

New year, old problems: Six issues Michigan leaders vow to tackle in 2020

January 6, 2020 Riley Beggin

LANSING – It was a rocky first year of divided government, and none of Michigan’s leaders deny it.

But Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and the Republican legislative leaders in the House and Senate say they’re going into 2020 wiser, relationships strengthened, to tackle the problems they couldn’t address in their first year.

Atop that list: finding funding to improve Michigan’s crumbling roads and bridges. It was Whitmer’s priority last year, proposing a 45-cent per gallon gas tax increase to raise \$2.5 billion to repair roads and bridges. The plan never took off and was tabled amid negotiations over a 2020 budget.

Republican leaders Sen. Mike Shirkey and Rep. Lee Chatfield, Democratic leaders Sen. Jim Ananich and Rep. Christine Greig, and Whitmer discussed their priorities and views on 2020 issues with Bridge Magazine. Here’s what they hope to accomplish this year.

Roads funding

Whitmer told reporters in December that she’s forming a new roads funding proposal this year. She said there are “a number of different possibilities,” but will likely abandon the unpopular 45-cent gas tax increase.

“The Legislature has shown a complete lack of courage when it came to actually solving the problem,” she said, so to return to the proposal “would probably not be wise.”

Michigan’s roads are [routinely ranked among the nation’s worst](#), and the nonpartisan Senate Fiscal Agency [found early last year](#) that they require \$2 billion annually to fix, a cost that likely will rise.

Whitmer said a graduated income tax in which [higher-income Michiganders would pay more](#) for roads and other services “could be a solution,” and seeking a ballot measure for more funding isn’t out of the question.

Michigan currently has a [flat income tax rate](#) of 4.25 percent. The cost of fixing the roads “climbs every day that goes by that we don’t actually solve the problem,” she said.

Chatfield and Shirkey agreed roads are a top priority. But Shirkey said “it’s a fool’s errand to try to achieve one big final solution.” Instead, he said he wants to “create a culture where it’s perpetual funding, micro-increases in funding,” passing smaller permanent funding increases “until we’ve reached a point in which we think it’s stable.”

“To do it all in one fell swoop, it’s politically unsavory ... and I also think it’s dangerous for our economy to do so,” he said.

Chatfield said the state should “reprioritize existing revenue” and reiterated that new sources of revenue shouldn’t be considered until all taxes collected at the pump go to roads. That would mean eliminating the

sales tax on gas, which funds schools and local governments. He's [estimated that gas sales generate \\$830 million](#) of the \$8.5 billion collected from Michigan's 6 percent sales tax.

Greig said the solution likely will involve multiple funding sources, such as taxing heavy trucks and instituting toll bridges, which her caucus [proposed in June](#).

Whatever the choice, the clock is ticking because House members will be focused on re-election campaigns this year, said Ananich, the Senate minority leader.

"The only chance we have is in early 2020, it can't get past the first quarter," he said.

Education

All five leaders expressed the desire to make changes to Michigan's education policies or funding in 2020.

Michigan is [last in the nation](#) for school funding growth over the last 25 years, and from 2003 to 2015 the state ranked last in school performance growth on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Test scores have improved in recent years, but schools still suffer from a teacher shortage and [lower levels of funding than experts recommend](#).

Michigan needs to be spending "a lot" more money on public education, Whitmer said. She said she's striving to ensure all money in the School Aid Fund goes directly to schools, which "is incredibly difficult, if not impossible" without a roads funding solution because education money has gone to shore up transportation funding in the past.

"So long as we're permitting all of these other raids on the School Aid Fund, I'm determined to continue to make greater investments in education," she said.

[About \\$4.5 billion](#) has gone to Michigan higher education out of the fund for K-12 education since 2010, while state per-student higher education funding [has dropped 40 percent](#) since 2000. Republican lawmakers have [pushed back on Whitmer's proposal](#) to stop the practice, expressing concern that a sudden change would create funding gaps.

Shirkey and Chatfield said [they're open to changing](#) the state's third-grade reading law, which Whitmer [has pushed to scrap](#). The law forces students who don't meet reading standards to repeat third grade.

Guns

Leaders of both parties say gun reforms are a priority, but their prospects are uncertain in a divided government.

Republican lawmakers, who outlined protecting Second Amendment rights as [a top priority](#) in 2019, introduced one five-bill package to [eliminate the requirement that people get a permit](#) to carry a concealed gun and allow carrying concealed firearms in banks, churches, courthouses, sports stadiums, day care centers and hospitals.

Other Republican bill packages would make guns and ammunition purchases [exempt from sales tax](#), allow people to purchase [lifetime concealed pistol licenses](#), transport [loaded guns in vehicles](#) on private land and [reduce the penalty](#) for carrying concealed weapons in "no-carry" zones.

Democrats, meanwhile, are proposing “red flag” bills to allow family or police to petition courts to ban people from possessing guns if they are at “significant risk” of harming themselves or others.

Other Democrat-supported bills would require universal background checks for those seeking to buy any gun, rather than just for pistols; require safe storage of firearms and make it a felony if someone is hurt due to failure to store safely; and bipartisan legislation that would bar people convicted of domestic abuse from having guns.

None of the Democratic bills has been given a committee hearing.

“I will never vote for any legislation that infringes on someone's right to keep and bear arms,” and the majority of the House Republican caucus won’t either, Chatfield said. Shirkey has expressed similar concerns that the legislation would infringe on Second Amendment and due process rights.

College attainment

During her first State of the State address last year, Whitmer proposed two continuing education programs to improve college graduation rates in Michigan, which ranks in the bottom third of states.

The MI Opportunity Scholarship would provide two years of free tuition and fees for high school graduates at a community college or two years at a four-year university, while the MI Reconnect program would provide two years of free community college or technical training for students older than 25.

Some Republican lawmakers and state business leaders endorsed the proposals, which would cost about \$300 million per year. Lawmakers introduced bills to implement them in both the House and the Senate, but neither has received a hearing.

Improving college affordability and technical training is a priority for both Greig and Ananich, and with the business community’s support, the proposals could see renewed action in 2020.

Transparency

Chatfield said several reforms to make state government more transparent and accountable are top priorities. They include bipartisan legislation in the House to require public officials to disclose some details of their personal finances and bills that passed the House that would make the Legislature and governor’s office subject to public records requests.

Chatfield indicated he may support government reform priorities backed by Shirkey and Voters Not Politicians, the group behind the successful ballot initiative to implement a citizens redistricting commission.

Shirkey said he’s committed to exploring ways to reform Michigan’s strictest-in-the-nation term limits, and VNP leaders have expressed interest in transparency, term limits, and possibly changing rules that allow lawmakers to become lobbyists immediately after they leave office.

While changing term limits aren’t a priority for Chatfield as they are for Shirkey, he may support the changes as a way to move ethics reforms.

“Trust in government is at an all time low, and I think that’s a major problem,” Chatfield said. “Much of that, I think, is due to collateral damage of people’s mistrust in the federal government, but states can lead the way.”

Shirkey is “just not interested” in the financial disclosure and open records packages supported by the House because he said they only serve to give the media “fodder to go have fun.”

But “we have to offer citizens additional reforms to get them to even consider term limit reforms,” he said.

For instance, he would support enhancing the Legislature’s conflict of interest rules to create an internal ethics committee, “and everything that’s reported in those is confidential.”

Abortion

In May, both houses of the Legislature passed Republican-backed bills that would criminalize the most common type of second-trimester abortion. The bills would make the dilation and evacuation procedure, called “dismemberment abortion” by opponents, a felony for doctors to perform and include an exception for abortions required to save a woman’s life.

Whitmer vowed to veto the legislation and lawmakers never sent it to her. Instead, Right to Life of Michigan circulated petitions for identical legislation and [submitted signatures in late December](#).

If the Board of State Canvassers finds Right to Life of Michigan collects enough valid signatures — which the group has successfully done several times in the past — the Legislature would get 40 days to take up the legislation for a vote. If passed, it would become law without Whitmer’s approval.

Chatfield and Shirkey [told Bridge they would likely vote on the legislation](#) if the signatures are approved.

“Both chambers have proven that they have the votes to get it done, it’s something that we believe in,” Chatfield said. “Should we have it in our possession I anticipate at least attempting to get the votes to see it done.”

Whitmer said she will “actively campaign” against the ban, though she wouldn’t have a say in whether the Legislature takes up the bills. “Otherwise, I would have vetoed them by now.”

Editor's note: Michigan ranked last in school performance growth on the National Assessment of Educational Progress from 2003 to 2015. This story was corrected Jan. 7, 2019, because an earlier version misstated the rankings.

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