



Michigan local leaders report widespread support for community recycling programs

By Debra Horner, Natalie Fitzpatrick, and Thomas Ivacko

This report—the third in a series on recycling issues in Michigan communities—presents Michigan’s local government leaders’ assessments of support for recycling programs among various groups within their jurisdictions. In addition, it looks at local leaders’ own views about whether recycling produces valuable outcomes and whether promoting environmental sustainability is an important aspect of local governance. The findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Fall 2021 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS), as part of the Michigan Local Recycling Policy Project, funded by the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE).

The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) is an ongoing census survey of all 1,856 general purpose local governments in Michigan conducted since 2009 by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP). Respondents for the Fall 2021 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 1,356 jurisdictions across the state.



Key Findings

- Fully 94% of Michigan local officials support local access to recycling in their communities, including 66% who express strong support in communities with recycling services currently, and 46% who strongly support adding recycling services in places that currently lack such access.
 - » Furthermore, in communities that currently have access to recycling, local leaders report widespread support among residents (86%), among local businesses including commercial, industrial, or agricultural operations (63%), and among their board or council members (88%).
 - » Even in communities that do not currently have access to recycling services, a majority of local leaders report support for recycling among residents (60%) and their board or council (53%), while just over a third say there is support among their local businesses (note: some of the smallest rural jurisdictions may not have any significant business presence to speak of).
- Local officials statewide express positive attitudes about the benefits of recycling. Statewide, most believe recycling programs can help protect clean water in Michigan (87%), decrease local litter and pollution (77%), address global climate change (56%), and nearly half agree that recycling could boost local economic development and job growth in their communities (47%).
- Few believe that recycling is not worth the effort (14%), while 68% believe it is. Meanwhile, although one third (32%) agree that “most materials collected in recycling programs end up in landfills anyway,” 37% disagree with that statement.
- Beyond recycling, most Michigan local leaders believe promoting environmental sustainability and “being green” are important aspects of local government leadership (64%). The percentage of local officials that strongly agree with this statement increased from 23% in 2019 to 28% in 2021.
 - » As of 2021, agreement with this statement—that promoting environmental sustainability and “being green” are important aspects of local government leadership—was found among local leaders from all partisan stripes, including Democrats (90%), Independents (74%), and Republicans (55%).

Background

Over the past few years, Michigan has been making substantial progress in expanding recycling access and participation by residents statewide. The state has increased its recycling by more than a third, from a 14.3% rate statewide in 2014 to 19.3% as of 2021.¹ Although this still lags behind the national average of around 32%,² Michigan has nearly doubled the number of households with available curbside recycling carts and drop-off sites since 2019 and has reported widespread increases in residents' understanding recycling best practices.³

During its lame duck session in December 2022, the Michigan Legislature passed a bipartisan package of bills (HB 4454-4461)⁴ proposing broad reforms and updates to the Michigan Solid Waste Law to provide additional funding, support, and incentives for recycling statewide. Once signed by Governor Whitmer, this will establish a statewide goal boosting the state's current recycling rate to 45%, among other initiatives.⁵ According to a 2020 impact analysis, this expansion could add over \$33.8 billion to Michigan's economy including over \$9 billion in added labor income.⁶

Michigan's local governments are key stakeholders in the state's materials management and recycling policies and practices. Counties are required to have solid waste management plans, and these are increasingly shifting away from a primary focus simply on waste disposal to an increased emphasis on recycling, organics management, and waste reduction opportunities.⁷ Local units of all sizes statewide, working alone or in conjunction with other units and regional organizations, may be involved in providing, funding, or coordinating such services as curbside recycling collection, drop-off programs for general recycling, household hazardous waste, source separated organics, scrap tires, metals, or electronics, education and outreach to residents about recycling, and more. Communities across the state are expanding recycling efforts, from a recent \$10 million investment in expanded plastics recycling capabilities in Flint⁸ to the nationally-renown comprehensive recycling program in Emmet County, where more than 80% of county residents participate.⁹

In Fall 2021, the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) sponsored a special wave of CLOSUP's ongoing Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) to better understand local officials' assessments of current recycling programs, policies, and issues in their local communities. The following report is the third in a series from that survey wave and explores local leaders' own views about recycling and whether promoting environmental sustainability is an important aspect of local governance.

Local leaders report widespread support for recycling services among community leadership and residents

As shown in *Figure 1*, when asked about community support for local access to recycling, local officials in jurisdictions that currently have recycling services say there are high levels of support, including among the majority of their residents (86%), local businesses including commercial, industrial, or agricultural operations (63%), and their board or council (88%). And the local government leaders themselves overwhelmingly support recycling services in their communities (94%). Two-thirds of respondents say that personally, in their role as a local official, they *strongly* support local access to recycling, and 49% say the majority of their local governing board or council strongly supports this too. There is less certainty, however, when it comes to estimating support among local businesses, with nearly one in five (18%) local leaders not sure whether their local businesses support recycling access.

Even in communities where recycling is not currently available, as shown in *Figure 2*, most local officials report some support or even strong support among residents (53%) and their board/council (60%). A large majority (77%) of these leaders themselves, in their role as a local official, also support introducing recycling services in their communities. Few report there is no support at all among these various community members. Uncertainty about this support is higher across the board compared with communities that currently have recycling, and is particularly high in regards to local businesses. Still, officials in communities currently lacking recycling services say there is slightly more support for recycling (38%) than opposition (26%) among their local businesses.

Figure 1
Local officials' assessments of support for local access to recycling (among jurisdictions where at least some recycling is available)

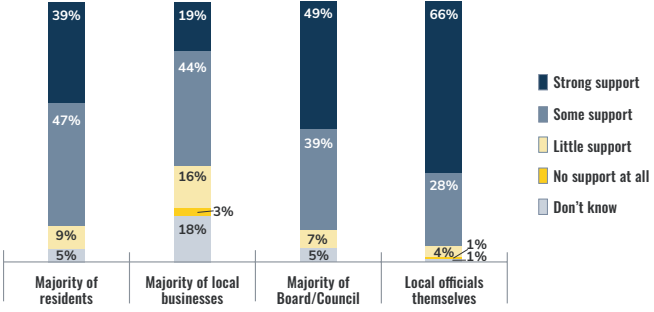
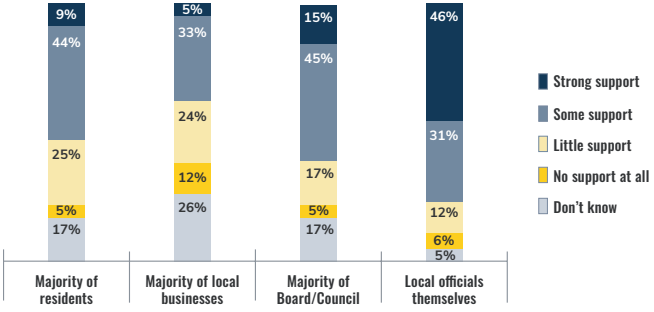


Figure 2
Local officials' assessments of support for local access to recycling (among jurisdictions where no recycling is available)



Local leaders' generally positive about benefits of recycling

The MPPS also asked local leaders more detailed questions about their opinions of the potential benefits and drawbacks of recycling efforts.

In terms of the benefits of recycling, local officials overwhelmingly agree that recycling programs can help protect clean water in Michigan (87%), including almost half (46%) who *strongly* agree with the statement (see *Figure 3*). Meanwhile, 77% believe recycling programs can help decrease litter and pollution in the local environment. Most local officials also agree that recycling programs can help address global climate change (56%) and nearly half (47%) believe that new state and regional recycling efforts could boost local economic development and job growth in their communities.

Figure 4 displays the percentage of Michigan local officials who somewhat or strongly agree with the statement: “state and regional recycling efforts could boost our local economic development and job growth,” aggregated at the county level. This includes communities that both currently report having local access to at least some recycling, and those that don’t. The lighter shades show where a relatively lower percentage of local officials within that particular county believe new recycling efforts could boost the local economy, while the darker shades indicate a higher percentage of local officials that who say new recycling efforts could boost the local economy.

When it comes to potential drawbacks with recycling, few of Michigan’s local leaders (14%) agree with the statement that recycling is *not* worth the effort given the small impact it actually has, while 68% disagree with that statement (see *Figure 5*). However, one third (32%) agree that “most materials collected in recycling programs end up in landfills anyway,” although even more (37%) disagree. Meanwhile, 11% don’t know whether most recycling ends up in landfills, and another 19% neither agree nor disagree with the statement.

Figure 3
Percentage of local officials statewide agreeing or disagreeing with statements regarding benefits of recycling

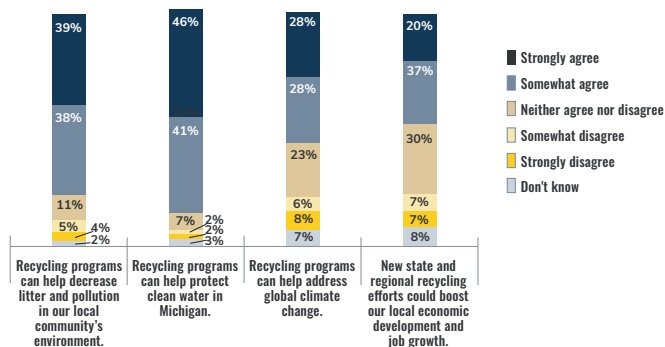


Figure 4
Percentage of local officials who agree that new state and regional recycling efforts could boost local economic development and job growth, by county

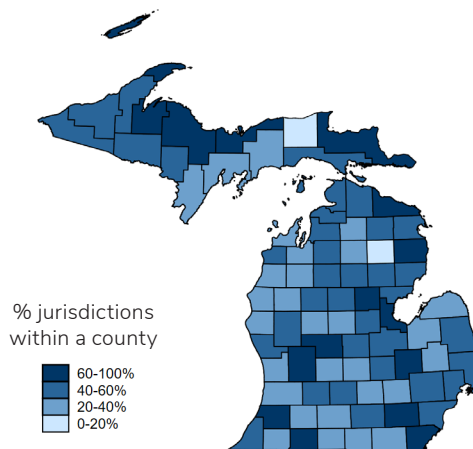
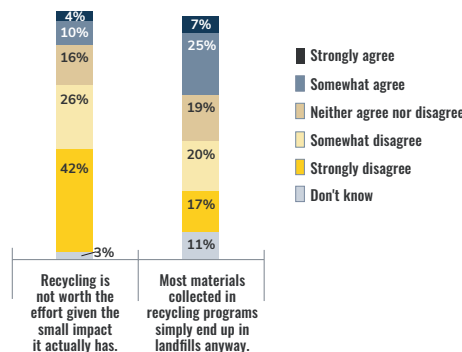


Figure 5
Percentage of local officials statewide agreeing or disagreeing with negative statements regarding recycling



Local leaders continue to support local government promotion of sustainability

Stretching back more than a decade, the MPPS has repeatedly asked Michigan’s local government officials whether they feel promoting environmental sustainability and “being green” are important aspects of local government leadership. Over the years, the survey has consistently found significantly more support than opposition to the idea. In the fall of 2021, 64% agreed it is an important role for local government, unchanged from 2019, although down slightly from 2010 and 2013 (see *Figure 6*). However, the percentage who *strongly* agreed increased from 23% in 2019 to 28% in 2021.

Figure 7 displays the percentage of those who believe that promoting sustainability is an important role for local government with jurisdictions aggregated at the county level.

Figure 6
Percentage of local officials statewide agreeing or disagreeing that promoting environmental sustainability and the concept of “being green” are important aspects of local government leadership, 2010-2021

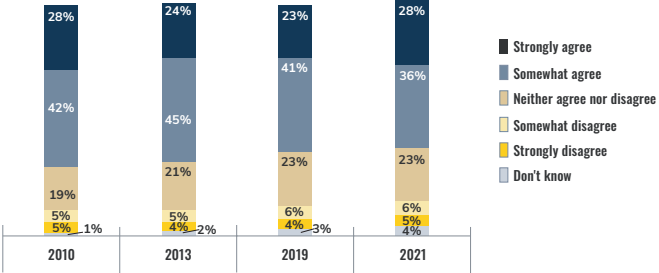
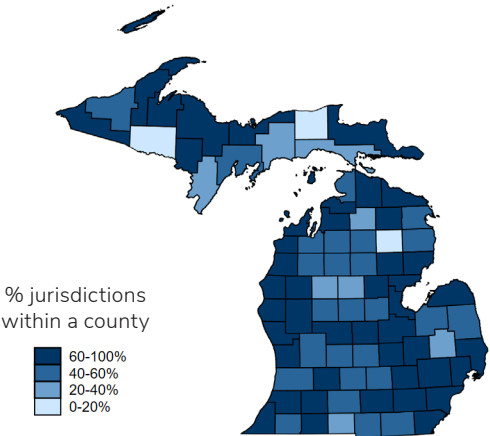
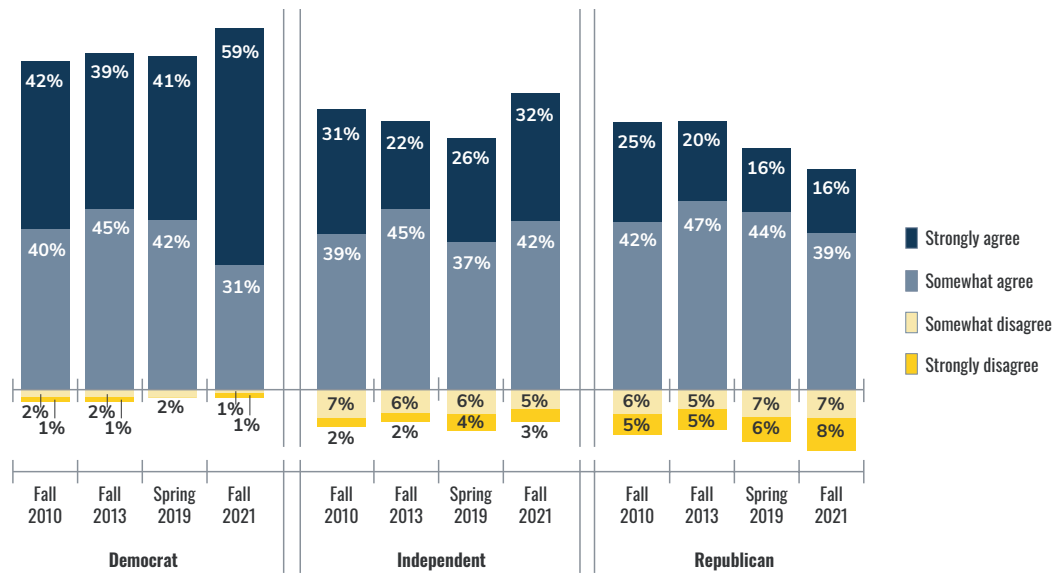


Figure 7
Percentage of local officials who agree that promoting environmental sustainability and the concept of “being green” are important aspects of local government leadership, 2021, by county



There is widespread support among local leaders across the political spectrum, although support is strongest among self-identified Democratic local leaders. Support for promoting environmental sustainability in local government among Democratic local leaders increased from 82% in Fall 2010 to 90% in Fall 2021, including 59% who strongly agree as of the latest survey (see *Figure 8*). Meanwhile, support has also increased among Independents, from 70% in 2010 to 74% in 2021. By contrast, support among Republican local leaders has decreased over time, from 67% in Fall 2010 to 55% in Fall 2021. Still, as of 2021, only 15% of Republican local leaders disagree that promoting sustainability is an important role for local government.

Figure 8
Local officials' assessments of whether promoting environmental sustainability and the concept of "being green" are important aspects of local government leadership, 2010-2021, by partisan identification



Note: responses for "neither agree nor disagree" and "don't know" responses not shown.



Conclusion

The state of Michigan has prioritized expansion and improvement of recycling in communities across the state, with numerous recent successes but significant remaining work to catch up with recycling rates in other states across the nation.

Local governments play a key role in these efforts, and the Michigan Public Policy Survey finds very high levels of support for recycling among the state's local leaders (94%), who believe that recycling can help protect clean water (87%), reduce litter and pollution (77%), address global climate change (56%), and boost local economic development and job creation (47%). These local leaders also report strong support for recycling among their residents, the business community, and local government boards and councils. Importantly, in communities that currently lack recycling services, a majority of local leaders report support among their residents (60%) and government board (53%) to introduce such services.

The extraordinarily high levels of support for recycling services among the state's local government leaders is also correlated with their persistent beliefs that promoting environmental sustainability is an important aspect of local government leadership (64%), a view shared by majorities of Democratic (90%), Independent (74%), and Republican (55%) local leaders.

Notes

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Survey Background and Methodology

The MPPS is an ongoing survey program, interviewing the leaders of Michigan's 1,856 units of general purpose local government, 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. Surveys are conducted each spring (and prior to 2018, were also conducted each fall). The program has covered a wide range of policy topics and includes longitudinal tracking data on “core” fiscal, budgetary and operational policy questions and designed to build-up a multi-year time-series.

In the Fall 2021 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, 280 cities, 253 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan.

The Fall 2021 wave was conducted from October 4 – December 6, 2021. A total of 1,356 jurisdictions in the Fall 2021 wave returned valid surveys (62 counties, 209 cities, 171 villages, and 914 townships), resulting in a 73% response rate by unit. The margin

of error for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.37%. 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 four ways—by jurisdiction type (county, city, township, or village); by population size, by the region, and by respondents' self-reports of whether jurisdictions are urban, mostly urban, mostly rural, or rural—soon will be available online at the MPPS homepage: <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey>

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.

Acknowledgement and Disclaimer

This material is based upon work supported by the Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) under Award Number 21*3363.

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Previous MPPS reports

- Michigan local government leaders report increased problems with workforce recruitment, retention, and other issues (February 2023)
- MPPS Policy Brief: Michigan local government officials' assessments of workforce wages and benefits (January 2023)
- Michigan local leaders report near-term improvements in fiscal health, especially in large jurisdictions, yet long-term concerns increase (December 2022)
- Michigan local leaders' concerns about U.S. democracy at state and federal levels ease somewhat, but remain grim (November 2022)
- MPPS Policy Brief: Local government officials give mixed reviews to Michigan's new approach to redistricting (October 2022)
- Michigan local government leaders say civic relationships and civil discourse remain healthy, despite worsening national politics (October 2022)
- Michigan local government leaders remain confident about their election security and administration, though concerns about disinformation increase (September 2022)
- MPPS Policy Brief: Statewide survey finds a majority of Michigan local governments experiencing harassment or other abuse (September 2022)
- MPPS Policy Brief: A survey of Michigan local government leaders on American Rescue Plan Act funding and uses (July 2022)
- Local leaders' pessimism about Michigan's direction continues, but eases slightly from last year (July 2022)
- Internet presence among Michigan local governments: websites, online services, and experience with virtual meetings (May 2022)
- Michigan local leaders' views on recycling: current challenges and opportunities for improvement (April 2022)
- Recycling Issues, Policies, and Practices among Michigan Local Governments (March 2022)
- Michigan local leaders report little change in the tone of civic discourse in their communities, but are concerned about local impacts of increasingly hostile national partisan politics (January 2022)
- Michigan local government officials report improved fiscal health after a year of COVID-19, but not yet back to pre-pandemic levels (December 2021)
- Michigan local officials' assessments of American democracy at the state and federal levels decline sharply (November 2021)
- The lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Michigan communities and local governments (October 2021)
- Michigan local governments report fewer economic challenges one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, and describe efforts to support local businesses (September 2021)
- Local leaders' views on Michigan's initial COVID-19 vaccine rollout in Spring 2021 (August 2021)
- Local leaders' concerns about Michigan's direction spike, while evaluations of state leaders sink over the past year (July 2021)
- Michigan local leaders' views on state's new approach to electoral redistricting (February 2021)
- COVID-19 pandemic sparks Michigan local leaders' concerns for fiscal health (December 2020)
- The functioning of democracy at the local level: a compendium of findings from the Michigan Public Policy Survey of local leaders (December 2020)
- Energy Issues and Policies in Michigan Local Governments (October 2020)
- Michigan local leaders expect increased challenges for the 2020 election, but are confident about administering accurate elections (October 2020)
- Michigan Local Energy Survey (MiLES): Intergovernmental collaboration on sustainability and energy issues among Michigan local governments (September 2020)
- Confidence in the accuracy of Michigan's 2020 Census count among local leaders was not very high, slips further (August 2020)
- Michigan local leaders expect mixed impacts from expanded voter registration and absentee voting reforms (July 2020)
- Local leaders' evaluations of Michigan's direction and Governor's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic's arrival (July 2020)
- The initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Michigan communities and local governments (June 2020)
- Energy policies and environmental leadership among Michigan's local governments (January 2020)
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- Michigan local officials' views on the next recession: timing, concerns, and actions taken (October 2019)
- Michigan local government preparations and concerns regarding the 2020 U.S. Census (September 2019)
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The state of community civic discourse, according to Michigan's local government leaders (December 2018)

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Michigan local government officials report complex mix of improvement and decline in fiscal health, but with overall trend moving slowly upward (October 2017)

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Local leaders more likely to support than oppose Michigan's Emergency Manager law, but strongly favor reforms (February 2017)

Local government leaders' views on drinking water and water supply infrastructure in Michigan communities (November 2016)

Michigan local leaders say property tax appeals are common, disagree with 'dark stores' assessing (October 2016)

Local officials say Michigan's system of funding local government is broken, and seek State action to fix it (September 2016)

Michigan local governments report first declines in fiscal health trend since 2010 (August 2016)

Michigan local leaders' doubts continue regarding the state's direction (July 2016)

Hospital access primary emergency medical concern among many Michigan local officials (July 2016)

Firefighting services in Michigan: challenges and approaches among local governments (June 2016)

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Confidence in Michigan's direction declines among state's local leaders (August 2015)

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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)

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Local leaders say Michigan road funding needs major increase, but lack consensus on options that would raise the most revenue (February 2015)

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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)

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Confidence in Michigan's direction holds steady among state's local leaders (August 2014)

Wind power as a community issue in Michigan (July 2014)

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Michigan's local leaders generally support Detroit bankruptcy filing despite some concerns (February 2014)

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Michigan local governments continue seeking, and receiving, union concessions (October 2013)

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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)

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Public sector unions in Michigan: their presence and impact according to local government leaders (August 2011)

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Local government and environmental leadership: views of Michigan's local leaders (July 2011)

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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)

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Fall 2009 key findings report: educational, economic, and workforce development issues at the local level (April 2010)

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