Welcome and thanks for joining us for our Michigan gubernatorial candidate interviews. I’m Nolan Finley from the Detroit News and Detroit Public Television. Today we’re interviewing Republican Senator Pat Colbeck who is a candidate in the Republican primary. Senator Colbeck of Canton Township is in his final year of his second term representing the Seventh District in Northwestern Wayne County.

Our questions today will come from a panel from the Detroit Journalism Cooperative. The DJC is made up of six media outlets; Detroit Public Television, Bridge Magazine, Michigan Radio, WDET Radio, New Michigan Media, and Chalkbeat. And we’d also like to thank the Knight Foundation for its support of our project. Today’s panel includes Erin Einhorn, Bureau Chief, Chalkbeat Detroit; Riley Beggin, Politics Reporter, Bridge Magazine; Stephen Carmody, Reporter/Producer, Michigan Radio; Hassan Khalifeh, Reporter, Arab American News and New Michigan Media; and Sandra Svoboda of WDET-FM.

So let’s get started with our first question. Senator Colbeck, every governor brings his or her own style of leadership to the office. How would you describe your leadership style, your approach to getting people to work together?

Well, first and foremost, my background’s in engineering so I have a different sort of problem solving approach where I actually try to find the best solution, not just a solution. So a lot of the problem solving you’re faced with as a state senator is pretty much a true/false exam. You’re given one bill. You get a chance to vote up and down on it.

And I have a different approach to going off and putting forward good policy. I try to frame what the actual problem statement is. So I often work in PowerPoint first, and I go up and highlight what are all the objectives we’re trying to achieve. And then I go into engineering trade study mode, and I identify what are all the possible ways of achieving these objectives. It’s a little bit different than what you see up in Lansing, and it’s something that I think citizens are looking forward to.

So the key is to get agreement on what are all the common objectives first. And when we went into this social studies standards recently, that’s exactly how I did it in a group that had a lot of people with diametrically opposed world views. And we started off with common objectives. Those were make sure that we had standards that were politically neutral and that were also accurate. And that’s the way I approach a lot of the problems, and it works
very well. It’s worked well in my professional career as a management consultant, including six years on my own as a small-business owner.

Nolan Finley: As governor, you will also be leader of the party that nominated you. What sort of obligation do you feel to carry out the agenda of that party?

Patrick Colbeck: Yeah, I think it’s very important that we kind of restore an appreciation for our platform, and a lot of politicians, it’s like there’s this little divide, I think in both of the parties, between what the platform is and what the fraternity is. And I think we’ve strayed away from some of the aspects of the platform, which is for the Republican Party is living within your means. It’s a no-tax platform. It’s a follow the constitution platform. And I think it’s important that we get people recalibrated around that. As leader of the party, we’re going to make sure that we promote candidates that are actually supporting the platform, not going off and playing the good old boys network.

Nolan Finley: Thank you. We’re going to turn next to education, and our first question will come from Erin Einhorn.

Erin Einhorn: Hi, Senator.

Patrick Colbeck: Hey, Erin.

Erin Einhorn: We heard from several people in our audience who had questions about education. Judith specifically wanted to know about your plans for schools. So do you believe that schools in Michigan have the resources they need to succeed to serve all students, including those with special needs, and do you think that schools are funded equitably?

Patrick Colbeck: Let me address the funding aspect. Yes, I do. I’m going to tell you what, for the folks that think we’re not funded adequately, I’ve actually got a way to go off and approach that problem in a way that gets to my core philosophy on education, that education should not be managed centrally from the federal government or by the state government. It should be focused on the parents, the teachers, and the students.

And what I mean by that is getting rid of this onerous testing that’s happening, statewide testing. When I grew up, we didn’t have something called the MDE. We didn’t have a statewide assessment. We would take the Iowa test, and we would take the California test to get some sort of a national
benchmark as to where we were headed, but we didn’t need a statewide assessment. And that’s part of where this micromanagement comes from.

Education, as somebody who served on the Senate Education Policy Committee and also served on the school board for Canton Charter Academy as treasurer, I understand how education works in this state. And essentially, you have a five layer cake in education. You’ve got the standards bone connected to the assessment bone connected to the curriculum bone and then lesson plans and course materials. The bottom three have historically always been in the domain of the local school districts, yet we’ve been trying to take over more and more with the state level and the federal level up at the standards and assessment level, which drives what the curriculum is. I want to knock that off and actually get back to that local control of the teachers and the parents in the classroom.

That’s one of the reasons I’m also a big advocate for school choice. And so if you have all the local options, well, you’ve got to give those students and those parents some option so that if they’re not getting their needs met, maybe they’ve got a special needs student that they want to take somewhere where they’re going to get an IEP that actually is followed through on, maybe they should have the ability to go off and be portable with those funds to go off and get their student the proper education.

That’s why I implemented what I call the Enhanced Michigan Education Savings Program Plan. It’s like an education savings account, and what it does is expands the current provisions of the Michigan Education Savings Program into K-12 services as well as post-graduate services. So if I want to go into skilled trades, if I want to go off and have a professional development change or professional development courses or a career change later on, it incentivizes education as a lifelong endeavor.

And the beautiful thing about these student specific accounts is that it opens the doors for third-party funding of student specific accounts and student specific educational needs. So for example, in Detroit, we’ve got Cornerstore and Cristo Rey schools that are private schools. They don’t benefit from this program at all. But they were used as a model for how this could work for public schools.

They’ll have work-study programs in high school where third-party companies will come up and partner with a student and say in exchange for you working five days a month in my business getting valuable experience, I’ll put in $7000.00 a year towards your education. Now if you were to apply that into the public school realm and open the doors for these partnerships to provide student specific accounts that they could put this funding towards, that opens a door to almost a 50 percent increase in foundation allowance.

The big rub of this, and why I’ve gotten some opposition from the AFT of
Michigan was that the parents are the ones that control where that funding goes. It’s not the education bureaucracy. So there are paths to get more funding if you want them, but the key is to put the control back in the hands of the customers of education, which are the parents and students. But bottom line is I want to go to pure local control, and it doesn’t get more local than the parents being in charge of where that money goes. And we definitely need to get the state and the feds out of it.

And I’m a big proponent of eliminating common core standards and have taken some hits for proposing that. But the more you learn about it, the more that drives everything that’s going down at the local level in that five layer cake, and it’s something that we actually lose some of that local control with that standard philosophy.

Erin Einhorn:

So following up on the standardized testing question or issue, research shows that test scores are often determined or driven by socioeconomic and other factors. So how well do you think the state’s current accountability system, how fairly is it measuring schools? And do you think that our current accountability system is a good way to determine whether a school should be closed?

Patrick Colbeck:

Well, just to be clear, ultimately the accountability I’m most concerned about is accountability to the parents. Now, to the extent that you can provide parents with better information as to what’s going on with an individual school or individual school district, I’ve supported, in theory, the concept of having different letter grades, not one rank file letter grade system, but having a letter grade on school growth, another one on achievement, another one on socioeconomic conditions so that everybody can understand what they’re getting into in a particular school. So in other words, you’re informing the consumer. So from that perspective, I’d support something of an improved accountability on it.

But the problem when you get into that mess is that now all of a sudden you are pushing for...it’s not just what the endgame is. It’s what are all the intermediate steps necessary to get to that point. And when you go down that point...like teacher tenure reform, for example, I was...we definitely needed to stop practices like last in, first out where we were limiting some of our best teachers in the classroom. But the solution that they came up with required that you had to start grading the teachers and assessing the teachers. Well, in order to do that, you need to go off and do an assessment. Well, it’s that assessment that led to this statewide standard approach and the micromanagement of the classroom by the state and by the federal government.

So while the accountability framework that you’re alluding to sounds good
and I’d like to have all that information out for parents, keep in mind what happens in order to implement that system. It forces that statewide assessment because now I’m getting to the point where I’m going to do achievement unless you’re just going to grade the socioeconomic conditions, if that’s the only thing you’re going to do, forget what I’m going to say here next. But if you’re going to go off and start grading the achievement and the growth of that particular school, now all of a sudden, you’re pointing to a statewide assessment. And just be careful what you wish for is what it comes down to.

I’m a big proponent that ultimately it’s the customers who determine what the quality is. You want to find out whether or not a school is good or not, you go in and talk to the teachers. You talk to the teachers in classes that are not the teachers that your students are going to be in because they’re the ones who know what goes on in their classroom. Better yet, talk to the teachers in the grade level above the teacher that you’re in right now because they’ll tell you whether or not the students were prepared for their classroom. So there’s a lot of different ways to go off and approach accountability.

As an engineer, immediately I started looking at the idea of a statewide assessment, and I’m going yeah, I could get behind...we have ASHRAE standards or something there standardized. But ultimately, what it comes down to is I want the individual parent saying yeah, that was a good job or not a good job.

[01:11:53;01] Nolan Finley: Thanks. Hassan?

[01:11:55;69] Hassan Khalifeh: Do you think Michigan should make changes to laws regarding how charter schools are governed and how they’re funded?

[01:11:59;85] Patrick Colbeck: No. I think what we should do...and actually, I faced this early on in my state senate career. A lot of people on the Democrat side are proposing to eliminate charter schools altogether, which is essentially saying hey, we know better about the education of your kids than you do so talk to the hand, parent. We don’t care what you really have to say. So I have a little problem with that.

But when it comes down to these false narratives around charters not playing under the same rules as a lot of the public schools, when I first got into the senate, I asked my staff to go off and provide a matrix of all the Michigan compiled laws in different categories, everything from transportation to funding levels to curriculum requirements all the way across the board, and we put out this table. And we posted it to everybody and said here’s what it says for public school academies, which is what charter schools are, and they
are public schools. They’re not private schools like some people bogusly assert. And I said here’s the requirements for homeschoolers. Here’s the requirements for parochial. Here’s the requirements for traditional public schools. None of the differences that people start to highlight are evident by what’s actually in law. And so I just encourage people to do their homework on what the differences are. They talk about funding levels and requirements and they say you get to pick and choose at a charter school. No, it’s a lottery system, which is a horrible way to go off and determine your kid’s future, frankly.

Nolan Finley: Thank you, Senator. Erin.

Erin Einhorn: What can the state do about the high cost of child care and the lack of preschool options for young children?

Patrick Colbeck: That’s a tough thing to go off and deal with. Number one, it gets down to the fundamental discussion over social issues like the sanctity of marriage and appreciation for families. A lot of the reason you need a lot of these assistances, we’ve broken down an appreciation for the traditional family unit. And if you have a mom that’s working, for example, dad can stay home and take care of the kids. If you’ve got a dad that’s working, mom can stay home and take care of the kids. We had a family structure that used to take care of some of those needs.

Now having said that, there are people that are going through transition phases, and they’re struggling with that care. And I want to make sure that we take care of them, but we’ve got to look at some of the long-term solutions and not just quick fixes and throw money at it and provide some of these institutions to take care of it. I really want to make sure we get at the underlying root cause of this.

Nolan Finley: And finally, Sandy.

Sandra Svoboda: We talked about K-12 earlier. You just answered the question about early child care. On the other end of that public education spectrum, costs in higher education, are they prohibitively high among colleges and universities, and what could you do as governor about that?

Patrick Colbeck: Well, they are prohibitively high, and if you actually look at them, some of the studies I saw say that the expenses at universities are increasing at the rate five times the rate of inflation everywhere else. I’m sorry but there’s just
nothing inside a university that drives up...that is unique to them that would substantiate an increase on that level. So what I would propose is that the state would actually have more oversight over the universities. Right now they have essentially constitutional immunity for anything regards to fiduciary matters inside the universities. I would open that up. And I’ve got a resolution on the senate floor right now that’s designed to do just that, amend the constitution so that the state would have more statutory oversight over university operations.

Nolan Finley: Thank you, Senator. You're term limited as a state senator along with two-thirds of your colleagues and a good chunk of the house. Do you think term limits are working in Michigan, or has it cheated the state of the expertise of people like yourself?

Patrick Colbeck: Yeah, there’s a lot of people that think they know more than they do up in legislative and it’s a lot of folks that are not necessarily looking out for the best interests of the people so I’m okay with the term limits the way they are right now. Two terms is good enough for George Washington, it’s good enough for me. But there’s an issue overall with people’s priorities up in Lansing. And when you turn it over on a more frequent basis, you have an opportunity to get some fresh blood in there with a fresh perspective. But I’m okay with term limits the way they are.

Nolan Finley: Okay. Let’s move to roads and infrastructure. Riley?

Riley Beggin: Senator, anyone who drives Michigan roads knows that they’re bad. A task force says that we need $4 billion more just to maintain them. How should Michigan pay to fix roads, bridges, and water systems?

Patrick Colbeck: Well, first of all, it’s not about the money. A lot of people are pushing that, and when they did a transportation study, I think it was back in 2006 or 2008 timeframe, they did the calculation of how much money do we need to go off and fix our roads. Well, they didn’t just include how much money we need to fix the roads. Every time they did that, they put a little jobs figure, and what happens is a lot of people are looking at transportation as a jobs program, not as a public service. And so there’s a lot of Keynesian economic fans that would go off and say well, we’ve just got to throw more money at it.

Here’s what happened when we proposed a $2 billion tax increase, and I opposed this at the time. It was Proposal 2015-1, and it was for a $2 billion tax increase. I was very vocal in opposition of that. I know Nolan was critical of me for doing that, but I highlighted that in that first year, only 400 million
of that $2 billion, actually 1.7 billion in the first year, would’ve actually gone towards the roads. People are using the roads issue...because everybody experiences it on a daily basis, they’re using it as a basis of a bait and switch.

What happened as soon as 81 percent of the people voted no against that proposal? They went off and proposed a tax increase without a vote of the people, a $600 million tax increase. And right after that was passed, they repurposed $400 million in general fund that was allocated to the transportation budget to go backfill potholes and Medicaid expansion. It was never about the roads. This money issue is never about the roads. It’s about people having more walking around money for other priorities.

Now the way to fix the roads is by focusing upon quality. It was about four weeks ago that I-696 had a segment of it paved, and two weeks later they dug it back up again because of poor quality. That’s probably got the record for the shortest lifespan of any road here in the state of Michigan, but it focuses on the issue that we are not promoting quality in process. When I talked to Ohio road officials, they have an in-process road inspection for every single road project that goes on in the state.

We don’t have that appreciation. What we do is we let them go off and finish the road and then afterwards say hey, you screwed up so go fix it. You’re going to be subject to all these different fines. Well, those fines don’t fix the roads. Those fines don’t help people deal with these orange barrels on a regular basis. But they do go off and feed government, and that’s not what we’re trying to do. We need to get roads back into the mode of being focused on being a public service.

There’s advanced road construction techniques that I’ve spearheaded in my tenure in the Michigan that would actually help the roads last three to four times as long for about 15 percent more up front in labor and materials. If you actually were to deploy this and convert all of our version one lousy roads into version two high quality, long lasting roads, you’d actually need less money to maintain our roads, not more.

As the recovery efforts continue in Flint, what have you learned from the situation there, and how would that inform your role as governor?

Well, first of all, if you’re going to assume the role as emergency manager, you’re becoming the mayor of that city. You’ve got to be up close and personal for that particular municipality, which means you’ve got to measure key quality of life metrics on a regular basis. So we had a case where when that water was turned over, it was six months before they decided hey, let’s go monitor the water quality. As an engineer, I know that’s way too long.
And as budget chair of the state police and Department of Military and Veterans’ Affairs budget, I actually did something rather unique. I focused on performance for those organizations and instead of the annual review of the budget and how they’re performing, I would actually set up quarterly metrics reviews. And I’d say here are your goals. Here’s the money you’re getting. Here are the services we’re expecting. Here’s the quality we’re expecting for each one of them. And I said every three months we’re going to be checking back with you to see how you’re doing against that.

I want to do that approach for all the agencies. But if you’re going to take over emergency manager responsibilities, you’ve at least got to have that sort of attention to detail for how you’re managing those city operations on the key metrics for the key services you’re providing for your constituents.

Senator Colbeck, as the Great Lakes State, water quality is essential to our identity, and we’re going to address that issue next with a question from Steve.

Hello, Senator. Several people in our audience have had questions and concerns about the water that our state relies on. Let’s start with the big question. It comes from Laurie. She calls the Great Lakes our most critical resource. What will you do as governor to safeguard that resource?

Well, I talked about monitoring metrics. So one of the key metrics is water quality all across the state, not just over in our Great Lakes, which I truly appreciate, but also in our rivers, in our aquifers, all the way around the state. So wherever we have water that’s being used for quality of life of our citizens, we’re going to go off and monitor it. And that’s what our chief role here is in government, actually monitor the things that impact the lives of our citizens the most and secure their rights.

M, Steve, and Daniel in our audience want to know about your plans for the future of Enbridge Line 5.

Well, first of all, you need to have a discussion over whether or not you want any fluids to go from point a to point b at all. If you do want any fluids, whether it’s gas, natural gas, whether it’s just water, from point a to point b, as an engineer who has done lots of failure modes and effects analyses and reliability analyses in my work on space station and a few other things, the most reliable way to get fluids from point a to point b is with a pipe. So if you recognize that you need to get fluids from point a to point b, a pipeline is the most efficient way of doing it.
If you do it with the freighter, there’s all kinds of opportunities for accidents. Everybody knows Exxon Valdez, and that’s something we don’t want to repeat on our Great Lakes. We know about truck accidents on a regular basis, jackknifed trucks. That stuff happens on a much more frequent basis. And rail disasters happen all the time as well. Pipeline is pretty quiet, and it is the most reliable way of doing this.

Now having said that, you’ve got to make sure you're maintaining the pipe. And you’ve got to protect it. And so I appreciate some of the discussions around protecting the pipeline either by burying it or putting a little shroud on the outside of it. There’s a lot of simple ways to go off and secure those lines. But overall, we need to...a pipeline is the most effective way to get from point a to point b.

Hassan Khalifeh: How do you intend to combat water contamination caused by industrial chemicals like PFAS?

Patrick Colbeck: Well, first of all, you monitor it and you understand where you’re actually getting contamination, making sure that people are held responsible and they actually do that. I’ve got an issue with vinyl chloride spill here in my district right now at a plant in Livonia. What I’ve been working with DEQ and also DHHS on is how do you determine what a clean bill of health is for the people that are in that community because there’s a health issue associated with it. There’s also a property value issue because they’re going to try to sell their home, and they’ve got the issue of a vinyl chloride spill in their neighborhood.

So what I’ve done is come up with an approach to DHHS and DEQ, and I said I want to come up with a “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” that says that I know that these homes right here are safe because they meet some minimum essential threshold or whatever of safety on particular vinyl chloride levels. And also the same thing in regard to property values, I want to be able to say that these are well within acceptable levels for any sort of transaction or sale of that home. So I try to work with it to get back to the homeowners and get them some peace of mind, first and foremost. And if that involves remediation on the part of the offending party, then we’ll make sure that there is remediation steps taken and hold them accountable.

Nolan Finley: Senator, should the state allow additional withdrawals from the Great Lakes Basin by bottled water companies?
Patrick Colbeck: As long as we’re not impacting the overall quality of life. I think a lot of people are talking about the Nestle property in particular. And ultimately, this is a case where I don’t know how many people would like the government to come onto your property and say all that food you’re growing in the back in your private garden, you have to make sure that a certain portion of it goes to somebody else. That’s kind of a difficult case to make. We have property rights, and Nestle, as long as they’re being a good neighbor to their neighbors and they’re not lowering the water levels of the rivers; they’re not lowering the water levels of nearby aquifers for their neighbors; if they’re not lowering the overall Great Lakes levels, which by the way are at records highs right now; I think we’ve got to appreciate the fact that property rights are something that are supposed to be protected.

Nolan Finley: Let’s move to immigration with a question from Hassan.

Hassan Khalifeh: You’re the state senator of a highly diverse city, Canton. Governor Snyder introduced the Michigan Office for New Americans in 2014, and established June as the month for new immigrants in Michigan. How would you attract more people to come to Michigan, given that there’s a possible population decline and we might lose a Congressional seat because of that?

Patrick Colbeck: Well, the best way to attract people to Michigan is with economic policy. My elimination of state personal income tax and senior pension tax gets us to the point where we’re zero percent income tax, six percent sales tax. A lot of the people…and when I graduated from the University of Michigan, I went to Alabama. I went to Florida. And both of those places are much better economic conditions than what we had in Michigan at the time. They were growing as states. Matter of fact, they were right-to-work states. And that’s one of the reasons that they’re growing so well, and that’s one of the reasons I pushed for Michigan to become the 24th right-to-work state. So the best way is to have an attractive business environment where we’ve got jobs for them to come to.

This isn’t something that we want to just promote government assistance or population for the sake of population. We’ve got to get people back here working. And a lot of families back in the “Lost Decade” under Governor Granholm were pushed out of the state because of bad economic policies. The way to reverse that trend is by eliminating the senior pension tax and the state income tax. I think you’ll see a lot of people wanting to stay here in Michigan and bring up their families.
As a follow up to that, I’d like to know if you plan to have refugees a part of that plan and if you support the EB-5 program.

Back when we had the Syrian refugee and Governor Snyder put his finger on the pause button, I issued support for that because I actually found out how they were screening refugees to come here into the state of Michigan, and there was no attention to the security. This is coming from Syria. This is land of ISIS, and one of the S’s in ISIS is Syria. And so we want to go off and understand who are we transplanting here to the state of Michigan. Now there are some genuine refugees that had their lives threatened over there, and they’re from a lot of different races and creeds out there as well, including Muslims because a lot of Muslims were persecuted by ISIS as well because they weren’t Muslim enough, if you know what I mean.

I want to screen people so that we make sure that they’re actually interested in becoming American. If they want to come here and resettle, then it’s about assimilating into American culture. It’s not about setting up unique cultures. My grandparents came over. My grandma came from Poland. My grandpa came from Ukraine. And they kept their culture. I had my pierogi and my kielbasa and my sauerkraut and my gwumpki back at home, and I love that kind of stuff. We had that. But ultimately, they learned English. They got to work. He started out working at a gas station, then ended up owning his own gas station. And that’s what we need to get an appreciation for.

So anybody coming here, we want them to become Americans. And so that’s one of the things that I’d be focused on. It’s not just bring people for the sake of relocating and increasing population. It’s a matter of bringing them over here because they appreciate the opportunities we are afforded as Americans and they want to be part of that American society.

Senator, what role can immigration play in meeting the workforce needs of Michigan’s employers?

Well, a lot of the visa programs, especially for farm communities and migrant workers, is something that’s been very important. I’ve talked to a lot of farmers where they’ve tried to put Medicaid enrollees on there. They last maybe two weeks and say this is too hard. I want to leave. Well, that doesn’t leave too many people that are willing to go off and work in those environments. So there is an opportunity where there are jobs that apparently there are Americans that are here that are able-bodied that are just unwilling to go off and fill. And for those, we do need to pick our crops. We need to go off and support that.
There’s other skilled areas maybe in software engineering that we’ve got some deficiency of. There’s a whole spectrum where we’ve got a skill deficiency that needs to be filled. By all means, I think we should look at maybe bringing some folks in. But the idea of immigration for the sake of immigration and just population increases for the sake of population increases is not a good policy to have. I think it’s got to be more demand driven.

And one other thing that might influence immigration in Michigan in the future, the 2020 census and the citizenship question. How do you see that impacting the state?

Well, I think it’s important to ask whether or not somebody’s a citizen or not, especially because we’re portioning voting privileges based on that and you’re voting insolvency based on that. And you have to be a citizen in order to vote. So I think it’s very important to be asking that question. As far as what the impact is, whatever the impact is, it’s the right thing to do from a rule of law perspective.

Let’s talk taxes now. Riley?

Many people in our audience want to know about taxes, insurance, and finance issues. From our audience member, John, do you believe that economic development deals with tax credits, incentives, et cetera are necessary and useful for Michigan’s communities? What’s your position on tax incentives?

Heck no. It’s been one of those areas that’s probably been the most frustrating policy area of my tenure in the Michigan Senate. Mackinac Center recently put out a survey of the records of legislators in regard to what they call crony subsidies. If you had 100 percent rating, it means that you never saw a crony subsidy that you didn’t like and you voted for every single one of them. And Bill Schuette got 100 percent rating. Brian Calley got a 95 percent rating. I got a 3.5 percent rating, and that was the best record of any state senator in two decades. And by the way, of that three and a half percent, one of them was for a place that they were counting on that subsidy because a new company had bought that company, and if I would’ve said no to it, the people that were already working at that company, it wasn’t incentive to setup a new shop, would’ve lost their jobs and I couldn’t do that in that case. But that’s where the three and a half comes from.

But I believe that the best approach to economic development is broad base
economic development. I’ve been a management consultant for 11 years. My job’s been to go off and turn around business operations for a lot of different companies. And if you want to turn them around and get them into a job growth mode, the best way to do it is lower the total cost of business operations. And you can do that by lowering the cost of government, which means eliminating state personal income tax. You can do it by lowering the cost of healthcare, which is something I’ve been a big proponent, not just statewide but nationally recognized by forbes.com on free-market healthcare solutions, and then lowering the cost of electricity by promoting energy choice where you can get ten to 20 percent less on your electricity rates than you would under the regulated utility market. So that’s the way to incentivize economic development. I’m opposed to the about a billion dollars in handouts that we give every single year towards what I believe is more cronyism.

Nolan Finley: Steve?

Stephen Carmody: In all likelihood, some time over the next four years we’re going to be back into a recession.

Patrick Colbeck: Oh, don’t call that out by faith.

Stephen Carmody: How would you prepare the state so that it’s ready if the economy does a downturn in the next four years?

Patrick Colbeck: Well, diversification. And the way you get diversification is not by mandating a diverse portfolio. A lot of top down central planners like to go off and do that. The way you get that diversification is actually by getting government out of the way. You’ll notice that every time they put together incentive program in Lansing, it’s like okay this year we’re going to incentivize films. Next year, now we’re going to incentivize batteries. Now we’re going to incentivize data centers. They try to play Sim City with our state and try to micromanage everybody’s lives.

No, the way to do this and the way to incentivize it and prepare us for the future is to let people be driven by their own passions in regard to what they want to pursue in the business realm. And that’s when you get the biggest success stories. That’s when you get somebody like a Henry Ford kicking off into some area that never was really an industry before. The auto industry wasn’t a real industry, if you would, before he got engaged on it. We want to incentivize all those new ideas. And the way to do that is by getting the government out of the way.
Erin Einhorn: Debbie and Ray in our audience want to know your plans for car insurance. Specifically, what would you do to lower rates?

Patrick Colbeck: Yeah. This comes into a recognition of what the debate’s been to date. First of all, no fault got instituted because a lot of people said we had too many claims going into the court system. It was bogging it down. So let’s just pretend that nobody’s at fault and make sure we take care of everybody. Well, that hasn’t worked. We actually have more claims in the court system now than we used to, it’s just different types of claims. They’re based on making sure people get their full health benefits.

So the reason we haven’t gotten any movement off dead center in the legislature is because it devolves into a debate between folks who want lower costs, which I’m definitely in that category, and folks that want a lifetime benefit. So if you’re injured and you’ve got a traumatic brain injury, that’s kind of a life altering scenario that you want to make sure your insurance is taking care of. Well, I believe we should meet both of those requirements, and to date, it’s always been seen as one or the other.

I’m an engineer. I like to approach things from a different perspective. And you take both of those as requirements and start looking at how could you actually go off and satisfy both of those, sometimes treated as diametrically opposed, requirements. And the secret is looking into my own insurance premium. When I looked at my own car insurance premium, it turned out 58 percent of my costs were due to state mandates. You eliminate the state mandates, which essentially means you go back to a tort based system. You eliminate no fault as we know it. And then you repurpose the funds associated with the Michigan Catastrophic Fund, which is a challenge.

You can reduce the rates of auto insurance by close to 60 percent, a minimum of 40 percent but I think we can get to 60 percent, while actually retaining lifetime benefits because the interest on that Michigan Catastrophic Fund almost covers the disbursements coming out of it for benefit claims. And that way you wouldn’t need that $192.00 per person MCCA surcharge you see on your current insurance claim. So we can get into a little bit more detail on how that is. But the biggest challenge to get to the full 60 percent involves the federal government, involves the treatment of those Michigan Catastrophic Funds, which is about a $20 billion corpus that’s sitting there right now earning less than two percent interest on it.

Nolan Finley: Senator, would you roll back Michigan’s income tax, or would you eliminate it altogether?
Patrick Colbeck: Eliminate it altogether. And it’s about a $9.7 billion gap, and I’ve got a practical, milestone based approach to get us all the way down to zero. And by the way, when you eliminate the state personal income tax, you eliminate the senior pension tax, and you also eliminate the debate about fairness between people with 401k style plans and pension taxes because neither one of them are taxed on income. So this is not something you do with just one bill and you say poof, income tax gone. No, this is something where you identify tangible, expense based milestones that once you achieve that milestone, you ratchet it down. Once you achieve the next one, you ratchet it down. And I believe we can get all the way down to zero by the end of my tenure as governor.

Sandra Svoboda: And could you give us a few of the highlights of replacing that $9.7 billion? If you’re taking it away in income to the state, how are you replacing the income or cutting costs?

Patrick Colbeck: Yeah, first of all, everybody needs to know I’m not cutting schools. I’m not cutting police and fire, all the usual red herrings everybody throws out on this stuff. Where you start is number one, at the single largest line item in our state budget and that’s Medicaid. Out of our $56.7 or so billion budget, $18 billion of it goes to Medicaid. In that line item, we’ve actually kicked off a pilot that I got into the state budget last year for direct primary based Medicaid pilot. It offers the opportunity to save over 20 percent on the cost of Medicaid, and it does so while actually getting Medicaid enrollees better care. So here’s a case where we can actually reduce expenses by improving services. Well, 20 percent of $18 billion is about $3.6 billion. Already you’re at 6.1.

Then we go back to what we were talking about in economic development, that billion dollars for Michigan Strategic Fund Michigan Economic Development Corporation, another billion off the top. Now we’re down to 5.1 billion. Now we go to economic growth. We get into the case where if we got 500,000 new private sector jobs through a pro-growth attitude here in the state again, like we’ve done over the last seven and a half years, now we’ve got another $1.9 billion net to the positive with the elimination in need for government assistance plus increased sales tax revenue, use tax revenue, property tax revenue.

Nolan Finley: What role would criminal justice reform play in that savings?

Patrick Colbeck: Reduction of recidivism could actually reduce it by another $300 million. As you know, it’s our largest line item for general fund money in the state.
budget. It’s the most fungible money we have in the state budget. So that is an opportunity to significantly reduce the cost of...

Nolan Finley: Have you thought about how you reduce recidivism?

Patrick Colbeck: Absolutely. That’s one of the reasons I’m on the Criminal Justice Policy Commission is to identify the different data streams that identify what programs are working to reduce recidivism and which ones are not working. And I’ve actually been pretty systematic about...matter of fact, unfortunately, the governor vetoed one of my bills to get a lot of that data out into the system. But ultimately, there’s a lot of particularly faith based programs that have been shown to cost very little up front, if anything, and actually reduce recidivism down in the single digits. So that’s one way of going off and approaching it. And just whatever the program is, if you can show how effective it is at keeping people out of this rotating door of prison, we can drastically reduce the cost of our corrections system.

Nolan Finley: So in the question about tax incentives, you talked about getting government out of the way and out of the market, letting the companies develop on their own. But as Michigan competes to become the mobility capital, the autonomous driving capital and competes with places like Silicon Valley, is there a role for government in helping foster and grow this new industry?

Patrick Colbeck: Yeah, in marketing. Go off and highlight what are all the assets we already have in place that can facilitate mobility discussion here in the state of Michigan. We’ve got great universities with excellent students coming out of there. Unfortunately, they’re all going elsewhere because of the reset of the quality of life aspects, including our income tax rates are so high. So yeah, you market what we do have as an asset.

When I talk about broad base economic development, what it does is...everybody goes to incorporate inside of Delaware, and they don't care whether or not you’re a mobility corporation, an energy corporation, pharmaceutical, whatever. A lot of people go to Delaware to incorporate because it’s no hassle and it’s low cost. We setup Michigan so that Pure Michigan becomes associated with it’s easy to do business in this state. We don’t get in your way. We don’t get in your knickers. We go off and we promote what is best for you to go off and thrive in our state. That sends a message to all different types of business, not just mobility, which is the latest fad. It sets it up for businesses that nobody’s even dreamed of yet.
Sandra Svoboda: Let’s stay on mobility but in terms of public transit. We’ve got a diverse state between the Upper Peninsula and the Lower Peninsula, Detroit, and other urban areas with population density and mass transit systems. So I’d like to hear a little bit about your specific plans both for the urban areas and regional transit, specifically in Southeast Michigan and then also the rest of the state and rural areas and what might be in the works for those regions.

Patrick Colbeck: All right. Well, I’m not a fan of the Regional Transit Authority in Michigan, in Southeast Michigan, in particular, right now. And part of the reason is because they never really solved the core problem. They just kind of put another layer on top of two existing.

Sandra Svoboda: What’s the core problem?

Patrick Colbeck: The core problem is legacy costs associated with those and delivering effective services. And frankly, when you start talking about mass transit, there are major disruptors out there that if the state goes in and puts in some major investments in infrastructure along those lines, where does that leave room for the next Uber of the world or the Lyft of the world that actually has an innovative way of maybe delivering some of these services in a way free from government entanglement? And they actually provide better quality services that meet the needs of consumers.

So the idea of the state getting in the middle of that, I know in Europe over many, many years, frankly with a lot of assistance from the United States, they’ve got some pretty good mass transit systems that are put in place. And I love taking advantage of that when we have it in place, but we need to make sure that the people that are receiving the services are also the ones that are the ones that are paying for those services. And a lot of the proposal that I’ve seen to date set it up so that somebody else pays for it and somebody else receives the benefit.

Now this could be part of an overall plan to go off and help folks we were talking about earlier with child care and the idea of getting people transportation to work, effective transportation to work, and there might be some room in that context. But we’ve got to be careful about becoming too heavy handed as a state and investing heavily in that infrastructure because I think there’s a lot of innovative disruptors like the Lyfts and the Ubers out there that might have a different approach to it that might satisfy our needs better.
Yeah, what’s your stance on the ballot measure to create an independent commission for redistricting? And if you oppose the Voters Not Politicians Initiative, what solution would you suggest instead to address gerrymandering?

Well, first of all, everybody needs to recognize that that proposal is not about the voters. It is about gerrymandering, and it’s about the Democrats trying to gerrymander the election process. When you actually...when Devin Scillian was on Channel 4, he actually interviewed the person who was actually promoting this and leading this effort. And when he asked them why are you doing this, they said well, we weren’t getting the election results we wanted. That sounds like a gerrymandering purpose to me. Doesn’t it?

So I think that the system is working just fine right now. Actually, if you look at my senate district, it’s about as close as you can get to a box as you’re ever going to find. Maybe they kept it nice and orthogonal for this engineer to go off and get his hands around it and they left the more creative ones to more artistic folks that are out there. But I think the system that we have right now is working fine. And people are going to go off and cite a bunch of examples of different things that are going on. Well, a lot of those creative lines that are drawn are actually based on Democrat policies and that are actually in statute that we have to comply with when we go off and put together those lines.

You mean the Voting Rights Act?

Yeah. Yeah. And so if you actually said it’s based on geography rather than demographics, it would have a different look. Because everybody is sensitive to the geometry of the districts. That’s where everybody’s getting so incensed by it and how crazy it is. But they need to realize that those gerrymandered districts are actually driven by demographic profiles, and people don’t migrate into a box. They migrate along some meandering lines sometimes, and so if you want orthogonal boxes, well, the Voting Rights Act is what’s driving that. Get rid of that. But I’m not proposing to do that either. I’m just saying leave it the way it is. Stop politicizing the process. And just focus on executing the process.
Sandra Svoboda: Michigan recently received the lowest rating among all the states for the transparency that is here. So assuming you think that’s a problem, I don’t want to put words in your mouth, what efforts would you initiate related to the Freedom of Information Act, making state and local records more available, maybe campaign finance reform and disclosure, and other transparency efforts that might boost our rating in that regard?

Patrick Colbeck: Well, first and foremost, I actually sponsored my first year, I think, in the state senate transparency legislation that talked about how all the money we were spending in the state was spent. And so if you go to tenmillionaccountants.com, you can actually see the spending plans in detail and that’s presented in a way that you can actually do some data mining and understand how exactly all the money that’s spent in state government is actually spent. And I think its first priority is that our citizens need to know how the state funds that we’re responsible for appropriating are spent.

The next area, and where it gets into transparency around campaign finances, it’d be nice to be able to take all the money out of politics. I’ve done that my own special way in this election, to take money out of politics. But the key is people need to recognize that that money provides you a voice out in the public square unless TV stations are going to provide free advertising. Folks who may have a different point of view from the folks who are controlling the airways who are going off and talking on a regular basis from a different world view, if they’re pushing a particular candidate, whether it’s a newspaper, whether or not it’s a TV station, or whatever, there’s no accountability on those funds.

And that’s what we’re competing against with the idea of fundraising. You’ve got to be able to buy ad time on those same places where they’re pushing one or a different candidate or a different world view on it, and you need that money to go off and compete. If there was accountability on that end, too...and we all know there’s very much a distinct bias in the media. It’s been proven time and time again. For a guy like me who’s a conservative, it’s tough to get the message out.

Sandra Svoboda: And let me follow that up with the Freedom of Information Act. There have been proposals to apply it to the legislature and the governor’s office. What could we expect from your administration on that issue?

Patrick Colbeck: Well, a lot of the salaries, if anybody wants to know how anybody’s making money or whatever in my office, my personal salary, that’s fine. The idea of going off and going on fishing expeditions, which is what Robert Mueller is doing right now with President Trump, a lot of people are using the Freedom
of Information Act as a political weapon, not as something to keep people accountable. And I think you’ve got to have safeguards in it so that folks like Robert Mueller wouldn't be able to do the same thing into state legislators or a state governor’s office and essentially use their authority and abuse their authority to just go on fishing expeditions.

Joseph Stalin had a famous quote once. He said you show me the man, I’ll show you the crime. And there’s a book out that that says *Three Felonies a Day*. There’s so many rules out there, so many regulations, it is so easy to go off and get somebody to trip up. Since we’ve been in here on this interview, I bet you somebody’s broken a law along the lines here in this area. And the key is whether or not that is something that merits public scrutiny, merits a lot of those resources, or whether or not it’s something that should be delved into and somebody should be held accountable. We have a very low standard for some of those searches, as exemplified by this Robert Mueller investigation.

Nolan Finley: Senator Colbeck, we want to ask you a few questions on social issues starting with Steve on marijuana.

Stephen Carmody: This fall, Michiganders vote on recreational marijuana. What’s your feeling on that? Do you support it? Are you opposed to it? And if it does pass, how will your administration implement it?

Patrick Colbeck: Yeah, I was opposed to the expansion of medical marijuana provisions. I thought what the people put into the statute was fine, just the two and a half ounces, 12 plants. That was reasonable because when you’re talking about marijuana, it’s still a controlled substance. You can’t use the bank for it so it’s a cash only business. I’d rather have people walking around with 20s than having them walk around with Brinks cars, which is what happened under the medical marijuana expansion.

At the time medical marijuana was expanded, against my vote, I was on the senate judiciary committee. I heard all the testimony around it. And I opposed it because there’s so much money being thrown into this business that I think the election’s being bought. I think the ballot’s being bought. I think people are not given the full story about what the impacts are. They’re only being talked about what the positives are, and everybody loves new tax revenue and they’re pitching that. They’re not focused on what the increased expenses are going to be.

So this recreational marijuana ballot initiative, I’m opposed to for a variety of reasons. Number one, we’ve got issues with folks driving under the influence of alcohol. I don’t want to add people driving under the influence
marijuana to that equation. Second of all, I’ve got 31,000 job openings in my district right now. We want to grow our economy. If we go off and pass recreational marijuana, people are going to have to pass drug tests to get employment. That number that I have of open job openings here in my district is going to go up. When that number of job openings goes up, the number of people on government assistance is also going to go up because they can’t find a job because they can’t pass a drug test. That is a bad recipe for Michigan’s future from my perspective.

Having said that, if they do pass it and they vote to pass it and get it so that we’re a recreational marijuana state, we’ll find a way to make it work. we’ll find a way to make it safe for everybody. But it puts in jeopardy a lot of the things that we would like to do for our economy and for the quality of life here for Michigan residents.

Nolan Finley: Senator, the two parentally contentious issues in this state, and in this country, are abortion and gay marriage. Do you see those as settled issues in Michigan, or do you think it’s still an open question here?

Patrick Colbeck: Well, Michigan actually has on the books, is one of four states that has, an anti-abortion law. So we’re having a lot of discussion around supreme court nominees right now. If Roe v. Wade were actually overturned, then Michigan would become a battleground state on abortion. Unlike the governor, I would definitely be making sure that we have prohibition on funding to Planned Parenthood. It’s in boilerplate right now. I actually have legislation making it into statute so I definitely support the elimination of abortion in our state. The idea of taking an innocent human life is something that is pretty abhorrent to be and should be abhorrent to everybody.

In regard to gay marriage, this is another case where in our constitution, we had 2,608,000 people vote back in I think it was 2006, for an amendment to our constitution that said that marriage was between a man and a woman. And then we had five supreme court justices in black robes that were not elected overturn that will. I have a tough time with that. And I think there’s a case where we start pursuing nullification proceedings on things that are blatantly unconstitutional rulings on the part of the supreme court. And we go off and address that. But having said that, there’s a lot of different issues associated with it. We’ll be open to the discussions. But those are my views on the subject.

Nolan Finley: We have some lighter questions from our panel. Erin?
Erin Einhorn: What is the make and model of the car that you and other members of your household are currently driving?

Patrick Colbeck: Well, my 2008 Ford Edge is now sitting in the shop getting a new driveshaft so technically I’m not driving it now. But it is one of my favorite cars we’ve got in the library, and the other car that we were talking earlier about compacts, I actually drive a 2012 Ford Focus that’s sitting out in the parking lot right now and love both those vehicles. It’s been good. I think the Ford Focus now, even though it’s a 2012, has got over 212,000 on it so far and that’s with friends driving me all around the state.

Nolan Finley: Hassan?

Hassan Khalifeh: Can you recall an interesting or touching moment that you experienced while talking to voters along the campaign trail?

Patrick Colbeck: There’s tons of sensitive moments. There’s a lot of anecdotes that I’ve gotten from a lot of my folks, too, out on the road. We had a gentleman just recently out in Stillman, Michigan, which is up in the UP, had a Colbeck bumper sticker. And this guy gets out of his car, runs up to him and says that’s my guy. That’s the guy I’m voting for. And he goes really? He goes yeah, not only am I voting for him, my whole GMUAW Local is voting for him. He goes really? And he goes yeah, they told us to vote for Hillary in the last election. We all voted for Donald Trump. This time they’re telling us to vote for Gretchen Whitmer. We’re all voting for Colbeck. And it’s stories like that that happen all over the state that warm my heart. There’s a lot of stuff not getting reported that’s happening on the ground that is really appreciated.

Now, I can recall back in my state senate run when I was knocking on doors and talking to somebody who just looked sad. And I sat down next to him. He was on a rocking chair. And he wasn’t on my list to go off and walk, but I saw the gentleman sitting out there and went up to him. Turned out that his wife of something like 50 years had recently passed away, and he was out there sifting through this poetry that he had written for her while he was there. So you’re never supposed to spend more than two minutes at any door. I ended up spending about 45 minutes sitting down as he’d recite all that poetry to me, and you can tell...I don’t even know if I got the guy’s vote at the end of this. But you could tell it made a huge difference for him when I left.

And there’s so many people that are out there hurting just like that gentleman that are looking for somebody just to give them a voice. This election’s about
that. It’s about giving people a voice. I never wanted to go into politics. It’s still my least favorite occupation I’ve ever had in my life. But there’s so many people that do not feel like they’re getting their voice out there, that I do my best to make sure that we can get that voice out. Right now I’m the only Republican state senator in Wayne County, and a lot of people in Wayne County feel like their voice is lost. They’ve adopted me as their state senator to go off and look into matters that their representatives are not doing. We’ve been the land of misfit toys where people will come to us because we will listen to them when nobody else will.

And those are the stories that touch my heart. I cannot stand bullies, and when the government’s acting like a bully, I make sure they’re held accountable. When there’s just people that are not in the government act as bullies, I make sure they’re held accountable, too. There’s tons of stories we could go on and on. Actually, I share a lot of these stories in my book, Wrestling Gators: An Outsider’s Guide to Draining the Swamp. If you go through that, it’s got a lot of personal stories that get into some detail and some things that actually happened. And it also talks about how government really works on the inside, which I think people would find pretty enlightening.

[01:56:36;06]
Nolan Finley: Riley?

[01:56:36;56]
Riley Beggin: What are you reading right now? What book is on your nightstand?

[01:56:40;06]
Patrick Colbeck: Well, just my bible every morning for the last 17 years. That’s the only thing I have time for reading, to tell you the truth. So I’ve got Experiencing God Day by Day by Blackaby Brothers, a devotional, along with my Bible In A Year.

[01:56:57;77]
Nolan Finley: Sandra?

[01:56:58;26]
Sandra Svoboda: Sticking on the book question a little bit, who is your favorite Michigan author? And then also, I’m interested in your favorite Michigan foods as well so book authors and foods?

[01:57:08;88]
Patrick Colbeck: Well, my favorite Michigan foods are probably not the ones that are the best for me, but I definitely like anything with a Better Made seal on it, which my wife is very good at making good I don’t go shopping with her for a reason. In regard to Michigan books, I honestly don’t look at where the author is actually from when I go off and look at the book so I can’t really say.
Nolan Finley: Steve?

Stephen Carmody: What makes for a good weekend? What do you like to do when you’re not campaigning?

Patrick Colbeck: I’ll let you know when I get one. Honestly, for me I’ve learned much more appreciation for taking the Sabbath off during campaign season than ever before. I had friends that were running for office back when I was running for senate that said you don’t campaign on Sundays, you’re going to lose. And I didn’t campaign. I won. They lost. And I think part of it is you need that time to go off and recalibrate on what is truly important in life, and if you don’t do that, you’re missing out on how you can serve people better and more effectively and with more empathy. I’d talk about Saturday except frankly, Saturday is like another Monday to me. It’s been a six day work week for a while.

Nolan Finley: Senator, one last question, and briefly because we’re running out of time, but our citizens have lost faith in government. How would you restore it?

Patrick Colbeck: Well, that’s actually written in my book, too. There’s a whole chapter on how to restore our respect for a system of government. That’s actually one of the reasons that I’m running is because I want to restore an appreciation for core principles that made us a great nation and get them into the service of the people that are in elected office. I think ultimately it means that we start prioritizing their best interests over the needs of ourselves. There’s a lot of ladder climbers in politics. I think it’s about time that we actually had a leader that was focused on the best interest of the people at large, the people whose voices haven't been heard in a long time, and that’s what I aim to do as the next governor.

Nolan Finley: Senator Patrick Colbeck, thank you. Thanks to our panel and to the Detroit Journalism Cooperative. And thanks as well to the John S. and James Knight Foundation for sponsoring our project. Thank you for joining us this evening.

Patrick Colbeck: Thank you very much. God bless you.