Christy McDonald: [10:05:49] This is the first stop.

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:05:59] Southfield, then I’m in Ann Arbor and _____ [00:00:18] later.

Christy McDonald: [10:06:05] Must be busy as [overtalk]

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:16:06] I look at it like

Christy McDonald: [10:06:06] And then I’m out of time.

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:06:09] Yes. Otherwise, it’s overwhelming.


Unidentified Male: [10:06:18] Stand by, everyone.


Unidentified Male: [10:06:20] 5-4-3-

Christy McDonald: [10:06:26] We’d like to welcome Gretchen Whitmer, Democratic candidate for Governor. Thanks so much taking part in our gubernatorial candidate interviews. I’m Christy McDonald with Detroit Public Television. In the room today and doing the questioning are members of 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 Detroit. We would like to thank the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for it’s support on this project here today.

Today’s panel includes and starting to my left Sascha Raiyn. She’s the education reporter at WDET and she’s representing Chalkbeat Detroit. Riley Beggin, she’s the politics reporter at Bridge Magazine. Steve Carmody, he’s a reporter and producer at Michigan Radio. Hassan Khalifeh, he’s a reporter with the Arab American News and New Michigan Media. And Sandra Svoboda from WDET Radio.

For the next hour each journalist will a series of questions and follow-up on your answers if they do need some more specifics. And we appreciate you keeping your answers concise so we can get to as many topics as possible. I will give us a 30-minute time reminder so we can stay on track for this next hour.

Let’s start off and I wanted to start off a little bit talking about leadership and responsibility. Much has been made of the management style of previous governors, a de facto head of the party with strong arm tactics of getting things done, to our current governor who has been criticized for not being as
politically savvy as he needed to be. First off, explain what your management and leadership style is.

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:08:01] I think that’s a great question. I’ll tell you this. I served with three different governors during my time in the legislature. The one that was able to get their agenda accomplished better than the other two, frankly in my opinion, was John Engler. And I don’t say that because I liked John Engler’s agenda. But I recognize how important it was for him to bring that legislative experience and put it to work. Whether it was negotiating appointment of cabinet members to writing the budget and using every lever of power in the executive office to get things done. And I voted against him probably 99 out of 100 times but I recognized that really understanding how to work with the legislature is critical to being successful.

My leadership style whether it was as the prosecutor in Ingham County or it was the top Democrat in state government, is that I surround myself with really talented people who are experts. And then I give them the support to their job. I set the agenda. I set the values. I’m the one that is on hand but I get good people to help make sure that we are making decisions, moving forward quickly, that we are nimble and always tethered to the fact that we work for the people of the State of Michigan.

Christy McDonald: [10:09:22] So how do you see the governor’s role, just in terms of the Democratic party? Do you see the governor as the head of the Democratic party in Michigan and carrying out what that agenda will be for the party?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:09:32] I see the governor as the head of Michigan. We’re hiring someone to lead our state. We’re not hiring someone to be the head of a party. And frankly, I think that we are at our strongest when we are finding ways to solve problems together. As a state legislature, as the head, as the top Democrat in state government, I wasn’t there on behalf of Democrats. I was there on behalf of my constituency. I took an oath to lift up the people of the state of Michigan and I always took that very seriously. Yes, my value is more aligned with my party and that’s why I’m a Democrat. But my allegiance is to the people of this state. And frankly, if we had more people in government whose allegiance was to the people they served as opposed to a campaign donor or a political party, I think we’d have a very different thing happening in Washington, D.C. right now and we’d all be better off for it. We are Michiganders first and that’s got to be top priority.

So when the governor locked the public out during the attack on collective bargaining, I threw open the doors of the capitol and I led the resistance from my office. When women’s health was on the line, I went to the microphone and I told my story as a survivor because they weren’t listening to a single woman or a healthcare provider when it was something as critical as our healthcare rights. When a governor of my own party started taking money out of the school aid fund to backfill the general fund, I took her on.
But when a governor on the other side of the aisle embraced the Affordable Care Act, even though his party controlled both chambers of the legislature, I knew there was no way he could get it done without my help. So I didn’t just go off to my partisan corner. I didn’t come out with a list of demands. I rolled up my sleeves, I negotiated and I put the votes together and we got it done. And 680,000 people in our state have healthcare coverage today who didn’t before. I didn’t ask the question what would Democrats want me to do. I asked the question what was right for Michigan. And that’s what I think we need in a governor.

Christy McDonald: [10:11:31] Alright. Let’s go ahead and take a look at some of the biggest issues facing the state right now is education. A lot of people are talking about it. So I’m going to go over to Sascha for the first question on education.

Sascha Raiyn: [10:11:41] Several of our listeners have questions about education and Judith wanted to ask specifically about what your plans are for schools. Do you believe that schools in Michigan have what they need to succeed and to serve all students including special needs students? And do you think that schools are funded equitably?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:12:03] No and no. That’s a simple and quick answer. Here’s what I know. People from around the world used to come to our state for opportunity. Right? You could get a good job that paid you well enough you could raise a family on it and retire with dignity in the state. And no matter what community you called home, your kids were going to have a phenomenal public school education. DPS was the finest school system in a state full of great schools.

Right now though because of years of neglect, because of years of underfunding, because of years of attacks on people who go into education, we are now last in the Midwest and we are bottom 10 in our country. Where we used to lead the world. And it’s unconscionable. And it’s not right. We’re all paying a price for schools that aren’t getting our kids to a place where they are going to be set up for success, where we’ve leveled the playing field for every child in the state which is education does and can do when it’s done right.

My mom taught in Lansing. My grandma taught in Waterford. My grandfather was a superintendent of Pontiac Public Schools. I’m a product of our public schools and I’ve got kids in our public schools. We are not doing right by our kids.

So first and foremost, the question was are we doing enough. Unequivocally, no. We’ve got to do better by our children and that means not punishing third graders who aren’t literate. It means wrapping them around with the supports they need so every child is literate. Tripling the number of literacy coaches. Having universal early childhood education so every child coming into kindergarten is ready to learn. And giving our heroes who go into public education the support that they need. We’ve got another crisis looming here
in Michigan and that is the fact that fewer and fewer people are going into education in the first place because the ranks of our teachers and para pros and counselors are just absolutely demoralized because of the continuous attacks. We’ve got to treat them with respect. Make sure that there’s not a teacher in the state that has to rely on the state for help to put money or put food on the table by you know signing up for the Bridge card. So we’ve got a lot of things to tackle.

But it also includes a weighted foundation allowance which I think goes to the heart of the part two of the question. You know study after study shows that kids in high poverty districts cost more to educate. And we have to make a greater investment. That means more nurses and social workers, smaller class sizes, literacy coaches. Those wrap around supports that I was talking about. Our historical funding in Michigan, we’ve got wealthy districts and we’ve got high poverty districts. And the high poverty districts, we’re spending less to educate kids that we know we should actually be making a greater investment in. So I don’t want to just move resources from one district to another. I want to make a greater investment in our kids’ schools by stopping the raids on the school aid fund. Just doing that alone, you could get about $700 million annually back into our education system. And having a weighted foundation allowance which will help us make sure we’ve got the supports for kids in the higher poverty districts. Because study after study tells you that that needs to be the case. I don’t think we need to study anymore. I think we’ve got to do right by our kids.

Sascha Raiyn: [10:15:24] Let me ask about testing, about accountability systems. They are often really focused on the socioeconomics as opposed to what’s really happening in schools.


Sascha Raiyn: [10:15:36] How would you weight? How would you use accountability systems in schools?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:15:41] There’s no question that we have to measure to see what’s working and what’s not working. I mean this is not just an experiment. This is about setting our kids up for a lifetime of health and wealth and opportunity or failing them and setting them up for you know the other trajectory. And that’s unconscionable. But we have to know what’s happening and to be able to measure. The standardized tests that our kids are taking and taking and taking aren’t being used to really make tweaks in the curriculum or in the teaching or in the investment in our schools. It’s being used as a tool of punishment. We’re over testing.

And so I believe there are better ways to analyze whether or not we have success. But less testing is a part of that. But testing the right things. Measuring the right things. Measuring growth as opposed to proficiency. I recognize that there’s a difference even though I think on the national level there’s been some debate what they mean.
But what we really know is that when a child comes into school versus the end of the school year, how much they’ve grown is really what tells you if what we’re doing in our schools is successful. And I think that’s got to be where we focus.

Christy McDonald: [10:17:03] Gretchen, are you suggesting that we should be changing the standardized testing? We’ve already gone from the MEAP to the M step. Are you suggesting another change?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:17:13] No, I think that we’ve got to have a stable test. We’ve got to have the same test so that we can have longitudinal ability to look at whether or not what we’re doing is working. This changing the test every year is making everyone crazy. And it’s giving us no data from which to really analyze what’s happening. It’s making it harder on our children. It’s making it harder on our educators. And it’s not helping parents assess what’s happening either. So I think we have to have a commitment to one test and keep it for a longer time than a legislature that comes in and out. But we also need to do less testing. I think that you can do less testing and get more data with a stable test that will help us make sure we’re getting the results that we need.

Christy McDonald: [10:18:00] Sascha talked a little bit about accountability. Let me ask you this. Should the state be making school closure decisions? The Michigan Department of Education. Should we be at that level, that they’re making the decisions of what schools should be closed down not based on achievement.

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:18:14] Well, you know when the governor went forward and started the process of trying to close schools, you have to ask yourself what is the remedy here. The first and only question I think that we should be asking around education is how are the children doing. And I don’t know that that question gets asked enough when it comes to decisions that are made around education.

The thought that you punish families by closing down the option that they have, that that’s going to somehow produce a better result is completely backward thinking. When you look at states that are turning around districts, they put more resources in. They don’t abandon families. They don’t make it harder for them to find education for their children. They improve the education system. They double down on it. It’s not just a matter of putting more dollars into it. It’s also doing things differently. You know assessing what works and what doesn’t and getting to work. Rolling up your sleeves and making the changes that we need to.

But this thought that you just close districts that aren’t meeting our expectations is completely backwards. It leaves people without options. And that’s the worst-case scenario.

Christy McDonald: [10:19:31] Let’s talk a little bit about Detroit public school’s community districts. Steve.
Stephen Carmody: [10:19:34] Obviously Detroit has the largest public-school district in the state, recently released a facilities report saying that it would cost half a billion dollars to bring the districts’ school buildings up to current standards. But the state law gets in the way of that. It won’t let the district borrow money to do those types of renovations. What should Lansing do here? Should Lansing make it easier for the district to borrow money? Or should Lansing step up and help pay that very large bill?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:20:03] I think that’s an important and great question. When I was in the legislature, I introduced year after year the ability to open up the purposes for which sinking funds can be used. It’s such a limited purpose and there are so many districts that have balances. Now I don’t know what Detroit public schools’ circumstances are on that front in particular. So I don’t know if this would have helped alleviate that. But I’ve been throwing solutions on the table for a long time. I’ve been in the minority and unable to get them signed into law but that will change after this election. I believe we’ve got to give districts some flexibility to raise the revenue if they can. But it’s on the state to ensure that every child has a good facility in which to learn. That the quality of the facility has a direct impact on the quality of education that’s happening within in.

I do believe ultimately the role is of our state government to ensure every child in this state has a great public school education. Despite what the federal court said, despite what Bill Schutte and Governor Snyder say, I believe every child in this state has a constitutional right to literacy. I believe you have a birthright to a good education. And it includes having a great teacher in your classroom, having facilities that promote the kind of learning that today’s day and age requires. All of these are pieces of that. And until we get that right, nothing else matters. I mean there are things that matter. I guess that’s an overstatement. But until we get that right, we’re not going to realize the real economic possibilities in this state because we’re not getting the core, the backbone of our society. It’s not strong enough. And it’s hurting our ability to draw people into our state. It’s hurting our ability to lift people out of poverty within our state. And it’s holding families back.

Stephen Carmody: [10:22:03] But how much should taxpayers in Grand Rapids and Mount Pleasant up in the UP contribute to the quality of Detroit public schools? Should that just be something that the citizens of Detroit have to take care of? Or is it something because it is such a large bill that does have to be spread out at least somewhat across the state?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:22:21] Well, you know, we all have an interest in educating all the children of this state. No child picks what family, what school district, what zip code they’re born into. But every one of them deserves a great education to level the playing field. And we all benefit when we are that state. If we could say come to Michigan because our public schools are the best, everyone in Michigan benefits when that happens.
We’re at risk of losing another congressional seat. Our population is not growing at the same clip that other states are and it’s hurting all of us when that happens. So this is a statewide responsibility. This is a statewide necessity. We all hurt when people in Flint can’t drink their water. We’re all paying a price for that. Not nearly as dear a price as the people of Flint are obviously. But every one of us is. These are core investments that are the foundation and dinner table issues that families across Michigan are worried about, that businesses across Michigan are worried about.

One of the things that I’ve seen in the last few weeks that’s given me some hope that we can pull the business sector that hasn’t really been at the table around education issues is watching the Detroit Chamber and SBAM come to a coalition with teachers to figure out how do we get education right in Michigan. It’s long overdue. We’re failing generations of Michigan kids right now. And we get one shot to educate them and we’ve got to do it right, all the kids in Michigan.

Christy McDonald: [10:24:00] Hassan.

Hassan Khalifeh: [10:24:01] Do you think Michigan should make reforms to laws regarding how charter schools are governed and funded?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:24:07] I do. I do. You know I was not a fan of charter schools when they first came on the scene. I opposed lifting the cap on them. Michigan is an outlier when you look at other states in the nation that have charter schools. So many of ours are for profit. There are not enough accountability measurements written into the law. The whole theory behind charter schools was that they would be untethered to the traditional oversights and so they would be able to innovate and have better results. But after decades of this, we now have seen they don’t necessarily have better results. Sure, some have had some success but as a general rule, they’re on par with public schools and so it’s not a great quality choice that we’re giving families in education in Michigan.

So, yeah, we need to have accountability and charters that aren’t working, shouldn’t be in siphoning taxpayer dollars out of our public schools and they should not be in existence. And especially when 84% of them have a for profit motivation, we have a duty to hold them accountable. Not just to taxpayers but most importantly for the kids that are attending them.

Hassan Khalifeh: [10:25:23] So then you don’t think that funds allocated for public schools should be used to fund charter schools?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:25:30] That’s not what I said. What I said was that we have a duty to make sure that our kids are getting well educated. Period. No matter what school they are in. That is on us as a state to ensure that every child is getting the education that they need. And if a charter school is not performing, they shouldn’t be in business. We have to know if they’re performing and that’s why holding them to accountable standards, making them transparent and
showing that they’ve got qualified teachers in the classroom, ensuring that they’re not picking and choosing what students they provide education to. These are important oversights that the state has a role in and should have a role in. Charters have given some families a good option but by and large, ones that aren’t working are just siphoning resources out of the traditional public schools and putting money in their pockets. And that’s wrong.


Sascha Raiyn: [10:26:27] What can the state do to make preschool and childcare options more accessible and available and affordable?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:26:36] Um hum. One of the things that we have proposed in my jobs in the economy plan is drawing down more resources from the federal government. Right now we could be giving tax breaks to families for childcare and we’re not. We could expand early childhood education which starting our kids off as four-year-olds would help alleviate some of that. There are a lot of different things that are available, even from the federal government, that we’re not making use of here in Michigan.

One of the things that I think was so disheartening in recent weeks, you know Governor Snyder signed into law the bill about Medicaid work requirements. Taking healthcare away from a lot of people in our state. Chipping away at what I think is the best part of what’s happened in the last eight years. There’s a lot that I’m unhappy about but when he and I worked on that, I was really proud of that. I know that that was important to him. But the legislature sent him this work requirement bill and he signed it in and it’s not really about getting people to work. It’s about taking healthcare away. Because if it was about getting people to work, it would be giving people more opportunities for skills training. It would be leveling the barriers like childcare for families. It would be focused on making sure everybody’s got transportation to get to work. And that’s not what they did. They just took healthcare away from people.

And so young families, families with young kids, are struggling. The cost of healthcare and child care eats up more and more of our family budgets and that’s what’s holding people back from getting ahead and that’s why I think that the state utilizing our schools, to make that a place where kids can start earlier, that giving parents tax breaks so that they can get some relief for the crazy costs of childcare is a part of that as well.


Sandra Svoboda: [10:28:37] Well, we’ve talked about K12 education. You just talked about early childhood and childcare. Let’s turn to higher education. Do you believe that the cost of higher education in Michigan is cost prohibitive now? And if so, what would you as governor have the ability and wherewithal and agenda to do about it?
Well, it is. I mean it just is. When I went to Michigan State University, the taxpayers I think picked up about 70% of the cost of my education. And it was on me and my family to come up with the rest. Now it’s just about flipflopped. And we’ve had this mindset in the last 20 years that the only way to a career, an honorable career that you can make a good living in is through a four-year degree. And so we’ve kind of pushed this mantra out there and stigmatized other paths and now we’re paying a price for it. Because we created this assumption and then we cut out people’s ability to afford it. So now here in Michigan, the state that used to have the most skilled workforce on the planet, we have too few people in four-year degrees. We have too few people in two-year degrees. We’ve got too few people in the trades in Michigan.

Yes, I believe that it’s critical that we open up all those paths. So one of the pieces of my plan is the My Opportunities scholarship which is a path to a two-year degree, a debt free two-year degree for every Michigander. We can that kind of investment toward bringing down the cost of a four-year degree and also opening up paths into the skilled trades. We’ve got to make it real, make it affordable for people to pursue whichever is their path. There is honor. You can make a darn good living in the trades. You can make a good living, we’re looking for nurses in Michigan. I mean I know in the paper today the anticipated shortage of sales reps, of truck drivers, of nurses, I mean of all these walks. There’s a good living to be made in this state but we’ve got to help people get the skills so that they can get into those better paying jobs.

Just a quick follow-up so everyone will think wow, we can all get a two-year degree. How are we all going to pay for that?

Yeah, so it’s actually not enormously expensive. When you crunch the numbers, we’ve looked at it. It’s about $100 million a year. Right now in our Rainy Day Fund, I mean we’re socking money away when we should be making those investments in ourselves. I’m not saying we just pull the money out.

So you take the money from the Rainy Day Fund for that?

I think when you’ve got a $50 billion budget, $100 million is a small piece of what I think is in the budget to pay for this and I think we would find fantastic return on that kind of an investment.

I spoke with a young man from Grand Rapids not long ago. He’s a dishwasher. He takes care of his mother. A young man who wants to become an electrician. The thing that’s standing in his way is the $6,000 that it takes to go to the community college and get the skills he needs. We need electricians. You can make a really good living as an electrician in Michigan. You can be your own boss. You can make $60, 70,000 a year. But he doesn’t have the $6,000 to get those skills. We want him to make a good living in
Michigan. We want him to take care of his family. We want him to be a good taxpayer too with a great job.

So this is the kind of short-term problem that we’ve created in Michigan that we can fix pretty quickly. But we’ve got to make that investment. It’s such an enormous return on the investment for the state and for the taxpayer that it’s foolish not to do it.

Christy McDonald: [10:32:34] Okay. Before we turn to some more policy specific questions, I want to ask about the workings of Lansing. You know Michigan’s term limit will cause mass turnover. How challenging do you think the loss of institutional knowledge will be? And as governor, how will you and your staff prepare to work with new lawmakers?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:32:52] It’s enormously challenging. Governor Milliken gave a speech on Mackinac Island maybe 12, 13 years ago. He said there’s no other walk of life where less experience is a prerequisite for getting the job. You never want the freshest neurosurgeon out of medical school to be the first one to do your brain surgery. I mean this is important that we have institutional memory, that we’ve got people who understand the role of the legislature is to be a check and balance on the executive office. And vice versa. We’ve got to work together. These are co-equal branches of government.

It was funny. Not too long a woman said to me if you win this race, you’ll have two months off between the election and the swearing in. And I said oh, you’re cute. But that’s not how it works. The day after the election is the first hardest day of next four years. It’s when you pull back the curtain on state government and find out what you’re really dealing with. It’s when you start a transition. It’s when you start the process of determining department heads, finding great, qualified people that represent the great diversity of this state and have an empowered seat at the table. These are all critical parts of what will happen after the election.

But one of the more critical things that needs to be done is building relationships with the term limited legislature. People are in and out of there so quickly. The legislature is not a group of employees for the governor. Even when the governor’s party controls everything, I think we’ve seen that over the last eight years. They are a co-equal branch of government. There needs to be quadrant meetings with the four leaders of the four caucuses. The Republicans and Democrats in both the house and the senate. Those used to happen monthly. They don’t happen anymore. They never happened when I was the leader, those first four years of the Snyder administration. These are critical pieces to working with the legislature.

You know one of the things that I want to fix is the roads. My infrastructure package fixes roads. It fixes the lead pipes that are delivering our drinking water. It will lay conduit to get us all connected to highspeed broadband so we can keep our edge in mobility here in Michigan. I’m going to need the legislature to help me. So I’m determined to build relationships very quickly.
To work with them, to try to whip the votes. And sometimes you can’t get something done in the legislature, you go straight to the people. I’m prepared to do that as well. But first thing is trying to make sure that we’re working together. I believe there’s a lot of opportunity to do that.

Christy McDonald: Speaking of roads, we’re going to get to that, roads and infrastructure right now. So I’m going to turn it over to Riley for that first question.

Riley Beggin: Yeah, it’s a perfect segue. Anyone who drives our roads here in Michigan knows that they are really bad. A task force says the state needs $4 billion more just to maintain our infrastructure here. How should Michigan pay to fix roads, bridges and water systems?

Gretchen Whitmer: You know when I was in the legislature I was negotiating with the governor and Republicans to put a long-term road fix, to do it. To finally get it done. And I took a lot of tough votes during that time. I was the Senate Democratic leader and my colleague on the other side of the aisle, Randy Richardville, we put up votes to get a real fix. It was in perpetuity and it actually was big enough to solve the problem. The governor could not get the House of Representatives to even take that vote. And so it failed and then they cobbled together that ridiculous proposal that everyone voted down because it did too many things. It touched too many pieces of the budget. And the people didn’t trust that the money was actually going to go where it needed to go.

That’s why I’ve led with an infrastructure package. Because everywhere I go people tell me the cost of fixing their car because the state government is not getting the roads fixed. The average Michigander is spending like $580 a year to fix their car. The average Detroiter I think it’s like $860 a year to fix their car because our roads are so bad. It’s not a Republican or a Democratic issue. We’re all paying for lack of leadership on this front.

So my road package is not just about roads. It does these other pieces of critical infrastructure. But I would fund it through perhaps some of these mechanisms that I’ve cast votes on during my time in the legislature. My commitment is that there will be $2 billion built into the budget next year, if I win this election, that will draw down a billion dollars from the federal government and put us in a position to throw shovels in the ground right away and start fixing the problem.

Now I’ve run a lot of commercials about the roads and I’ve got a tagline that apparently cut through to some of the noise because people repeat it to me all the time. But I didn’t create that. It is reflective of the frustration that people in our state have. The roads are the most obvious failure of state government. That’s how people talk about them and I think it shows why it’s so important that we fix it.
Riley Beggin: [10:38:00] You mentioned those mechanisms that you suggested in the legislature. For people who maybe weren’t watching that at that time, could you talk a little bit about what those mechanisms are?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:38:07] I mean so the governor proposed all sorts of user fees and those were all pieces of it. The legislature could look very different next year. The environment could be very different next year. That’s why I think it’s important to tell you what my commitment is but all the different pieces of it may change based on how the environment changes.

Riley Beggin: [10:38:26] Okay. We’re going to talk a little bit about Flint. As the recovery efforts continue there, what have you learned from the situation and how would that inform what you do as governor?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:38:37] Well, the thing that I’ve learned from the situation is that budget decisions are not just numbers on a balance sheet. Those are people’s lives that get impacted. It’s a statement of our values, the state budget. To use the Emergency Manager Act to take away self-governance from communities across our state and then make decisions based solely on dollars and cents, the people of Flint have paid the worst price for that. But we need to be honest. In 2014, 50% of African Americans in our state were under some sort of an emergency manager. There are racial implications here that we have to talk about, address and fix.

There’s also the fact that our government failed in the worst way. For two-and-a-half years, children in Flint brushed their teeth every night with water that was hurting them. For two-and-a-half years they were dismissed. Our Attorney General didn’t go in and do his job. Our governors, people were saying oh, just relax. It’s insulting and dangerous. And it still hasn’t been remedied. I hear the governor say we’ve fixed it. We’re the comeback state.

I was in church in Flint last Sunday and a woman rolled up her sleeve and showed me this horrible rash on her arm. She said her kids’ arms are worse. We haven't done our job yet to fix it.

There are 71 other communities in our state that have higher lead levels in their water than Flint does right now. PFAS is in 20 communities. We’re the Great Lakes State and we have almost a hundred communities that can’t drink their tap water. That’s not the Michigan that I’m proud to be from. That’s not the Michigan that is going to lead the world.

I want to create a department of the Great Lakes and Fresh Water that task one will be getting justice and clean water for the people of Flint. It’s going to be eliminating corporate threats to our fresh water. We have 21% of the world’s fresh water and we’ve got a pipeline going through the Straits of Mackinac and a company that’s just gotten authority to pull more and more water out of our ground. We’ve got to get the best experts overseeing our drinking water and I’m going to have a clean drinking water ombudsman at
the cabinet level. That’s how important it is that I think we move on this and make it a priority.

Christy McDonald: [10:41:20] Water quality was going to be the next part of our conversation. Steve, is there something that you want to add to that coming out of some of the questions and answers that Gretchen gave?

Stephen Carmody: [10:41:28] Well, it is a big question and the Great Lakes are a critical resource for the state of Michigan and you did touch on somewhat what you plan to do to address water issues in general. But I want to stay with the lakes in particular. You mentioned Line 5. What else are you looking at that you’ll have to do as governor to safeguard the quality of our Great Lakes?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:41:50] Well one of the things that I think we need to do is to convene and create a real caucus with some muscle to bring to bear pressure on Washington, D.C. We can’t unilaterally control the federal government but what we can do is get every congressional member and every governor of all the Great Lake states and all the states that rely on the Great Lakes and create a caucus that will have some might. Because every time Donald Trump introduces a budget that cuts oversight funding for our Great Lakes, we need to be active, rolling up our sleeves.

We’ve got to eliminate the threat of invasive species to our Great Lakes. We’ve got to eliminate the threat of withdraws from our Great Lakes. I read not long ago that part of the Scott Walker Foxconn plan, you know the package, the incentive package they created, included withdraws from Lake Michigan. This is the kind of threat that I think we as the Great Lake State have a duty to lead that effort. And it should be an international effort. You know reaching out to our partners in Canada and Justin Trudeau. This is something that defines who we are. It defines our borders. It defines our psyche. But it’s also as the climate continue to change, something that we have got to be leaders on. And so bringing to bear that kind of pressure and pushing Washington, D.C. This kind of caucus could push forward on the Soo Locks as well which is a huge investment that we’ve got to make as a state. It’s a huge part of our national economy and our state economy.


Riley Beggin: [10:43:40] What are your plans for the future of Line 5?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:43:44] Here’s what I know. Line 5 just avoided I think a catastrophe with that latest anchor strike. But it’s a matter of time. Pipelines don’t last forever. That one is way beyond what anyone anticipated when then put it in. I think it’s time to get the oil out of the Great Lakes. So on day one, I will file to enjoin the easement that Enbridge has through the Straits of Mackinac and I will see it through. We will be up against a company that has millions and millions of reasons to delay and keep that in there as long as they can. We cannot wait. And we can’t wait for a tunnel to be built either. We have to get the threat out of the water now or as quickly as legally possible. That’s why I
am absolutely committed to seeing it through, doing everything we have to do through the courts to shut that down.

Christy McDonald: [10:44:40] What is your solution for the delivery of that petroleum product then? If you don’t think that there should be a tunnel, are you looking at trucking? Or what is the solution then to move a resource that people use?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:44:49] I think that there are a number of possibilities, frankly. I mean whether it’s shipping it over the water which is not idea or it’s on trucks. The UP has got exorbitant energy prices. We have to acknowledge that and we have to help people get the energy we need. But by and large, Line 5 just runs through Michigan. It just runs through Michigan. It goes from Canada to Canada. It’s not supplying energy by and large to people in our state. We bear all the risks and a foreign company gets all the benefit from it. It’s a crazy risk to be taking. I say we move forward on shutting it down. And we work on ensuring that Upper Peninsula Michiganders have low cost energy available to them. I think we can address that on a number of fronts.


Hassan Khalifeh: [10:45:44] You mentioned PFAS already. I wonder exactly how do you intend to combat water contamination caused by industrial chemicals like PFAS?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:45:55] Well I think first and foremost we get experts leading our departments in Michigan. No cronies, no buddies and certainly lobbies of BP heading up our environmental quality and DNR departments. Second, it’s a complicated issue. There is no easy, quick fix. That’s what’s so scary about it because it’s devastating. The potential problems that people are going to face because of PFAS but we’ve got to serious about this. These bases where a lot of this has happened, it’s on the feds to pay to fix it, to remedy this. In some cases, we might not be able to fix it and that’s what’s so scary. They’ve got to provide clean drinking water for people who own property that is now less valuable and that can’t produce water coming out of their taps that they can consume. I don’t know that there’s an easy fix but we’ve got to get to work doing it. We can’t pretend it’s not happening. We can’t pretend that this isn’t a real threat to individuals in our state but to our state as a whole as well.

Christy McDonald: [10:47:06] Okay. We’re going to move on to some topics on immigration. Hassan.

Hassan Khalifeh: [10:47:10] Governor Snyder established the Michigan Office for New Americans in 2014 to attract and retain global talent. He declared June as Immigrant Heritage Month this year. Exactly how do you plan to attract more families to come to Michigan given that we might lose a congressional seat due to population decline?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:47:33] Well immigration is so fundamental to who we are, who I think we are, as Americans, to what we were founded on. It is fundamental to our
state as well. You know Michigan is the place people used to come to from around the world for opportunity. My in-laws came from Kentucky and Tennessee and Alabama like a lot of people did. By you know people came from Lebanon to Dearborn. People came from Finland to the Upper Peninsula. From Holland to the west side of Michigan. And on and on and on. And that’s why we’ve got this rich diversity and such wonderful culture here in Michigan.

But you know the Trump administration has really scared the heck out of people. The Trump administration I believe is unconstitutionally interpreting and using their authority, separating families and making this a less likely a place that people are coming. Young people enrolling in our universities, it’s plummeting and Canada’s has gone through the roof. We’re all paying a price for this.

And that’s why it’s on a governor to use their bully pulpit, to use every tool that they’ve got to say Come to Michigan. I’ve got your back. We’re going to protect you. We are going to fight back when we need to. We’re going to pull our troops out from the southern border, our National Guard troops. We’re going to sue the federal government and get the children that are in Grand Rapids right now reunited with their families. I mean a governor has an important role. I will acknowledge that the governor has done some good things on this front but we need to do more.


Hassan Khalifeh: [10:49:15] So then you would support the EB-5 visa program?


Christy McDonald: [10:49:20] Alright. Let’s move on to taxes and some tax incentives taking a look at the state. Riley.

Riley Beggin: [10:49:25] Many people in our audience wanted to know about taxes, insurance and finance issues. From our audience member John, do you believe that economic development deals with tax credits, incentives, etc. are necessary and useful for Michigan’s communities?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:49:39] It depends. You know very few of these questions are going to be yes or no. But I’ll say this, it’s important for states to have economic development toolboxes. However, in the use of those, they have to have real guidance. They have to be promoting some sort of an important public purpose. Whether it is creating investment in something that we value, like Brownfield redevelopment or historic building renovation or it is an important public purpose like using development in neighborhoods that desperately need economic activity. If we a convince a grocer to come into a
food desert. These are the types of important public purposes that I envision when I talk about that.

But I think the public has a right to know what they are. We have to have real transparency. And we have to ensure that they’re available to people of all walks. People that have been cut out. Not just the big guys but people who have never left, who are trying to do some good in their community. Those are important public purposes in my book.

One of the things that I’m always concerned about though whenever any policy is pushed in Lansing is what are the consequences of it. What is the foregone price that we’re going to pay? When tax credits are given for stadiums and it comes out of the Detroit public schools, I voted no. Because that’s something that is much more important public purpose in my mind. And there was not a good answer for how do we fill that hole. That’s the kind of 40,000-foot wave that I look at tax incentives. But I think most importantly, the public has a right to know. The ability for people to not disclose what the terms are, like when I talked about that Foxconn one with the Lake Michigan water, I mean these are fundamental to who we are. These are our resources.

Riley Beggin: [10:52:00] Would you suggest some sort of transparency? What would you recommend for a transparency process in that regard?

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:52:07] Well, I think looking at the MADC. I mean they’ve historically not been held at the same standards that other departments have. I know that trade secrets are protected. I get that. That’s not what I’m talking about here. But when we’re talking about giving away taxpayer dollars, the public has a right to know. So what exactly does that look like? I mean we’re so far behind the world when it comes to transparency and ethics. I mean we’ve got miles to make up. We can do it relatively quickly though because other states are doing a heck of a lot better than we are in Michigan. The executive office should be open to FOIA. The whole branch. You should be able to search all of their documents. Make it easy on the press, not harder. Between the time when I started in the legislature and when I ended, they stopped televising and putting online all the work that we were doing and the votes that we were taking. That’s wrong. We should be using technology to make it easier for people to access their government.


Christy McDonald: [10:53:08] Steve.

Stephen Carmody: [10:53:096] The economy is doing well now but, in all likelihood, there probably will be a recession sometime in the next four years. How will you as governor prepare the state to weather that storm?
The most recession proof thing we can do is make sure our population has the skills they need. When a recession hits, people that have greater skills are able to weather it better than those who don’t. That’s why my investment in us is at the top of the list. Making sure that everyone’s got a path to a high wage skill. These are important. We cannot control the national and international global environment. We can prepare and preparation comes from building up Michigan people and making sure that we’re read and that we are in jobs that pay well and that translate no matter how the winds blow globally.

Is raiding the Rainy Day Fund before it starts raining a good idea?

Well, Steve, you know it’s raining for people in Flint. What does that mean? Does building up and having a great credit rating mean much if you have a city full of families that still doesn’t trust the water coming out of their taps? Does it mean much if your roads are turning to gravel? Does it mean much if you’ve got a hundred communities that can’t drink their water?

My answer’s no. I’m not suggesting that we use that to fund all the priorities I’m talking about because it’s onetime funding and we have to build in long-term solutions and be honest about what it’s going to take to do that. But to your point about the rainy day and an economic possibility of recession in the future, I think we’ve got to get serious about making the long-term commitments and investments in us so that we can weather a storm.

Sascha, you have a question about auto insurance?

Yes. Debbie and Ray in our audience want to know what your plans are for auto insurance and specifically how you might lower the rates?

Yeah. There’s no question that the cost of auto insurance for Michiganders generally is tougher than the rest of the country, but Detroiters are feeling it the worst. I hear about it everywhere I go. People say my car note is a half of what my auto insurance is. That’s rent. That’s childcare. That’s a lot of different things that are going toward just the bottom line of an insurance company.

There are a few things that I think we can and need to do on auto insurance to give people real relief. I’m only interested in real relief, not talking points and not a temporary solution. We’ve got to have a long-term solution and that comes from a couple of different places.

First and foremost, the no-fault system was created to give people that are catastrophically injured the care they need for the rest of their lives. I think that’s important. I also think that part of their goal was to bring down litigation costs and I think that’s important too. But what we have right now is a system where the insurance industry doesn’t have to pay claims on time. That costs all of us more. Where they’re not penalized when they do that in bad faith. Where policyholders aren’t necessarily treated fairly, where costs
are different depending on who’s paying. That’s not right either. So we do have to have some reasonable cost controls.

But we’ve also got to make sure that we’ve got an insurance commissioner who is a consumer protection advocate. It would be nice if we had an attorney general who was as well. The insurance commissioner is appointed by the governor and so that’s one thing that I know unilaterally we can help a bit. But we’re going to need some legislation.

Here’s how I look at it though. There are a couple of really important pieces. Number one, the excuse that the insurance industry uses to increase rates all the time is that they need to build more money into the catastrophic claims fund. But here’s the rub, we’re not allowed to know how much money is in there. Experts peg it between $20 and 40 billion. And yet we’re not allowed to know. So how can we challenge the increasing rates if we don’t know how much money is actually in that fund. So transparency and suing if we have to get it is something I’m committed to.

Then also the solution I believe needs to incorporate a prohibition on redlining and the discrimination that happens in rate setting. You know marital status doesn’t have anything to do with your driving record. Where you live, your zip code, your education level, your credit rating. These things should not be a part of the determination on insurance rates. And they are right now. And that’s got to be a part of the solution too.

I know that we can bring rates down but for too long we’ve had one side writing the rules and that’s going to change and I want to sign a bill into law within the first six months of next year. Real relief.


Sandra Svoboda: [10:58:28] Interested in talking about transit, especially as our state is so diverse in terms of urban, suburban, rural areas. I’d like to hear a little bit about transit policy for the entire state and also because southeast Michigan specific with the RTA issues.

Gretchen Whitmer: [10:58:43] Yeah, so when I was in the legislature, I supported the RTA. I took the vote that helped get it moving so that the region could put it before voters. I was sad to see it not get passed and I was sad to see you know the more recent discussions about it. One of the things that I know is that if the state got back to fixing roads, perhaps that wouldn’t be the top issue that is keeping some leaders in the region from being able to consider this as a real necessity and really look to solving this problem. I know that there are people that live in the city of Detroit who work, whether it’s in Oakland County or in Romulus that need to take a couple of buses to get there. It’s a real hardship for people when they are applying for jobs because the question of how are you going to get here is asked.
We’ve got bad roads. We’ve got crazy cost of insurance. And lack of transit for people that is solid and reliable. That’s keeping hardworking people from getting into good paying jobs. Regional transit is very important. It is something that I do support. And it’s something that as governor, I’m going to work with the leaders of the county and Mayor Duggan and the county execs to get it done.

Christy McDonald: [11:00:15] Alright. You talked a little bit about transparency earlier. We have some specific questions on that. Riley.

Riley Beggin: [11:00:13] What’s your stance on the ballot measure to create an independent citizens redistricting commission? And if you oppose the voters not politicians initiative, what solution would you suggest to address gerrymandering?

Gretchen Whitmer: [11:03:23] Well, you don’t need to ask me part two because I’m going to support it. I’m a yes vote. When I was in the legislature, I saw every day the disservice that this partisan redistricting has because we are a state that goes back and forth. We’re 50/50. You can look at every election statewide and determine that. And right now the Republicans have a super majority in the senate because of the way that they’ve drawn the lines. And that means that our voices are not equal. That means two-thirds of the senate gets decided in a Republican primary and sets the agenda for all of us. Every voice needs to be respected and that’s why we’ve got to take redistricting away from the legislature. I would say that if it was Democratic control. I would say that if I really thought that we were going to flip everything in one fell swoop because it’s the right thing to do.

Christy McDonald: [11:01:20] And Sandra has some more specifics on FOIA.

Sandra Svoboda: [11:01:22] And state transparency recently of lowest rating among the states in a study that was done. Speaking a little bit more about the Freedom of Information Act and campaign finance disclosure. How would you bring greater support, bring in greater transparency to state efforts?

Gretchen Whitmer: [11:01:39] Yeah, so first and foremost, I mean unilaterally we could open up the executive branch to FOIA and ensure that there is real notice and real searchable capabilities online. I do believe that we should have a moratorium. That there should be a five-year waiting period before a legislator can go out and make a living as a lobbyist. You know I think there are conflict of interest laws that are on the books and observed in many states that are not here in Michigan. The public and the press need tools so that they can get information.

The fact that we just found out the press person during the Flint water crisis that everyone thought had been fired is still on the state dime doing trainings for public relations. I mean that’s ludicrous. And the fact that we’re just finding out tells you I think how difficult it is to really understand and ask questions and scrutinize what’s happening.
We deserve to know. We deserve to know. The public does. And we have a right and a duty to make sure that they can.

Christy McDonald: [11:02:49] We just have a few minutes left here. So we’re going to tackle one more issue. Marijuana. Steve.

Stephen Carmody: [11:02:52] This fall Michiganders vote on legalizing recreational marijuana. What’s your thoughts on that? And if it passes, how would you as governor make sure that the rollout works?

Gretchen Whitmer: [11:03:04] The second part of that question is really important and I’m grateful that you asked it. I’m going to be a yes vote on the initiative. In 2008 after years of trying to get stem cell research permitted in Michigan, Joe Schwarz, a Republican and I decided with a big group of people that we needed to go straight to the voters and get it passed. That same year medical marijuana was on the ballot as well. I’ll tell you, I supported both. It was long before it was fashionable to support any marijuana changes.

But I supported both because when I was in my first term in the legislature my mom got sick and died of brain cancer and I took care of her at the end of her life. That experience is what drove me to push for stem cell research here in Michigan so we could be in the race for cures. But also to embrace medical marijuana so that she could have had some relief. She died before it passed but I think that was really important at the time.

And our leaders failed the people. Our leaders frequently ignore the will of the public. Like when we rejected that emergency management law, they just pushed it through again with a gimmick to override the will of the people. That happened on medicinal marijuana. They did not, Mike Cox and Bill Schuette never wanted to make it successful and so they did not promulgate rules to ensure that it was and the will of the people was respected.

That’s why part two of your question is really important. When this passes, because I believe it will, I will take it very seriously and push forward to make sure that we do it right. So it stays out of the hands of kids, to ensure that the dollars actually go where they’re supposed to, into our infrastructure and our schools. To promulgate rules so there’s not this huge grey area that gets in the way of effectuating the will of the people. We have a duty to respect the people when they vote and to carry forward their wishes. That’s something I’m absolutely committed to.

Stephen Carmody: [11:05:06] Any concerns about the potential social effects of legalized recreational marijuana?

Gretchen Whitmer: [11:05:13] Oh absolutely. There’s always concern and the biggest concern is insuring that it stays out of the hands of kids, you know as their brains are developing. But there is so much unknown around marijuana because it’s been illegal for so long that the studies haven’t moved forward the way that
we really should have. Some of the stuff they’re doing across the world is really encouraging. It can be used as an exit drug. We’ve got an opioid epidemic here in Michigan. I think that there are so much unknown but certainly that creates a lot of concerns as well.

Christy McDonald: [11:05:50] Alright. We want to wrap up with some fun questions. I know this has all been a lot of fun. [laughter] But we’re going to wrap up with just some really quick fun questions from everyone. So who is going to start us off? I think Sascha, you are going to start us off.

Sascha Raiyn: [11:06:04] So we’d like to know what make and model you drive and people in your family drive? What are the cars in your life?

Gretchen Whitmer: [11:06:11] Okay. So I drive a Ford Expedition. It is enormous but I’ve got three stepsons, two daughters and a husband. I like it because I can get all my stuff and people in it. My husband drives a 10-year-old Yukon. It has a huge dent in the back because well, he had a mishap and that’s that. Yeah, I’ve always been a GM purchaser until I bought this Ford and I love my Ford Expedition and my husband loves his GM car so.


Sandra Svoboda: [11:06:45] What is your favorite Michigan food?

Gretchen Whitmer: [11:06:50] At the risk of sounding like I’m pandering, I love Vernors. I really do. My mom gave it to us when we were sick. We ate it with ice cream when we were celebrating. I mean Vernors is the thing and my sister is in from New York and is stocking up on Vernors too.


Hassan Khalifeh: [11:07:08] Just going back to the race a little bit. Can you think of an interesting or touching moment you came across with a voter along the campaign trail?

Gretchen Whitmer: [11:07:15] Yeah, so not long ago I was speaking with some kids at the Detroit Children’s Hospital. I was invited to come in and read. After we were done reading, I talked with them and their moms. One of the moms was trying to get her child to talk to me. She said tell her what you think is important. And here’s a child in a hospital gown and he said you know I want everyone to be able to read. And the 11-year-old chimed in and he said well I want everyone to have clean water. The enormity of sitting there with kids who are in the hospital, lobbying for literacy and water tells you how stressed out kids in Michigan are. I tell that story all the time because it really put a laser focus for me as a mom on the real issues we’ve got to solve quickly. Our education and the safety of our families in Michigan is paramount.

Christy McDonald: [11:08:09] Riley,
Riley Beggin: [11:08:10] What book are you reading right now? What’s on your nightstand?


Stephen Carmody: [11:08:24] When you're not campaigning, what’s a good weekend? What do you like to do?

Gretchen Whitmer: [11:08:29] I like to hang out with my family. My kids are teenagers so they’re rarely up before I leave the house and so we facetime later on. I live near my dad. He’s got a pool so sometimes we’ll go over there and hang out by the pool or go to the water. I’m always drawn to the water.

Christy McDonald: [11:08:49] And what was your first job?

Gretchen Whitmer: [11:08:50] I used to mow lawns and babysit, but my first job where I got a paycheck was at Burling Game Lumber on 28th Street in Grand Rapids. I was a cashier. I wasn’t chopping down trees. [laughter]

Christy McDonald: [11:09:01] Alright. Well, that is going to conclude our conversation with Democratic candidate for governor, Gretchen Whitmer. Many thanks to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for its support. On behalf of the Detroit Journalism Cooperative, I’m Christy McDonald. Thanks so much for joining us. We appreciate it.


Christy McDonald: [11:09:18] Thank you for your time. I know that’s a long time.