The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

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Michigan Public Policy Survey May 2015

Michigan local leaders have positive views on relationships with county road agencies, despite some concerns

By Michael Q. Crawford and Thomas Ivacko

This report presents the opinions of Michigan local government leaders and officials from the state's county road agencies regarding the relationships between local governments and county road agencies, as well as local officials' ratings of road agency performance and related issues. The findings in this report are based on a statewide survey of local government leaders and county road commissions and departments in the Fall 2014 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 2014 wave of the MPPS include county administrators, board chairs, and clerks; city mayors and managers; village presidents, managers, and clerks; and township supervisors, managers, and clerks from 1,356 jurisdictions across the state.

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Key Findings

- Local leaders overall express positive opinions of the road commissions and road departments that maintain county primary and township roads in their jurisdictions.
  - » On five of seven statements about their road agencies—especially regarding working relationships, communications, and the quality of road work—large majorities of local leaders give positive assessments.
  - » On two statements—regarding financial matching requirements imposed on local governments by their road agencies, and the agencies' transparency—slim majorities of local leaders give positive evaluations.
- Despite the overall high approval ratings, local leaders from villages and cities are less likely to give positive ratings of the road agencies, compared to leaders from townships and county general purpose governments.
- In addition, local leaders from the Southwest, Southeast, and Upper Peninsula are less likely to give positive ratings, compared to their counterparts from the Northern and Central Lower Peninsula.
- In 78 of Michigan's 83 counties, road governance for county primary and township local roads is currently vested in "special purpose" road commissions. In the other five counties these duties have been transferred to the relevant general purpose county government. When asked on the MPPS, only 17% of local leaders statewide think their road commissions should be disbanded, with the road duties taken over by the general purpose county governments. This increases to 21% among village leaders and 36% among city leaders.
  - » Nearly three-quarters of local leaders (73%) prefer a special purpose road commission which focuses only on roads, instead of a general purpose county government. Overall 49% prefer elected road commissioners while 24% prefer an appointed board.

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Background

In Michigan, different classifications of roads and bridges are constructed and maintained by different kinds of governments. The Michigan Department of Transportation has responsibility for highways and state trunklines (roads designated with a prefix of I-, US-, or M-), while cities and villages have responsibility for most of the local roads within their boundaries. Meanwhile, Michigan's county primary and township local roads are governed in one of two ways. First, 78 counties have "road commissions" (governed by elected or appointed road commissioners) in charge of their county primary and township local roads (see *Figure 3*). These commissions are "special purpose" units of government—distinct from the state's general purpose county governments—that deal only with roads. This approach of using special purpose county-level governments is unique compared to any other state in the U.S.[1] Second, five counties in Michigan have disbanded and/or merged their special purpose road commissions and transferred their powers and responsibilities to the general purpose county government.

Among the special purpose road commissions, 36 are governed by elected leaders and 42 are governed by leaders appointed by their general purpose county board of commissioners. Michigan's county road agencies (whether commissions or departments) vary in terms of their structure, size, leadership, and priorities, but are collectively responsible for the care of more than 90,000 miles of roads, both paved and unpaved, spanning every corner of the state.[2]

Because county primary roads may be located within any kind of general purpose local jurisdiction (i.e., a township, city, or village), a great deal of intergovernmental cooperation and coordination is required between the special purpose road agencies and the general purpose local governments. For example, if the main street in a city, village, or township is actually a county primary road, then the work of the county road commission or department may have a significant impact on that general purpose local government and its wider community. Agreements may be required between the road authority and the local government concerning the funding, timing, type, and extent of the work to be done.

To learn more about the relationships between general purpose local jurisdictions—counties, townships, cities, and villages—and their special purpose road commissions or departments, the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) asked a series of questions on these topics in the Fall 2014 survey. In addition, a supplemental survey was sent to each county-level road agency in the state to learn more about the views of the county road commission or department leaders. This report explores the views and opinions from both sides of Michigan's road governance arrangements.

Most local jurisdictions have positive views of county road agencies

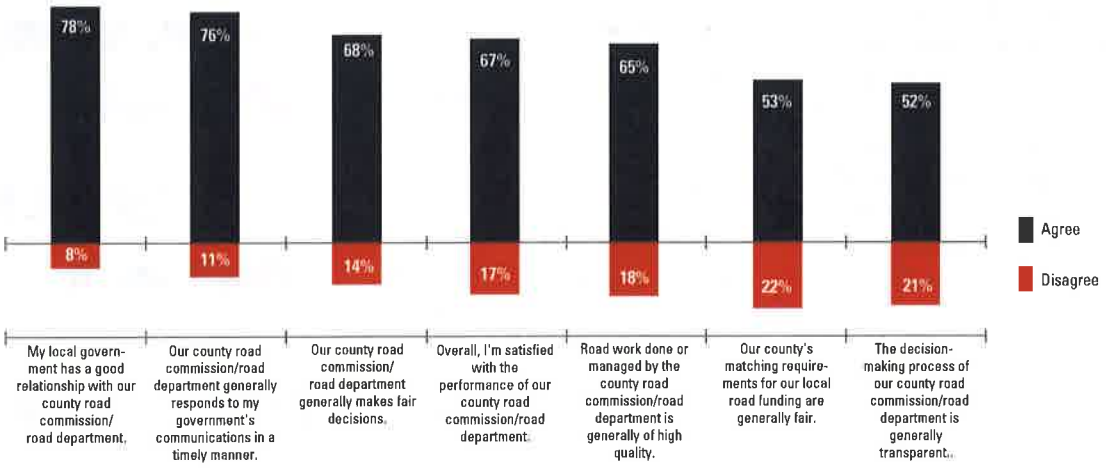
The Fall 2014 Michigan Public Policy Survey asked local government leaders from Michigan's counties, townships, cities, and villages for their opinions on seven statements regarding their particular county's road agency (i.e., road commission or department). Overall, large majorities of local leaders give positive ratings of their road agencies. In particular, 78% of local leaders agree that the relationship is good between their own jurisdiction and its road agency (see *Figure 1*). Large majorities also give favorable assessments when it comes to the timeliness of road agencies in responding to communications from the local governments (76%), the fairness of decisions made by the agencies (68%), the quality of road work done by the agencies (65%), and general satisfaction with the agencies overall (67%). Two statements have lower levels of support among local leaders, though both still have majority favorable ratings. The first of these has to do with financial matching requirements imposed by road agencies on local governments for road projects done within their borders. Here, a bare majority (53%) of local leaders agree that the agencies' matching requirements are fair, while nearly one-in-four (22%) disagree. The second statement concerns the transparency of road agency decision-making, wherein a slim majority (52%) believes that road agency decision-making is generally transparent, while 21% of local leaders disagree.

Despite these overall affirmative ratings provided by local leaders, there are differences found when drilling deeper into the data. One trend is clear: on almost every issue raised, leaders from the county general purpose governments are the most likely to give positive assessments of their road agencies, followed by leaders from townships, then cities, with village leaders being the least likely to give positive ratings. For example, on the question of whether road agency matching requirements are fair, 70% of county leaders agree they are, compared to 56% of leaders from townships, 46% from cities, and just 37% from villages (see *Appendix A*).

Another trend is seen when the responses are examined by region of the state. In general, local leaders in the Southwest Lower Peninsula are least likely to give positive statements about their road agencies (see *Appendix B*). While somewhat less consistent, local leaders from Southeast Michigan, and from the Upper Peninsula, also tend to give lower ratings for their agencies compared to leaders from the Northern Lower Peninsula and the Central (both east and west) Lower Peninsula.

Nonetheless, even among the least satisfied groups of local leaders, majorities (including 64% of village leaders and 70% of leaders from all jurisdictions in the Southwest region) still give overall positive ratings of their relationships with their counties' road agencies. In addition, majorities (including 58% of village leaders and 57% of all leaders in the Southwest) also give positive ratings for their satisfaction with the overall performance of the road agencies.

Figure 1
Local officials' views of their county road agency



Note: responses of "not applicable" are excluded from the analysis; responses for "neither agree nor disagree" and "don't know" are not shown

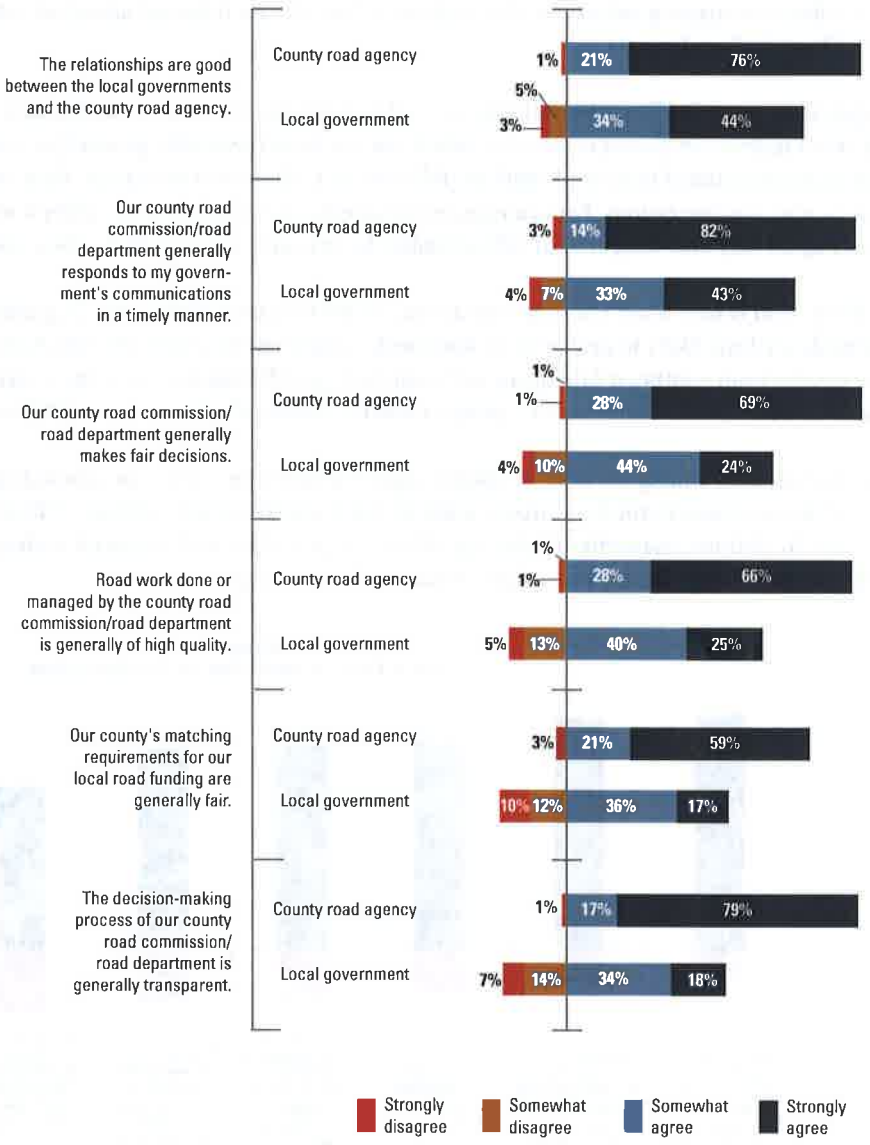
The view from the other side

In a supplemental and simultaneous survey conducted of county road commissions and road departments across Michigan, the MPPS asked agency leaders for their own views on these same issues. Most road agency leaders thought even more highly of their own organization's performance compared to the assessments provided by local government leaders from counties, townships, cities, and villages (see *Figure 2*). For example, while 76% of leaders from counties, townships, cities, and villages agree that their counties' road agencies respond to communications in a timely manner, fully 96% of those county road agency leaders believe that their own organizations respond to communications from these local governments in a timely manner.

In fact, county road agency officials responding to the survey were nearly unanimous in their agreement with positive statements made about their own organizations, with most questions receiving over 95% agreement. On only one criterion did less than 90% of these officials agree. When asked whether the local road funding matching requirements they impose on local governments for road projects in their jurisdictions are generally fair, 80% of road agency leaders agree that they are. Despite these lower levels of agreement, only 3% of these respondents explicitly disagree with the statement (the remaining 17% neither agree nor disagree with the sentiment).

The MPPS also asked county road agency officials two questions about their views of the county, township, city, and village governments within their territories, and found agency leaders had quite high appraisals of the local governments with which they work. For example, 90% of road agency officials agree that local jurisdictions respond in a timely manner to communications from the road agencies. Similarly, when asked if they agree that the local governments generally make reasonable requests of the county road commission or road department, 86% of agency officials agree that they do.

Figure 2
Comparison of road agency and local officials' views of their county road agency

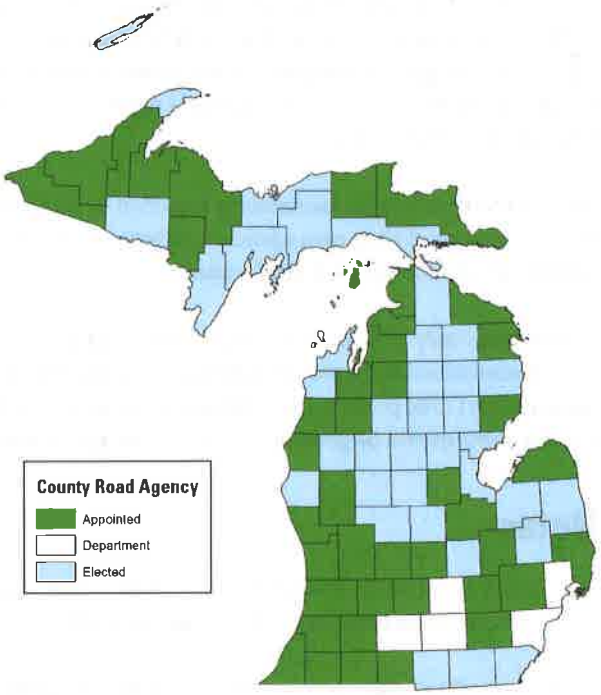


Note: responses of "not applicable" are excluded from the analysis; responses for "neither agree nor disagree" and "don't know" are not shown

Local leaders' views on how county roads should be governed

In 2011, Governor Rick Snyder proposed allowing the boards of general purpose county governments to disband county road commissions and transfer their powers and duties to the county government.[3] Governor Snyder's hope was to foster cost savings and improve efficiency and accountability through government consolidation. Public Act 15 of 2012 granted this authority until its expiration on January 1, 2015.[4] During that time period, only three counties (Calhoun, Ingham, and Jackson) transferred responsibilities for their roads to their county governments (see *Figure 3*). Prior to that time, two other counties (Macomb and Wayne, the only home rule charter counties in Michigan) had also disbanded their road commissions and transferred road governance to the general purpose county government through charter adoptions and amendments as approved by their voters.

Figure 3
Governance of Michigan's county road commissions and departments as of May 2015



Recently-introduced legislation seeks to remove the sunset of the P.A. 15 of 2012 and allow for the ongoing transfer of powers, at the discretion of the boards of general purpose county governments.[5] In the fall of 2014, the MPPS asked local government leaders how they think county and township roads in their counties (and therefore, in some cases, within their own jurisdictions) should be governed. Statewide, fewer than one in five local leaders (17%) think their county primary and township local roads should be overseen by the general purpose county government itself, instead of by a special purpose road commission. Leaders from townships are the least likely (12%) to believe the general purpose county governments should in fact take over the road duties from commissions. By comparison, 14% of leaders in general purpose county governments support disbanding road commissions and transferring their duties to the county governments, as do 21% of village leaders and 36% of city leaders.

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of local leaders think road commissions should be in charge of managing Michigan's county primary and township local roads, with 49% preferring elected commissioners and 24% preferring appointed boards. Support for elected commissions is strongest (70%) among leaders in counties that currently have elected commissions. However, even in counties with an appointed road commission as of the time of this writing, a slight plurality of local officials (38%) would prefer having elected commissions, while 35% support appointed commissions. Plurality support (39%) for disbanding road commissions and transferring their duties to general purpose county governments is found only among officials from the five counties where this has already happened. It is unclear if this support preceded or simply followed the dissolution of the five road commissions.

Finally, while there are no significant differences in these views based on the party identification of Michigan's local leaders, there are in fact large differences based on whether these local leaders themselves hold an elected or appointed position. Among local elected officials across the state, 54% believe the state's county primary and township local roads should be governed by elected road commissions. By comparison, only 27% of Michigan's local appointed officials feel the same way.

Conclusion

As Michigan roads have become one of the state's highest priority policy issues, the MPPS finds that most local government leaders have positive opinions of the special purpose road commissions (or, in a few cases, road departments) that maintain county primary and township local roads across the state. In many cases, these road commissions maintain critical roads that run through the state's cities, townships, and villages, and upon which so many Michigan residents rely. Majorities of local leaders give positive assessments regarding the special purpose road agencies on all seven statements presented to them on the survey. Particularly positive assessments are given in regard to relationships with the road agencies (78%), as well as the timeliness of their communications (76%), the fairness of their decisions (68%), the quality of their road work (65%), and overall satisfaction with the agencies (67%). Meanwhile, slim majorities of local leaders also give positive ratings when asked if their road agencies' financial matching requirements are fair (53%) and if their decision-making is transparent (52%).

Despite these high overall ratings, when breaking the data down further, important differences are found. For instance, local leaders from cities and villages tend to be less satisfied with the road commissions, compared to leaders from townships, and especially from general purpose county governments. In addition, local leaders from jurisdictions of all types in the Upper Peninsula and Southern Lower Peninsula regions tend to be less satisfied compared to their counterparts in the Northern and Central Lower Peninsula.

Despite the already high assessments provided by local leaders, leaders from road commissions themselves tend to have even higher opinions of their own agencies' performance. This results in some amount of mismatch in assessments of road commissions, compared with the views of local leaders.

Nonetheless, only 17% of local leaders from general purpose counties, townships, cities, and villages would prefer to disband their road commissions and have their duties taken over by the general purpose county government. Rather, nearly three out of four local leaders (73%) prefer a special purpose commission, though there remains some question of preference regarding whether the commissions should be governed by elected or appointed commissioners.

Notes

1. Taylor, J. C. (2007). *Road ownership, classification and travel volumes*. Midland, MI: Mackinac Center for Public Policy. Retrieved from http://www.mackinac.org/8420

2. County Road Association of Michigan. (2013). *County Road Association of Michigan* [homepage]. Retrieved from http://www.micountyroads.org

3. Wurfel, Sara. (2011). *Governor says revitalized infrastructure is road to Michigan's success*. Retrieved from http://michigan.gov/snyder/0,4668,7-277-57577-264676--,00.html

4. *County Boards of Commissioners*. State of Michigan Act 156 (2012). Retrieved from http://legislature.mi.gov/doc.aspx?mcl-46-11

5. Senate Bill 0322. (2015). Retrieved from http://legislature.mi.gov/doc.aspx?2015-SB-0322
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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 2014 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. A supplementary survey was conducted at the same time as the standard fall MPPS, with surveys sent to the leaders of Michigan's 83 county road commissions and road departments.

The Fall 2014 wave was conducted from October 6 to December 11, 2014. A total of 1,356 jurisdictions in the Fall 2014 wave returned valid surveys (64 counties, 210 cities, 177 villages, and 905 townships), resulting in a 73% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.4%. The supplemental survey returned valid surveys from 73 county road agencies, resulting in an 88% response rate by unit and a margin of error for the survey as a whole of +/- 4%. 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.

Appendix A

Local officials' views of their county road agency, by jurisdiction type

		County	Township	City	Village	Total
My local government has a good relationship with our county road commission/road department.	Agree	87%	81%	75%	64%	78%
	Disagree	6%	8%	8%	11%	8%
Our county road commission/road department generally responds to my government's communications in a timely manner.	Agree	86%	81%	68%	61%	76%
	Disagree	6%	10%	13%	14%	11%
Our county road commission/road department generally makes fair decisions.	Agree	81%	69%	64%	58%	68%
	Disagree	10%	15%	15%	14%	14%
Overall, I'm satisfied with the performance of our county road commission/road department.	Agree	75%	69%	62%	58%	67%
	Disagree	12%	17%	20%	18%	17%
Road work done or managed by the county road commission/ road department is generally of high quality.	Agree	78%	66%	63%	57%	65%
	Disagree	8%	19%	18%	16%	18%
Our county's matching requirements for our local road funding are generally fair.	Agree	70%	56%	46%	37%	53%
	Disagree	4%	26%	16%	17%	22%
The decision-making process of our county road commission/ road department is generally transparent.	Agree	68%	53%	43%	45%	52%
	Disagree	14%	21%	28%	17%	21%

Appendix B

Local officials' views of their county road agency, by region

		Upper Peninsula	Northern Lower Peninsula	West Central	East Central	Southwest	Southeast	Total
My local government has a good relationship with our county road commission/road department.	Agree	78%	87%	81%	75%	70%	78%	78%
	Disagree	8%	6%	7%	9%	13%	6%	8%
Our county road commission/road department generally responds to my government's communications in a timely manner.	Agree	69%	85%	81%	77%	69%	73%	76%
	Disagree	13%	8%	7%	8%	18%	13%	11%
Our county road commission/road department generally makes fair decisions.	Agree	69%	76%	70%	70%	56%	64%	68%
	Disagree	17%	11%	12%	12%	21%	17%	14%
Overall, I'm satisfied with the performance of our county road commission/road department.	Agree	64%	75%	71%	69%	57%	62%	67%
	Disagree	19%	12%	14%	13%	23%	22%	17%
Road work done or managed by the county road commission/road department is generally of high quality.	Agree	61%	70%	68%	68%	57%	59%	65%
	Disagree	20%	11%	16%	14%	24%	24%	18%
Our county's matching requirements for our local road funding are generally fair.	Agree	48%	52%	55%	59%	47%	56%	53%
	Disagree	29%	26%	18%	16%	24%	23%	22%
The decision-making process of our county road commission/road department is generally transparent.	Agree	50%	58%	56%	55%	43%	43%	52%
	Disagree	18%	17%	15%	20%	28%	30%	21%

Previous MPPS reports

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)

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Michigan's local leaders are divided over the state's emergency manager law (September 2012)

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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)

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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)

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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)

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