statewide reporting they are somewhat (18%) or very (77%) satisfied with the fire services provided in their jurisdictions, and 91% saying they believe their citizens are somewhat (22%) or very (69%) satisfied.
- Statewide, 65% of local officials say their jurisdictions have enough funding available to meet their current fire protection needs. Meanwhile, one in five (20%) report that their jurisdictions do *not* have sufficient funding, including 36% of the state's largest jurisdictions.
  - » Overall, 41% of local jurisdictions report successfully passing new or increased local fire services millages or special assessments in the last few years.

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## Background

Michigan's local governments offer a wide variety of different combinations of services to their citizens. However, one common service that almost every city, village, and township across the state provides is fire protection. Many local governments maintain their own fire departments, while others provide fire protection indirectly by contracting for fire services from a neighboring unit or, alternatively, working in concert with multiple jurisdictions through a jointly-run department or fire authority. According to the most recent U.S. Census data, Michigan's local governments combine to spend nearly a billion dollars (\$909,068,000) on fire protection services<sup>1</sup> provided by approximately 1,029 fire departments, which, in turn, are served by 34,500 paid and volunteer firefighters across the state.<sup>2</sup>

Michigan firefighters are called upon to provide emergency response and non-emergency services of many kinds. These include not only fire suppression, but also emergency medical service, fire prevention education, arson investigation, emergency and disaster management, terrorism response and training, hazardous materials response, search and rescue, wildland firefighting, fireworks inspection, and more.<sup>3</sup> Michigan's Bureau of Fire Services reports that just over a quarter (27%) of local firefighters are full-time or "paid career" personnel, while the bulk of firefighters statewide are "part-paid/non-paid volunteer,"<sup>4</sup> with the average full-time firefighter in Michigan paid an annual wage of \$44,000 in 2015, somewhat below the national average of \$49,330.<sup>5</sup>

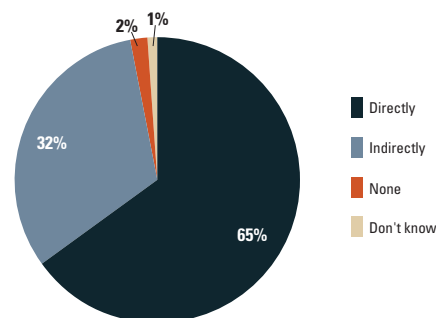
Staffing of both volunteer (or paid on-call) and full-time firefighters has been decreasing in locales across the state, from Grand Rapids<sup>6</sup> to Port Huron<sup>7</sup> and in-between. The decreases may have been driven by a number of factors, including local government fiscal distress combined with cuts to state grants for fire protection,<sup>8</sup> a gradual decades-long decline in the reported number of fires,<sup>9</sup> and challenges over recruiting and retaining qualified personnel.<sup>10</sup>

The Fall 2015 MPPS survey went to local officials statewide to gather their assessments of their local fire services and to find out more on issues such as fire department performance, staffing, and funding.

## Two-thirds of Michigan local governments run their own (or joint) fire departments

The Fall 2015 MPPS asked how fire services are provided across the state of Michigan and finds that 65% of Michigan local governments (excluding counties) report having a direct role in providing fire services by running their own (or joint) fire departments (see *Figure 1a*). These jurisdictions may also provide fire services for other jurisdictions who contract with them. Meanwhile, 32% report that they play an indirect role in providing fire service—that is, they contract with a special authority/district, another municipality, or another provider for fire services in their own jurisdictions. Only a small handful (2%) say they don't have any role in providing fire services. These jurisdictions providing no fire service include mostly small villages and a few townships.

**Figure 1a**  
Percentage of jurisdictions (excluding counties) reporting how they provide local fire protection services





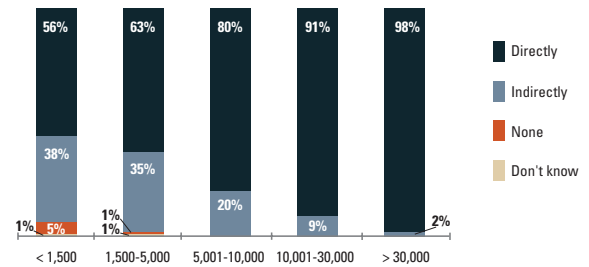
While size does matter when it comes to fire service provision, even the state's smallest local governments tend to be in the firefighting business. As shown in *Figure 1b*, over half (56%) of Michigan's smallest jurisdictions—those with fewer than 1,500 residents—report that they provide their fire services directly. Among the state's largest cities and townships—those with more than 30,000 residents—almost all (98%) provide fire services directly.

By region, jurisdictions in the Upper Peninsula (75%) are the most likely to report providing their own fire protection services directly to residents, while local governments in the East Central (39%) and Northern Lower Peninsula (37%) are most likely to say they contract with another provider for their fire services (see *Figure 1c*).

These approaches to local fire protection and related services are unlikely to see much change in the near future. When the MPPS asked local officials how likely it is that their city, village, or township will change its approach to fire protection services within the next two years, only 5% statewide say that it is either somewhat or very likely they will do so. There are only slight differences in predictions about near-term change in fire protection service provision by jurisdiction size (see *Figure 2*), by region of the state, or whether a jurisdiction is currently providing its own fire services or contracting for them indirectly.

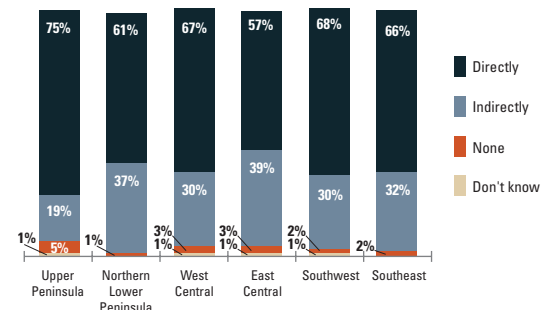
**Figure 1b**

Percentage of jurisdictions (excluding counties) reporting how they provide local fire protection services, by population size



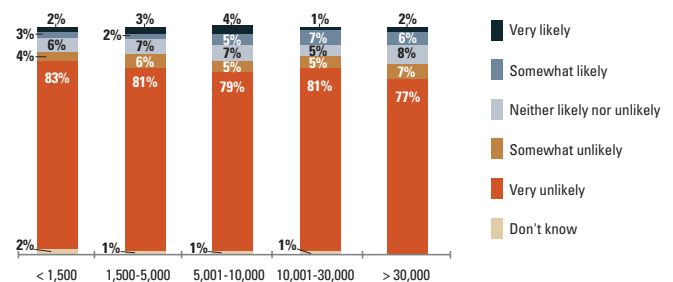
**Figure 1c**

Percentage of jurisdictions (excluding counties) reporting how they provide local fire protection services, by region



**Figure 2**

Local officials' assessments of the likelihood of their jurisdictions (excluding counties) changing fire protection service delivery arrangements in next two years, by population size



## Most Michigan local fire departments are staffed by volunteer firefighters

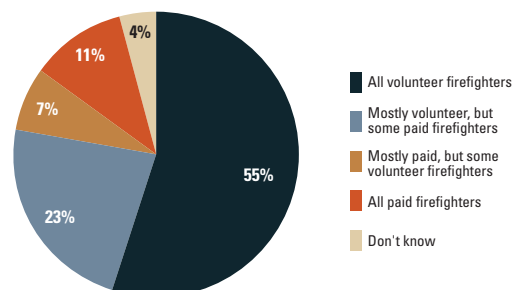
Among jurisdictions that report having fire protection services, the majority (55%) indicate that their departments are comprised entirely of volunteer firefighters—including those who may receive a stipend for fire runs, sometimes referred to as “paid on-call” (see *Figure 3a*). Another 23% are covered by mostly volunteer departments that have some paid firefighters on staff. Only 18% of jurisdictions report that their departments are staffed entirely (11%) or mostly (7%) by paid firefighters.

Staffing by paid vs. volunteer firefighters is closely associated with a jurisdiction’s population size. Among the state’s smallest jurisdictions, 71% of officials say they are served by all-volunteer forces, compared with only 3% among the largest jurisdictions (see *Figure 3b*). Meanwhile, 35% of mid-sized jurisdictions—those with between 10,001-30,000 residents—report having all-paid firefighters, as do nearly two-thirds (65%) of the largest cities and townships.

There are significant regional differences in staffing, too. The Upper Peninsula has the highest percentage of jurisdictions (82%) served by all-volunteer firefighters (see *Figure 3c*). By contrast, only a quarter (26%) of local governments in Southeast Michigan report having all-volunteer departments, while 30% report being staffed fully by paid firefighters.

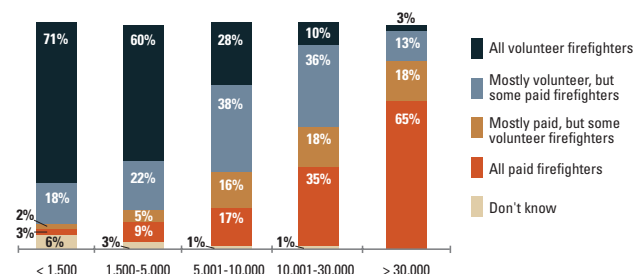
**Figure 3a**

Percentage of jurisdictions reporting how fire services are staffed (among those jurisdictions directly or indirectly providing fire protection services)



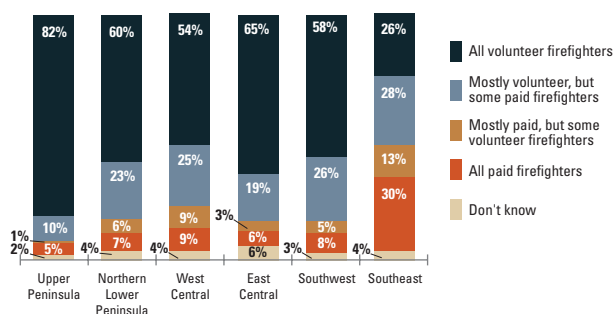
**Figure 3b**

Percentage of jurisdictions reporting how fire services are staffed (among those jurisdictions directly or indirectly providing fire protection services), by population size



**Figure 3c**

Percentage of jurisdictions reporting how fire services are staffed (among those jurisdictions directly or indirectly providing fire protection services), by region





## Concerns about recruitment and retention, especially for volunteer firefighters

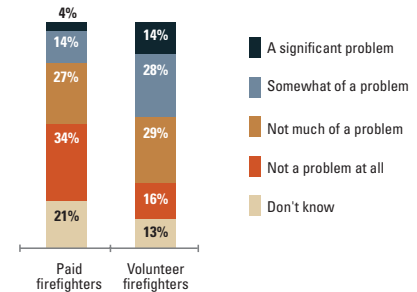
The MPPS asked to what extent, if any, local officials believe that recruitment and/or retention is a problem—either now or recently—in the fire departments that serve their jurisdictions. In jurisdictions with at least some paid firefighters, nearly one in five (18%) report that recruitment or retention is somewhat of a problem or a significant problem for their fire services (see *Figure 4*). And in jurisdictions with at least some volunteer firefighters, that percentage more than doubles, with 42% saying personnel recruitment or retention is a problem. Given the widespread use of volunteer firefighters across Michigan, recruitment and retention of qualified personnel is a significant issue. (It is worthwhile to note that many local officials respond that they “don’t know” whether paid (21%) or volunteer (13%) firefighter recruitment or retention is a problem for the fire departments that serve their jurisdiction.)

Looking at jurisdictions of different sizes, concerns over paid firefighter recruitment are fairly consistent among officials from both small and large communities. For example, 20% of officials from the smallest jurisdictions served by paid firefighters report problems with recruitment and retention, compared with 23% from the largest jurisdictions (see *Figure 5a*). By contrast, problems with recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters are more likely to be reported in large jurisdictions (56%) than in small ones (40%).

By region, *Figure 5b* shows concerns about recruitment and retention of paid firefighters are highest in the Upper Peninsula (31%) and the Northern Lower Peninsula (30%). Northern Lower Peninsula officials (52%) are also the most likely to say volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention is a problem, while officials in the East Central region (32%) are the least likely to say so.

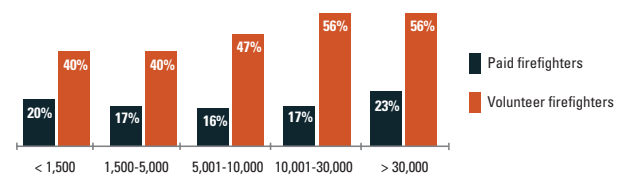
**Figure 4**

Local officials’ assessments of difficulties with local fire services recruitment/retention for paid and volunteer firefighters (among jurisdictions where those types of firefighters serve)



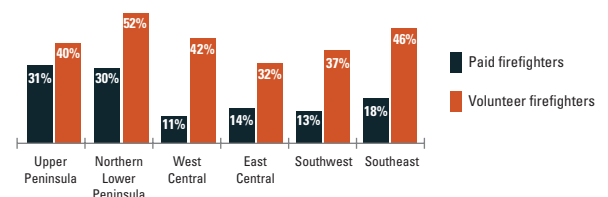
**Figure 5a**

Percentage of local officials saying recruitment/retention of paid and volunteer firefighters is a “somewhat” or “significant” problem (among jurisdictions where those types of firefighters serve), by population size



**Figure 5b**

Percentage of local officials saying recruitment/retention for paid and volunteer firefighters is a “somewhat” or “significant” problem (among jurisdictions where those types of firefighters serve), by region



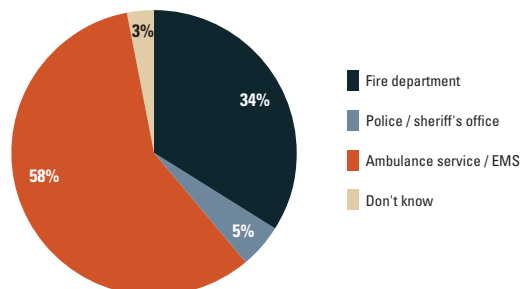
## Fire departments act as first emergency medical response in one-third of communities statewide, more often in larger communities

Local fire departments are often charged not only with the tasks that fall under traditional fire and hazardous materials protection, but also with acting as first responders when there is a medical emergency. The MPPS asked local officials to identify which public safety unit most often provides emergency medical response in their jurisdictions—the fire department, police/sheriff's office, or ambulance service/EMS. In a third (34%) of the state's jurisdictions, local officials report that the fire department provides emergency medical response services more often than do law enforcement or ambulance service/EMS (see *Figure 6a*).

Fire departments are somewhat more likely to function as first responders for medical emergencies in larger jurisdictions compared with smaller communities (see *Figure 6b*). Meanwhile, regional differences are much more pronounced, with officials in the Upper Peninsula (11%) and Northern Lower Peninsula (22%) being significantly less likely than other regions to report that fire services act as the first responders in a medical emergency in their jurisdictions (see *Figure 6c*).

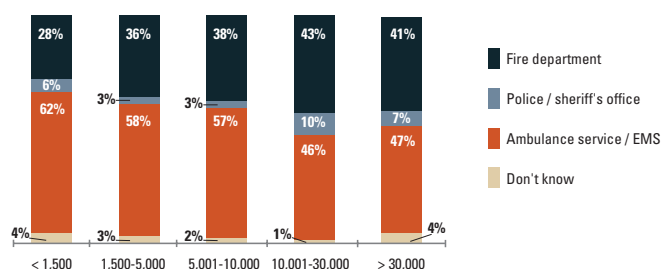
**Figure 6a**

Percentage of jurisdictions reporting which public safety unit most often provides emergency medical response in the jurisdiction



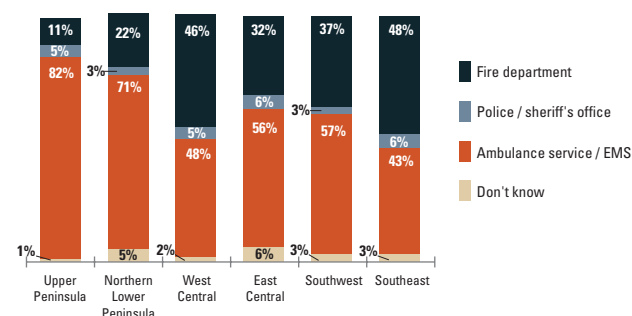
**Figure 6b**

Percentage of jurisdictions reporting which public safety unit most often provides emergency medical response in the jurisdiction, by population size



**Figure 6c**

Percentage of jurisdictions reporting which public safety unit most often provides emergency medical response in the jurisdiction, by region





## Statewide, 22% of jurisdictions say fire issues are a problem for their communities

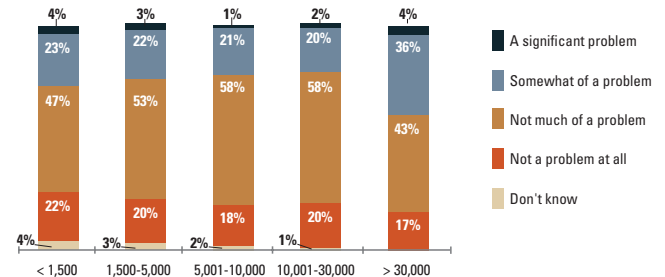
Different jurisdictions face different kinds of demands for fire protection services based on a number of factors, such as size, urbanization, aging housing stock, or proximity to forests or hazardous materials. The MPPS asked local officials to identify whether certain types of fire issues are currently (or have recently been) problems in their jurisdictions. Overall, 22% of officials from cities, villages, and townships report that fires and related issues are either somewhat of a problem or a significant problem for their communities. Officials from the state's largest cities and townships (35%) are the most likely to report facing these problems (see *Figure 7*).

When it comes to different types of fire-related challenges, only 4% of local officials statewide say arson is either somewhat of a problem or a significant problem in their communities, but this percentage increases to 25% among the largest cities and townships (see *Figure 8a*). By comparison, wildfires, unsurprisingly, are reported as problems more often by officials from smaller, more rural communities, including in 18% of the smallest jurisdictions. Meanwhile, officials from jurisdictions of all sizes have concerns with other types of fires (e.g., accidental fires), reported by 14% statewide and 22% in the largest jurisdictions. Finally, 7% of local leaders report that hazardous material incidents are a problem in their communities, with officials from the largest communities being most likely to say so (14%).

When looking across different regions of the state, as shown in *Figure 8b*, it is clear that wildfires are a significant concern in the Upper Peninsula (27%) and Northern Lower Peninsula (30%). Officials from these regions are also more likely to say that “other” types of fire (beside wildfires and arson) pose challenges for their communities (17% and 22% between these two regions, respectively). In addition, officials from jurisdictions in the Southwest (15%) are most likely to indicate hazardous materials incidents pose a problem in their communities.

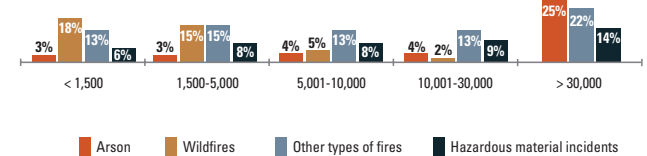
**Figure 7**

Local officials' assessments that fire issues are problems in their communities (excluding counties), by population size



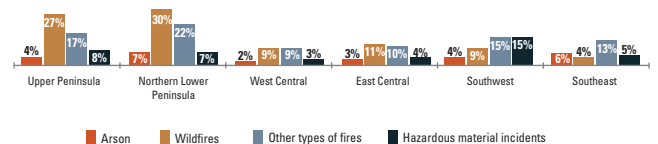
**Figure 8a**

Percent of local officials (excluding counties) who say various types of fire issues are somewhat of a problem or a significant problem in their communities, by population size



**Figure 8b**

Percent of local officials (excluding counties) who say various types of fire issues are somewhat of a problem or a significant problem in their communities, by region





## Most local officials are very satisfied with their fire services and believe citizens are, as well.

Satisfaction among local leaders regarding the fire departments serving their communities is almost unanimously high, with 95% of officials statewide reporting they are somewhat (18%) or very (77%) satisfied. These high levels of satisfaction are seen across jurisdictions of all sizes (see *Figure 9a*) and regions (see *Figure 9b*).

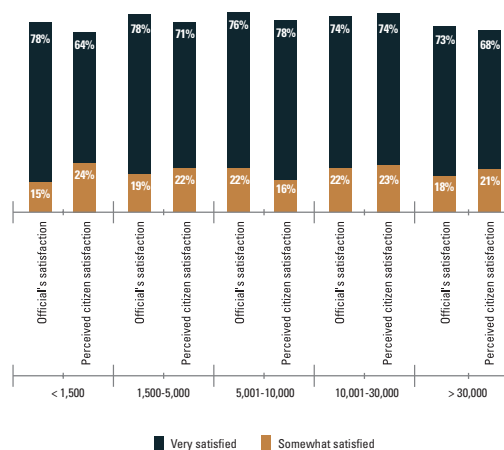
Futhermore, 91% of local leaders think their citizens are somewhat (22%) or very (69%) satisfied with their fire services as well, only slightly lower than the officials' own levels of satisfaction. However, there are some differences in how officials view the satisfaction of their citizens. For example, officials from mid-sized jurisdictions (with 5,001-10,000 residents) are the most likely to say their citizens are "very" satisfied with fire services (78%) compared with 64% of officials from the smallest jurisdictions who say the same (see *Figure 9a*).

Meanwhile, by region of the state, officials from Southeast Michigan are the most likely to rate their citizens as "very" satisfied (80%) compared with only 62% of officials from the Northern Lower Peninsula saying the same (see *Figure 9b*).

As shown in *Figure 9c*, officials in jurisdictions that receive their fire protection indirectly—through a special authority/district, from another municipality, or from another provider through a contract—are somewhat less likely to say they are "very" satisfied with their fire services (73%) compared to those in jurisdictions that provide their own fire services directly (81%). Similarly, in jurisdictions with indirect fire service provision, 64% of local officials believe their citizens are "very" satisfied, compared with 74% of officials from jurisdictions that run their own fire departments.

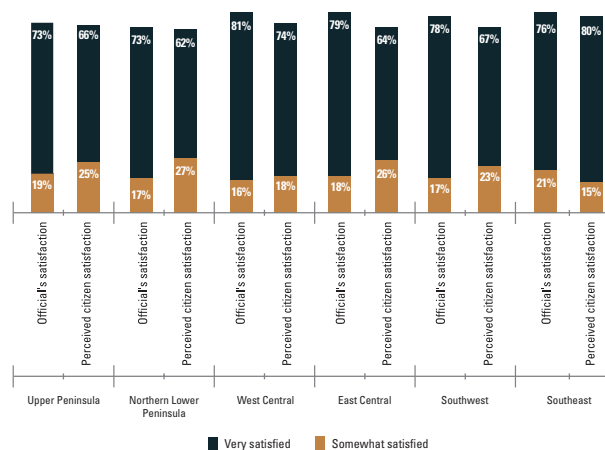
**Figure 9a**

Local officials' own satisfaction with and assessments of citizen satisfaction with local fire services, by population size



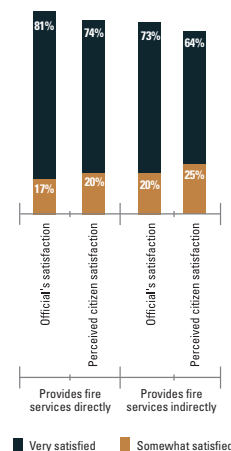
**Figure 9b**

Local officials' own satisfaction with and assessments of citizen satisfaction with local fire services, by region



**Figure 9c**

Local officials' own satisfaction with and assessments of citizen satisfaction with local fire services, by direct vs. indirect service provision







## Officials say citizens are confident that fire services will arrive in time, particularly in larger jurisdictions

When it comes to the performance of fire services, there is widespread agreement among local officials that most people in their jurisdictions feel confident that fire services will arrive in time to handle a fire, with 85% overall saying they strongly (55%) or somewhat (30%) agree with that statement. Whereas satisfaction is uniformly high with overall firefighting services (as shown in *Figure 9a*), there are greater differences among officials from jurisdictions of different sizes regarding whether people think their fire services will arrive in time. In the state's smallest jurisdictions, 77% say their citizens believe fire services can be relied upon to show up in time to handle a fire, compared with 96% in the largest jurisdictions (see *Figure 10*).

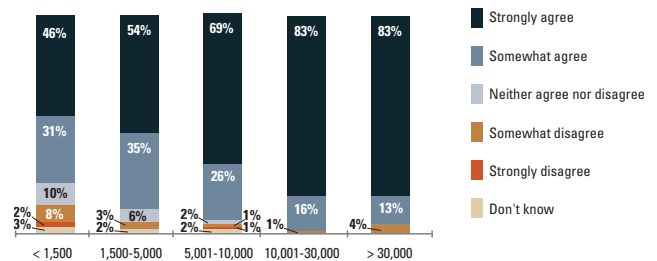
## Two-thirds of local leaders believe their fire services are more effective today compared with five years ago

Statewide, two-thirds (65%) of local leaders from cities, villages, and townships that provide fire services believe that their fire services are more effective now compared with those offered five years ago, including 39% of officials who *strongly* believe this. Officials from jurisdictions with between 10,001-30,000 residents are the most likely to strongly agree (55%) that their fire services have improved over the last five years (see *Figure 11a*). And while officials from the smallest jurisdictions are the least likely to report that they've seen improvements in their fire services, nonetheless, 61% agree effectiveness has increased. Few local officials overall (4%) outright disagree that there has been recent improvement in their fire services' effectiveness.

Officials from jurisdictions that directly provide fire services are more likely to say their services are more effective now compared with five years ago: 44% strongly agree this is the case, compared with 29% of officials from jurisdictions where fire services are provided indirectly (see *Figure 11b*).

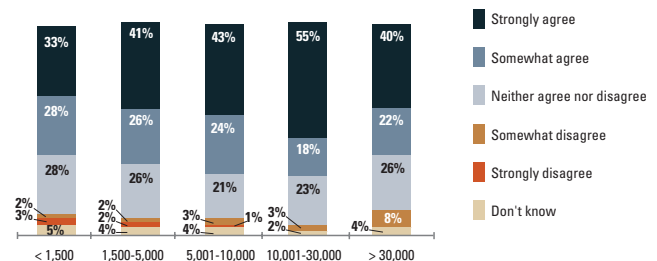
**Figure 10**

Percentage of local leaders who think most of their communities' citizens are confident that fire services will arrive in time (among those directly or indirectly providing firefighting services), by population size



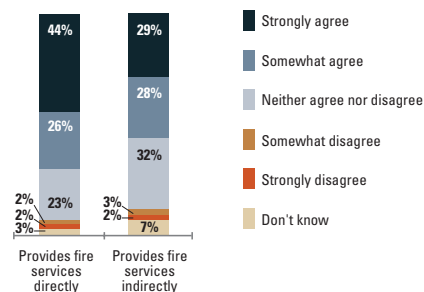
**Figure 11a**

Percentage of local leaders who agree the effectiveness of local fire services has improved compared with five years ago (among those directly or indirectly providing firefighting services), by population size



**Figure 11b**

Percentage of local leaders who agree the effectiveness of local fire services has improved compared with five years ago (among those directly or indirectly providing firefighting services), by direct vs. indirect service provision



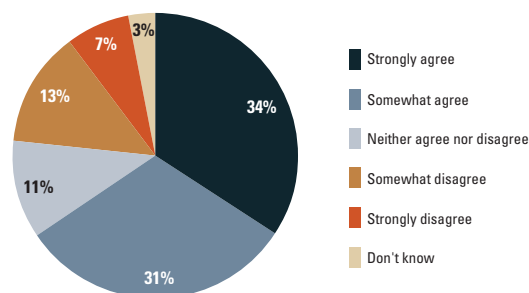
## Most officials agree they have sufficient funding for current fire services, but one-third of officials from largest jurisdictions disagree

Although fiscal stress among many of Michigan's local governments has been gradually easing since the end of the Great Recession, many are still seeing declines in revenues and increases in public safety demands.<sup>11</sup> With nearly all Michigan local governments providing some kind of fire services, either directly or indirectly, the impact on local government budgets is an important issue. The MPPS asked local leaders if their jurisdictions have enough funding available to meet the fire protection needs of their communities, and two-thirds agree that they do have sufficient funds, including 34% who strongly agree and 31% who somewhat agree (see *Figure 12a*). Meanwhile, one in five (20%) local leaders report that their jurisdictions do not have sufficient funding to meet their needs, and another 11% are ambivalent (neither agreeing nor disagreeing) about the adequacy of their fire services funding.

Local officials from smaller jurisdictions with between 1,500-5,000 residents are the most likely to agree (71%) they have sufficient funding to meet their fire service needs (see *Figure 12b*). Conversely, more than one-third of officials from the state's largest jurisdictions (36%) say that they do *not* have sufficient funding for their fire service needs. Meanwhile, there are few differences in the estimates of adequate fire services funding among officials from different regions or among those whose services are provided directly vs. indirectly.

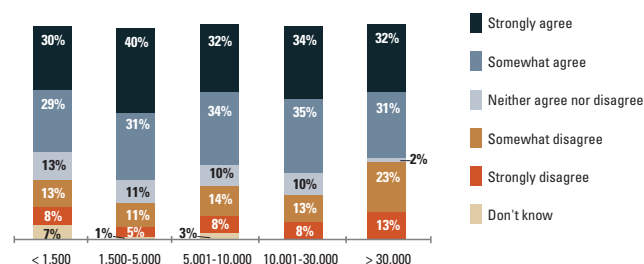
**Figure 12a**

Local officials' assessments of whether jurisdiction has sufficient funding to meet fire protection needs



**Figure 12b**

Local officials' assessments of whether jurisdiction has sufficient funding to meet fire protection needs, by population size





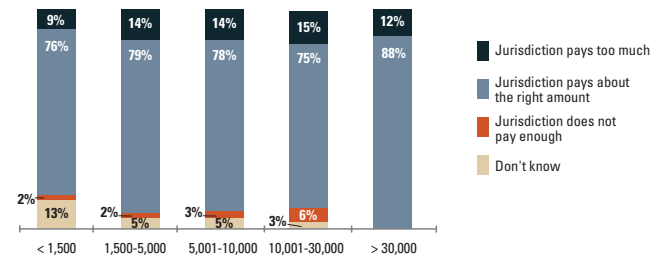
## Most think shared fire services are funded equitably

As shown earlier in *Figure 1a*, 65% of Michigan jurisdictions report they play a direct role in providing fire services (running their own department, or directly participating in a joint fire department), and 32% report they play an indirect role (contracting for fire services by another provider). Taking into account all of these jurisdictions, a shared service approach of some kind is very common. Only 22% of local officials report that they do *not* currently share fire service delivery with neighboring jurisdictions in some fashion, by either providing services to or receiving them from another jurisdiction via contract.

Among the majority of jurisdictions that *do* share fire services, the MPPS asked their local leaders whether they feel the division of costs across jurisdictions is fair. When services are shared jointly between multiple jurisdictions, or provided by one jurisdiction for another, only 12% statewide think they are paying too much (with few differences by jurisdiction size, as shown in *Figure 13*). Meanwhile, 6% of leaders from jurisdictions with between 10,001-30,000 residents who share services believe they are actually not paying enough of their share. There are few other differences in these assessments by region, jurisdiction type, or whether the service is directly or indirectly provided.

**Figure 13**

Local officials' assessments of whether jurisdiction pays a fair proportion for shared fire services (among those jurisdictions where services are shared jointly or provided by one jurisdiction for another), by population size



## Many jurisdictions recently successful in pursuing local funding for fire protection

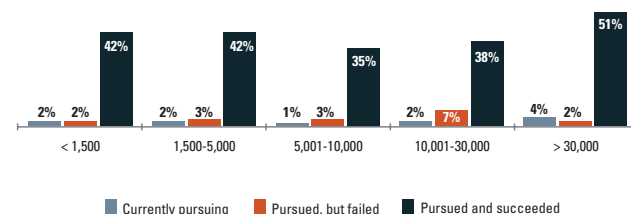
The Fall 2015 MPPS reveals that while only 14% of jurisdictions have recently passed new or renewed local millages or special assessments for law enforcement services,<sup>12</sup> overall, 41% report success when they have pursued new or renewed fire services millages or special assessments. While officials in jurisdictions of all sizes report recent success with new or renewed funding efforts, this is particularly true among the state's largest jurisdictions, where over half (51%) report successful local funding efforts (see *Figure 14*).

Even though there has been widespread success in new millages and special assessments in recent years, many of these funding sources may be limited to short time periods. Looking ahead, 42% of local leaders say they would support their jurisdiction pursuing additional local revenues for fire protection, with more than half (52%) of officials from the state's largest jurisdictions saying they would support such an effort (see *Figure 15a*). However, a quarter (25%) of local leaders statewide say they would oppose the pursuit of new local fire funding in their jurisdictions in the next few years.

As shown in *Figure 15b*, officials from jurisdictions that provide fire services directly are more likely to say they support the pursuit of new local fire funding (47%), compared to officials from jurisdictions that get their fire services indirectly (35%).

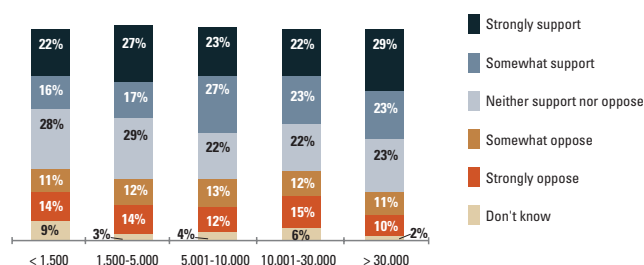
**Figure 14**

Jurisdictions' pursuit of local fire services funding in recent years through new or renewed millages or special assessments (excluding counties), by population size



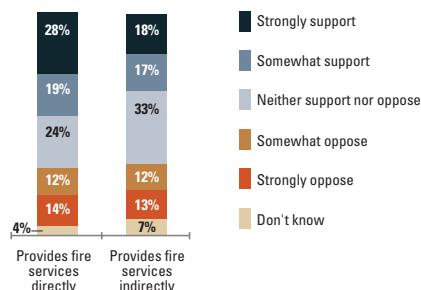
**Figure 15a**

Local officials' support for or opposition to their jurisdiction pursuing additional local fire services funding through future new millages or special assessments (excluding counties), by population size



**Figure 15b**

Local officials' support for or opposition to their jurisdiction pursuing additional local fire services funding through future new millages or special assessments (excluding counties), by direct vs. indirect service provision





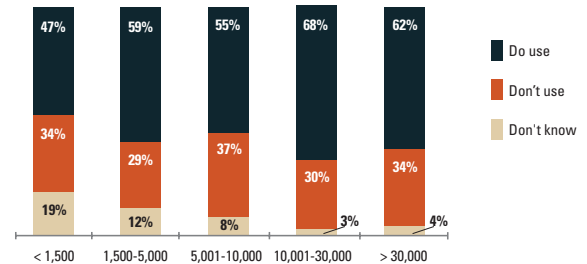
## More than half of Michigan's largest local governments use cost recovery practices to help fund fire services

In addition to local millages or special assessments, some local governments offset fire services expenses with the use of cost recovery policies and ordinances. These might include policies such as charging fees for responding to motor vehicle accidents, hazardous materials incidents, multiple false alarms, special technical rescues, and so on. According to local officials, more than half (55%) of Michigan jurisdictions use cost recovery practices to help fund their fire services. This is more than double the number (24%) that report doing so for law enforcement services.<sup>13</sup> Officials from the state's larger jurisdictions are the most likely to say they use cost recovery policies, including 68% from jurisdictions with 10,001-30,000 residents and 62% from jurisdictions with over 30,000 residents (see *Figure 16*). At the same time, almost half (47%) of the smallest jurisdictions report using cost recovery practices, as well (although it's important to note that 19% of officials from these smallest jurisdictions answer "don't know" regarding the use of cost recovery policies).

Among those jurisdictions that do use cost recovery practices for fire services, 60% of local leaders say they are generally satisfied with the approach, while only 13% are dissatisfied (see *Figure 17*).

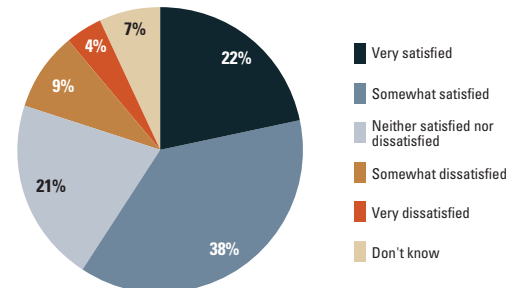
**Figure 16**

Jurisdictions' use of cost recovery policies or ordinances for fire services (excluding counties), by population size



**Figure 17**

Local officials' satisfaction with their jurisdictions' use of cost recovery for fire services (among those with cost recovery policies or ordinances)



## Biggest fire related challenges facing local jurisdictions

In an open-end response question, the Fall 2015 MPPS asked local leaders to identify the biggest public safety challenges—fire, law enforcement, and ambulance/EMS—facing their communities today. This survey item elicited nearly 300 descriptive comments specifically regarding fire protection. Although these open-end responses do not necessarily speak for the entire MPPS sample, they do represent an extensive cross-section of opinions regarding the specific concerns local officials have regarding their most pressing fire safety issues. Despite the high percentage of leaders who say they currently have sufficient funding for their fire service needs, the most common theme officials discussed was still their concerns over fire funding, in particular the lack of funds to train and pay firefighters. These funding concerns also overlapped with concerns about recruitment and retention—particularly of volunteers, as noted earlier in this report—and about negotiating cost sharing agreements across units of government.

### Voices Across Michigan

Quotes from local leaders regarding their communities' biggest public safety challenges: mentions of issues related to fire protection and related services

- “Balancing what the community wants and can afford is a challenge. Regarding fire departments—everyone wants the fire department when their house is on fire. The equipment is outrageously expensive. We recently passed a per-parcel assessment to fund a pumper truck. The ballot question... passed 2-1. The responsibility of the elected body is to keep the need active in the minds of the electorate. Be honest and ask for feedback... there are smart people in your community.”
- “Rising costs—labor and equipment costs and lack of adequate cost recovery—collections, especially from residents or visitors of other townships we serve, is a continual struggle. Our township residents are eating the costs for the other townships. The costs of the ambulance/fire service need to be spread over a larger geographic area so that the call volume is high enough for the costs involved.”
- “The residents in Michigan are getting older which results in more medical runs for our Fire Department.”
- “Our 100% volunteer fire personnel and medical first responders is the biggest issue we face. With funding as it is and our location being rural, we can't afford to have full time paid fire fighters. I believe it is a concern for our citizens but the special assessment we currently have will not support having them as paid.”
- “When stipends paid to volunteer firefighters have to be so minimal to avoid volunteers being legally classified as employees rather than volunteers. Often the maximum allowable legal stipend doesn't even cover the volunteers' cost to serve! For most smaller communities volunteer Fire and EMS services are all they can afford. Maintaining enough trained volunteers when they can't at least be compensated for their personal expenses incurred for required training and then serving their communities is becoming more and more difficult.”
- “Getting volunteers to serve as firefighters—paper work, increasing regulations and training requirements—are challenges. We also have an older population which does not exactly provide a large field of recruits.”
- “Manning the Fire Station during the day is difficult because most of the firefighters have day jobs. We have to rely on mutual aid from neighboring departments to provide service.”
- “Our Fire Department has a group of Medical First Responders and they are being called more and more to respond until an ambulance arrives. Residents of the City and residents of the two townships that the Fire Department covers by contract are very grateful for the Medical First Responders but the additional calls are starting to have a negative impact on the Fire budget. So far we have been able to cover the additional costs but the concern is what do we do when we need additional funding.”



## Conclusion

In Michigan, nearly every city, village, and township plays some role—either directly (65%) or indirectly (32%)—in providing fire protection to citizens. A majority (55%) of local officials report that their fire services are staffed entirely by volunteer (including paid on-call) firefighters, with only 18% of jurisdictions reporting that their departments are staffed mostly or entirely by paid firefighters.

Local officials are concerned about the retention and recruitment of local firefighters, especially among volunteers. It is seen as a challenge for jurisdictions of all sizes—with officials from 40% of the state’s smallest villages and townships and 56% of officials from the largest jurisdictions—saying recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters is a problem for the fire departments that service their jurisdiction.

When it comes to the performance of fire services in local jurisdictions, local officials’ satisfaction is high, with 77% statewide saying they are very satisfied with the fire services provided in their jurisdictions. Furthermore, 69% believe their citizens are very satisfied, as well.

Support for local millages and special-assessments to fund fire services has generally been successful in communities across the state. However, many local governments (55%) have had to supplement that local funding with cost recovery practices, and a large percentage of local officials (42%) say they would support asking for additional local funding through millages and special assessments in the near future.



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## 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 Fall 2015 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 Fall 2015 wave was conducted from October 5–December 8, 2015. A total of 1,418 jurisdictions in the Fall 2015 wave returned valid surveys (66 counties, 226 cities, 193 villages, and 933 townships), resulting in a 76% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.26%. 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

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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