

March 2019 Legislative Report

During Governor Gretchen Whitmer's state of the state address she asked if the Legislature would put partisanship aside and work with her to get the job done for Michigan. The Governor outlined issues the state must address, including fixing the state's roads and improving its educational results, but did not provide actual details on how she would deal with the issues. In her address, Governor Whitmer said details of how she would handle those issues would be addressed on March 6 when she delivers her 2019-20 budget request.

Governor Whitmer called for new scholarship programs that would make specialized training and higher education more affordable. She intends to set a policy to ensure that at least 60 percent of all adults have some sort of post-secondary certificate by 2030.

Governor Whitmer wants to require all state contractors treat LGBTQ people fairly without discrimination and called for expansion of the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act to include state protections for the LGBTQ community. House Speaker Lee Chatfield (R-Levering) stated recently that he would not allow a bill that expanded Elliott-Larsen on the House floor. Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey, (R-Clarklake) has also expressed opposition to the proposal as potentially discriminating against religious views.

The Governor received praise by Republicans and Democrats when she said she was willing to engage with all people of good faith about ideas and priorities, including bringing down car insurance rates.

As far as transportation and road repair, which she referred to as a "major crisis", Ms. Whitmer said the state's infrastructure has been graded as the worst in the nation. Roads are crumbling, she said, bridges are standing with temporary supports. "We are paying a road tax that does not even fix the damn roads," she said. She did not offer a specific solution to the problem, but said it would not be an easy fix since the problem took years to create.

The second crisis she outlined was in education and skills. "Since 2014, Michigan has experienced the worst decline in childhood literacy; and the decline has been consistent across every racial and economic group in our state." stated Whitmer.

To help working and displaced adults, she announced the "Michigan Reconnect Program" which will help train adults in in-demand industries. Ms. Whitmer called it a way to "up-skill" and help connect those workers with state businesses with unfilled jobs.

The new "MI Opportunity Scholarship" will assure that every graduating high school senior can get two-years free tuition at a community college if they are looking for skills-based work. The same scholarship will offer two years of tuition assistance at a four-year, "not for profit college or university." Eligible students will have to have graduated high school with at least a B-average.

In terms of her upcoming budget, Governor Whitmer said it will "offer a real solution to fixing our roads and rebuilding our infrastructure. It will give our front line educators the tools they

need to address our literacy crisis. House and Senate Republican reactions to Governor Whitmer's first State of the State was basically "show us the money".

Environmental Quality Director Lisel Clark addressed the House Natural Resources /Outdoor Recreation Committee and earlier in the day the Senate Environmental Quality Committee to share her plans for the DEQ. She indicated she does not have a strategic plan, but she will engage in a strategic process when addressing issues. Clark indicated she will be asking for more funding for some DEQ programs. She indicated the department must protect the health of our citizens and our environment. She indicated that the DEQ budget has fallen over the years which has restricted some of the department's activities, but that she needs additional resources because inspectors and testing costs money.

In February the new MDOT Director, Paul Ajegba addressed the House Transportation Committee and the Senate Transportation Committee to provide his thoughts as to how he plans to run the department. He insisted that new revenue for Michigan's roads is a must. He gave a basic overview in the basics of transportation funding and MDOT. In 2010, 91 % of the state's roads were in good condition and by 2018 that had fallen to 79 % and it will continue to fall absent new revenue. Director Ajegba said that the longer we wait for proper funding for roads the more expensive it will get. Ajegba said "it's all about funding, funding, funding."

Governor Gretchen Whitmer has made the decision to halt the sale of the Deerfield Correctional Facility in Ionia to a private firm planning a privately operated federal immigration detention center. Republicans are livid, especially Rep. Thomas Albert, R-Lowell, who represents the district where the facility is located and wants to know why the Governor would turn away 250 good paying jobs for the area. The facility has been closed since 2009 and the sale to Immigration Centers of America would have brought the facility back onto the property tax rolls. The Governor believes that building more detention facilities will not solve immigration problems and she believes that separating families does not reflect Michigan values.

Rep. Albert commented that "She torpedoed the deal by demanding the detention center for illegal immigrants be turned into a hotel where anyone can leave at any time. Obviously, Immigration Centers of America cannot agree to a policy of catch and release. We just lost out on millions of dollars in economic investment and hundreds of good paying jobs.

No fault auto Insurance legislation was the first bill introduced in the Senate, SB 1. Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey, R-Jackson declared no-fault auto insurance reform as the top priority of the Senate Republican Caucus for this session. Speaker of the House Lee Chatfield, R-Levering has created a special committee on auto insurance which is chaired by Rep. Jason Wentworth, R-Clare. Both leaders have expressed that the Legislature has tried and failed in the past on auto insurance reform, but this session will be different.

Governor Gretchen Whitmer has issued an amended Executive Order to reorganize the DEQ and elimination of one of the three oversight panels created by legislation sponsored by Senator Tom Casperson, R-Escanaba. The original E.O. was rejected by the House and the Senate through adopting HCR 1. This time she is only attempting to eliminate the Environmental Science Advisory Board and re-name the DEQ the Department of Environment, Great Lakes and

Energy. Both the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader have agreed they will not attempt to reject her second effort and appreciate her willingness to re-draft her Executive Order and work with the Legislature.

Daily, I monitor legislation being introduced which could impact our members. I have been attending fundraiser events and using the opportunities to introduce our issues and goals to "newbie" legislators. Weekly, I attend various meetings in an effort to inform legislators of our legislative goals and to get a "fix" on "newbie" members.