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Sound Policy in a Time of Divided Government

By Michael Van Beek

Summary

Criminal justice, government transparency and occupational licensing are just three areas ripe for reform.

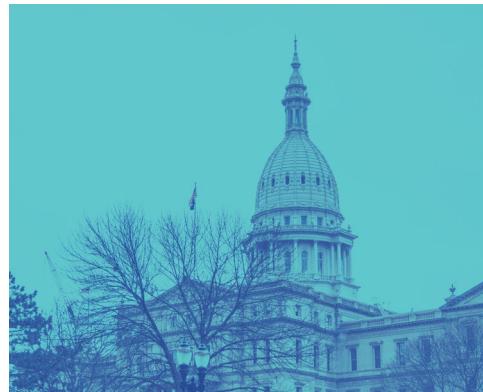
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Michigan's new bipartisan government is only a few months old, but the political debates are already in full swing. Early spring is tough on pavement, so no surprise, most of the arguing is about how to fund and fix Michigan's notoriously bad roads. Reforming car insurance, another perennial issue, consumes nearly all the rest of the oxygen available in Lansing. These two issues affect millions of Michiganders and are important in their own right. But don't let them overshadow other valuable policy reforms that are just as needed.

While debates about road funding rally partisans to their battle fronts, there are plenty of worthwhile reforms that have bipartisan support. The most promising of these is criminal justice reform. A consensus is growing that Michigan is overcriminalized and does not do enough to protect the rights of the accused or help former offenders get their lives back on track. Some reforms to address these concerns include eliminating civil asset forfeiture, raising the age for prosecuting an adult from 17 to 18 and making expunging minor offenses from one's criminal record automatic, rather than costly and time-consuming.

Another area ripe for reform is government transparency. Shining a light on the inner workings of government doesn't fix any problems by itself, but it does make identifying such problems a lot easier and discourages bad behavior, to boot. Michigan is one of only two states where not every branch of government is subject to a public records request law. That should be changed by opening the state Legislature and the governor's office to such a law. On a related note, the state should improve the transparency of its subsidiaries: county and municipal governments. School districts must follow robust transparency reporting laws and so should these other government entities.

In the midst of debates over how much money is needed, where and when, it is refreshing to consider reforms that won't cost a dime and can improve the lives of many Michiganders. Take the issue of occupational licenses. It used to be that about 5 percent of workers needed a state license to work — doctors, dentists, teachers. Today, it's about 20 percent and growing. The state needs to rethink this, as occupational licensing laws have been shown to do little to improve public health and safety. But they do raise the cost of becoming a carpenter, cosmetologist, and security guard, to name a few occupations. Paying fees, completing courses and



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passing exams cost too much time and money for many individuals, who are forced to give up on their preferred occupation.

The state should thoroughly analyze these licensing laws and remove ones that do little but make it harder for people to earn a living. Similarly, when a review shows that requiring a license is a good idea, the state should consider expanding the scope of practice for what licensees, such as nurses, are allowed to do.

A final policy area overdue for reform is corporate welfare — all the different programs the state runs to try to nudge the economy forward. This includes handing out grants to certain companies, giving special loans to others or reducing the tax burden on a particular business or industry. There aren't many things economists agree on, but the futility of these corporate welfare programs is one of them. Decades of economic research show they simply don't work: They are too small in size to have a meaningful effect, and there are as many misfires as there are successes. Taxpayers would get a much better bang for their buck if this money were redirected elsewhere. Michigan should give up this game and spend the hundreds of millions on roads instead.

These aren't the only proposals worth keeping an eye on: I've got more, but have run out of space. My colleagues at the Mackinac Center and I research and write about policy reforms that lawmakers should consider, and these are some of our top priorities for 2019. For a full listing and broader descriptions of each of these issues, see "Policy Recommendations 2019," available at www.mackinac.org/policy2019.

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