

Michigan Is Ours Ensuring Adequate State Government Funding

Focus

In 2005, the League of Women Voters established a task force (Michigan Is Ours) to study the issue of adequate funding of state government. That action was taken in response to the concerns of several league members that state government revenues were inadequate to address the needs of its citizens.

What follows is a review of their work to date.

A modern, healthy society provides the following systems:

- Roads and transportation
- Education
- Public safety
- Public health
- Public welfare
- Recreation

A Glimpse at Service Delivery in Michigan

On August 8, 2005, Michigan's Senate Fiscal Agency reported, "Some \$65.1 million in comprehensive transportation funds, money that would go to buses and other public transit systems, has been diverted over the last five years to help keep the state's general fund budget balanced." Cities as diverse as Alpena, Houghton, Lansing, and Kalamazoo have had to scale back street maintenance and construction projects.

Schools throughout the state have been forced to cut programming and staff. Some of the more dramatic examples include Warren Consolidated School District (where 89 staff positions were eliminated) and Livonia Public Schools (where 193 staff positions were eliminated). Public per student spending at the university level has dropped from just over \$7,000 in the year 2000 to \$5,656 in 2004. As the Kalamazoo Gazette editorialized, "... Michigan – once known for its excellent public schools and universities – is earning a reputation for having an educational system that is getting a little less excellent, year by year."

According to Dan Gilmartin, Executive Director of the Michigan Municipal League, "We have 1,300 fewer police officers on the street in Michigan today than we did on 9/11 (2001)." The reductions have impacted communities throughout the state, including Dowagiac (1), Houghton County (2), Ingham County (14), Kalamazoo County (10), Warren (30 fire fighters), Ishpeming (3), Waterford Township (18), Saginaw County (7), Ypsilanti (10), and Southgate (2). Other reductions may be necessary in 2006.

A number of Michigan communities have been forced to reduce recreation staff, close recreation facilities and limit library hours.

The State Department of Community Health has cut funding for vision testing for students in 5th, 7th, and 9th grades and hearing tests for students in 2nd and 4th grades. In 2005, the Office of Children's Ombudsman made it clear to lawmakers that the Department of Human Services workers were carrying caseloads that far exceeded their abilities to handle them competently.

Because of reductions in funding for Human Services, counties throughout the state have experienced staff and/or program reductions. In some cases, overburdened staff are simply trying to deliver the same services with fewer resources.

Communities across the state have spent down reserves, reduced staff, reduced benefits for existing staff, postponed expenditures, frozen wages, increased fees, and privatized services. While those tactics may balance the budget for now, they are not permanent solutions.

The Perspective of the Michigan Is Ours Task Force

Life Style: No tax cut will ever impact an individual's lifestyle. Poor government services (inadequate roads, inadequate public transportation, poor schools, poor health care, lack of recreation facilities, and inadequate public safety) can have a very significant impact on quality of life issues.

Inefficiency: We concede that there are inefficiencies in government – as there are in households, corporations, non-profits, and any other endeavor performed by human beings. Government will not become more efficient simply because we refuse to fund it.

Priorities: We should not be forced to choose between adequate roads, good schools, quality community health programs, public safety, and public recreation programs. A modern, healthy society should provide all such systems. And, we should be willing to pay taxes to ensure that those systems are available to all citizens.

Government as an Investment: A good government provides for the quality of life of all of its citizens – in the present and for the future. Anyone who runs for public office should believe that. If a candidate does not believe that and does not believe that government is worth the investment of our taxes, he or she should seek another profession.

Distractions: This is an issue of adequate government funding. It is NOT...

- A matter of priorities.
- A problem created by the war.
- A choice between stimulating the economy and having adequate government services.
- A problem that can be solved by reducing teacher pensions, privatizing government services, or placing lifetime limits on access to public assistance.
- A problem that can be solved by making government more efficient.

What Leagues Can Do to Help

Continue to research the impact of budget reductions on local government services. Report the results at <http://fs16.formsite.com/lwvmi/MIOsurvey/index.html>.

Organize a program around the subject. Members of the LWVMI MIO Task Force are available to make presentations.

Include questions on government funding in your voter guide and/or candidate forums. (See Candidate Questions below.)

Include articles on the subject in your local *Voter*.

Submit letters to the editor or viewpoint articles on the subject on behalf of the local League.

Candidate Questions

The state and local governments have been struggling for years to balance their budgets. Is the answer more cost cutting or increased revenues? If the answer is cost cutting, what specifically would you cut? If the answer is increased revenue, how specifically would those revenues be raised?

Citizens in this country have historically looked to government to provide services such as public transportation, roads and highways, education, public safety, and public health. How well do you think governments are performing? What changes would you like to see? What is required to make that happen?

Some argue that reducing taxes stimulates the economy by providing more funds for spending and investment. Others argue that sound infrastructures (including public transportation, roads and highways, education, public safety, and public health) stimulate investment. Do you believe that the state of Michigan and local governments are doing a good job of balancing these priorities? Why or why not?

What Individuals Can Do to Help

Submit letters to the editor or viewpoint articles on the subject.

Ask candidates about their views on government funding. Use their responses to inform your voting.

Talk with friends and colleagues about the issue.