

MARCH/APRIL 2026

# IMPACT

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**MACKINAC  
IN THE  
MEDIA**

## The Washington Post

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"Michigan students deserve better than the governor's teachers union wish list."

*Molly Macek, Director of Education Policy*

## CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

### Michigan Should Embrace Zoning Reform, Reject Housing Subsidies

"Limiting what local governments can zone is not a strange concept."

*Jarrett Skorup, Vice President for Marketing and Communications*



**Michigan**

### Solar Expansion Prompts Cost, Reliability, and Local Control Concerns

"Solar energy has been pushed in Michigan for decades through mandates, tax incentives, and subsidies, yet it still provides only about 2% of the state's electricity."

*David Stevenson, Director of Energy and Environmental Policy*

## Washington Examiner

### Artificial Intelligence and the New Era of Government Transparency

"For the sake of transparency and public trust in government, elected officials should make AI-driven sunshine programs an immediate priority."

*Michael Reitz, Executive Vice President*

## The Detroit News

### School Boards Should Represent the Public, Not Silence It

"The Mackinac Center Legal Foundation is representing Hernden and Litkouhi in their legal actions. ... They highlight an ominous trend toward secrecy and intolerance for opposition – a trend coming from the very institutions that are charged with representing the public fully, honestly, and openly."

*Patrick Wright, Vice President for Legal Affairs*

## Washington Examiner

### Congress Should Stop Paying States

"The federal government has been paying for too much that ought to be left to states alone, and people ought to look to their state capitals when trying to make a difference on the next big domestic issue."

*James Hohman, Director of Fiscal Policy;  
Thomas Savidge, Research Fellow at the American Institute for Economic Research*



# On Housing, Local vs. State Control Is the Wrong Question

A battle in Lansing over affordable housing is morphing into a debate over the wrong question. Unless lawmakers understand what the argument is really about, we may lose a rare opportunity to get ahead of a problem with bipartisan cooperation. Liberty, not locality, is the question.

Michigan housing costs less overall than the national average, but we are losing our advantage. Michigan house prices roughly doubled over the last decade, a bigger increase than in most states and in most neighboring states. Michigan's price surge was the nation's fifth-highest in the last quarter measured by the Federal Housing Finance Agency.

The Mackinac Center favors a package of state House bills intended to ease upward pressure on housing prices. The legislation would limit the mandates and prohibitions local governments can impose on property owners and homebuilders. Over decades, many municipalities, townships, and counties have increased minimum lot and dwelling sizes, raised setback requirements, expanded parking space mandates, outlawed "mother-in-law" cottages, required onerous reviews, and taken myriad other steps that raise the cost of building, buying, and owning a home.

Those who oppose the bills call them an attack on "local control." But the heart of the matter isn't local control at all.

"Local control" is a rhetorical distraction. Dressing up "control" with the friendly modifier "local" shouldn't

Photo by Shutterstock

make us forget we are being controlled in the first place, or even feel better about it.

Choosing local control or state control does not by itself point us to pro-liberty policies.

The Revolutionary War-era farmer portrayed by Mel Gibson in the 2000 movie *The Patriot* referred to a classic observation about local officials when he said of King George, “Why should I trade one tyrant 3,000 miles away for 3,000 tyrants one mile away?”

The tyrannical monarch waged brutal war, and our elected local officials operate mostly via peaceful public processes. But that doesn’t mean local control means immunity from abuse and overreach.

Michigan has 15,000 local elected officials in 1,800 separate units of government that spend about \$60 billion in tax dollars. The officials regulate and restrict what we do with our property, our paychecks, our professions, our pastimes and even our parking, issuing around 500,000 pages of legally binding text. That’s a lot of control, even if it is local.

The heart of the matter is liberty, not proximity to those who govern us. What may we do with our own property?

The state has every legal authority to override local governments to protect the people and their rights. This is different from the relationship between the federal government and the states. Local governments were created by the states while states are sovereign entities that created the federal government.

Chief Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court Thomas M. Cooley was one of America’s foremost authorities on state constitutions. He called our local units of government “mere auxiliaries of the State Government in the important business of Municipal rule.”

The state’s supremacy over local governments is well recognized. It is why your city cannot restrict

your rights to gun ownership, speech, and religion. Your village cannot discriminate against you because of race, sex, disability, or sexual orientation. Your township cannot tax your income or your purchases. Your county cannot take away your right to farm.

The Michigan Municipal League, Michigan Townships Association, and other tax-funded lobbying groups oppose the affordable housing bills. They would have us frame questions in terms of local control vs. state control. They prefer that local governments, not the state, decide whether you may exercise certain property rights.

Civic-minded local officials see themselves as part of the American tradition of self-government. They’re not wrong when they say zoning can contribute to property values. But they should remember the tradeoff. To the extent zoning protects your property value, it comes at the cost of having neighbors exert collective control of your property.

The Mackinac Center frames legislative questions in terms of liberty. We ask if a bill constrains government power, protects individual and property rights, promotes economic freedom, and creates consistent, predictable rules. Our analysts believe the housing bills championed by Reps. Kristian Grant, D-Grand Rapids, and Joe Aragona, R-Clinton Township, score well by those measures. Gov. Whitmer has suggested she is supportive.

Housing costs are a major driver of personal financial stability (especially for young people), employment markets, population migration, and overall state strength. We can make affordable housing a decisive competitive advantage for Michigan by remembering that liberty trumps locality. ■



*Joe*

**By Joseph G. Lehman**

*President of the Mackinac Center*

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# WE SUPPORT FREEDOM AT THE HIGHEST COURT

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“If the tax bill was 100 bucks, would you still take the house?”

This was the question Justice Amy Coney Barrett asked the attorney representing Isabella County, Michigan, in a recent oral argument before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Mackinac Center staff made the trip to Washington, D.C., to witness arguments on February 25 in *Pung v. Isabella County* — a case that asks whether the government can disregard property value and take far more than the taxpayer owes.

In 2015, Isabella County foreclosed on the Pung family home over roughly \$2,000 in disputed property taxes that a state tribunal had already confirmed were exempt. The county — which had previously assessed the home at nearly \$200,000 — sold it for just \$76,000 and initially kept the proceeds, leaving the family with nothing.

The Supreme Court is now weighing whether the taking violated the U.S. Constitution and whether the Pungs are owed compensation for the equity they lost.

The Mackinac Center Legal Foundation filed an amicus brief in the case, offering Michigan-specific regulatory context to supplement the arguments already before the court. Its brief is the kind of targeted, substantive contribution that can sharpen a court’s understanding of how a ruling will play out on the ground.

Members of the court could place meaningful limits on how far governments may go when collecting delinquent taxes, particularly when the amount owed bears no resemblance to the value of the taking. Several justices joked about why the county didn’t first consider inspecting the house and taking something of comparable value — such as a Peloton bike — before moving to foreclose on the family home.

After the session closed, petitioning attorney Philip Lee Ellison, who led oral argument on behalf of the Pung family, spoke with Mackinac Center staffers on the steps of the Supreme Court about what our work did for the case.

“Mackinac Center did a really fantastic job writing about how Michigan-specific laws work,” Ellison said. “While I’m here on a Michigan case, I’m arguing

a nationwide rule. Mackinac gave us the opportunity to focus on the bigger picture.”

Being present mattered. Showing up, driving to Washington to stand alongside the families and attorneys fighting these battles, reflects something real about the Mackinac Center’s commitment to the people affected by these issues. Property rights aren’t abstractions. Violated rights cost the Pung family their home.

The court’s decision is expected by July. ■

“While I’m here on a Michigan case, I’m arguing a nationwide rule. Mackinac gave us the opportunity to focus on the bigger picture.”

– Philip L. Ellison, petitioning attorney



**By Jessica Wyeth**  
*Marketing Content Manager*

# 50 YEARS STRONG

## The Story of Al Taylor and Hart Enterprises



Photo by Al Taylor

Some achievements deserve to be celebrated loudly, and Hart Enterprises' turning 50 is one of them. The custom medical device company Al Taylor built in Sparta, Michigan, is more than a healthcare institution — it is a neighbor with a half-century of showing up for West Michigan. In communities where good opportunities have quietly disappeared, Hart Enterprises did something rare: It stayed. And it gave generations of workers a trade, a future, and a reason to put down roots.

As a businessman and a philanthropist, Al does not plan in quarters; he plans in generations. Al maintains a deep faith in the founding fathers and the Constitution. He believes we must protect liberty and pass opportunity on to future generations. His estate gift to the Mackinac Center for Public Policy is his way of doing that.

Al has been a friend of the Mackinac Center since the days of President Larry Reed. He knows people thrive when they have opportunity and are free to pursue it. That's why he has long championed our free-market approach to economic policy. Al supported our work on affordable and reliable energy, and — perhaps most passionately — our Legal Foundation, which stands up for ordinary people against government overreach and never charges a client a single dollar.

Al's interests extend well beyond public policy. He is an avid bow hunter and dedicated

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fisherman, so conservation is a way of life for him. In 2003 Al founded the Nimrod Society, a nonprofit dedicated to educating the public about the vital role hunters and anglers play in wildlife conservation. He serves as president of the organization and in 2020 endowed the Nimrod Education Center at Hillsdale College — creating a permanent home for courses, scholarships, and grants that connect the next generation to America's sporting and conservation heritage.

Bow hunting demands patience, precision, and an intimate knowledge of the natural world. Fishing offers something different: a quiet clarity that only comes with slowing down, reading one's surroundings, and trusting the process. Both pursuits reflect the same instincts that built a 50-year company — the ability to be still, to be ready, and to know when to act.

Fifty years of Hart Enterprises. Real careers. Real opportunity. A lifetime of principle. The Mackinac Center is proud to call Al Taylor a friend. ■



**By Nicole Irrer**

*Director of Advancement*

# HOW THE MACKINAC CENTER HELPED PUT HOUSING REFORM ON MICHIGAN'S AGENDA

Michigan's housing affordability challenges did not appear overnight. For much of the state's history, builders responded to demand, working under relatively simple rules that allowed communities to grow organically. Neighborhoods evolved naturally, and homes remained within reach for most residents. Much of the housing that defines Michigan's most beloved communities was built before today's complex zoning rules existed.

That reality has changed. Over time, layers of local zoning restrictions have made it increasingly difficult to build new housing. Minimum lot sizes, excessive setback requirements, parking mandates, and even minimum home size requirements make it illegal to build many types of homes in large parts of the state. At the same time, demographic trends — including smaller households and an aging population — mean

Michigan needs more housing units, even though the population is barely growing. The result is predictable: constrained supply and rising costs.

The Mackinac Center has been working with lawmakers to advance a bipartisan housing reform package now moving through the Michigan Legislature. We gave input on the bills, met with lawmakers, hosted two events, and repeatedly testified. The focus of the legislation is straightforward: Make it legal and feasible to build again.

The bills take several steps to reduce regulations that suppress housing supply. They would prevent local governments from banning duplexes and accessory dwelling units, allowing homeowners and builders to create the kinds of middle-class housing that once existed throughout Michigan communities. The





legislation also limits procedural obstacles that can delay projects for years, such as protest petitions and excessive requirements for studies. The package also reins in mandates on parking, setbacks, and minimum home sizes — all of which drive up costs without improving safety or quality of life.

Other states have enacted similar laws. From Texas and Florida to Oregon and Montana, lawmakers across the country recognize that restrictive local zoning can block housing construction and make communities less affordable.

While several housing proposals circulate in Lansing — including ideas centered on subsidies or government-directed development — the Mackinac Center stays focused on supply-side solutions. Subsidies may move a few projects forward, but they

cannot solve a statewide shortage if building remains illegal or excessively difficult.

Michigan's housing shortage is fundamentally a supply problem. Restoring affordability requires restoring the freedom to build. The reforms under consideration would move Michigan closer to that goal, ensuring that families, young workers, and future residents can once again afford to live and grow here. ■



**By Jarrett Skorup**  
*Vice President for Marketing  
and Communications*



Photo by Adobe Stock

# CAPCON GETS RESULTS

Michigan Boosts SNAP Security to Combat Fraud



Michigan's food stamp program saw a dramatic drop in fraud last year, on the heels of reporting from Michigan Capitol Confidential. Fraud should continue to decrease as the state rolls out reforms that CapCon repeatedly endorsed.

Michigan nearly halved its food stamp fraud from 2024 to 2025, according to a new state report.

The value of fraud reported in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program was \$7.7 million in 2025. That's just more than half the \$14 million reported for 2024.

That number should continue to drop as Michigan rolls out chip-enabled SNAP cards in June.

A Michigan Capitol Confidential investigation into the program in 2024 and 2025 revealed that reported SNAP fraud had increased by nearly 400% from 2023 to 2024. The state health department sent 738 new SNAP cards every day, CapCon reported, because criminals were stealing card information through skimmers installed in high-traffic areas such as grocery stores, gas stations, and liquor stores.

The state report credited the progress in fighting fraud to new technology. Agencies have deployed algorithms to detect compromised SNAP and other benefits accounts. Governments have also detected and seized 33 skimming devices. Another new process helped identify cloned point-of-sale terminals. The government also tracks

internet addresses on benefit applications to catch people living outside the state who apply for benefits.

About 1.4 million Michiganders swipe SNAP cards at around 10,000 retailers statewide to help buy groceries.

CapCon's investigation pushed the state to upgrade its SNAP cards, something that the private sector began doing in 2015. Legislators prominently quoted

our reporting during debates over food stamp fraud.

Later this year, Michigan will send new, upgraded SNAP cards that should deter thieves from stealing from Michigan's poorest residents.

Michigan is one of eight states that are upgrading or

have already upgraded SNAP cards. The others are Alabama, Arkansas, California, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, and Virginia.

Every dollar stolen by a criminal is money that doesn't reach a family in need.

While many newspapers run recycled content, CapCon completes original investigations and gets results. ■

“A Michigan Capitol Confidential investigation into the program in 2024 and 2025 revealed that reported SNAP fraud had increased by nearly 400% from 2023 to 2024.”



**By Scott McClallen**  
*Michigan Capitol Confidential*  
Reporter



# U.S. Education Secretary Linda McMahon Highlights Our Worker Freedom Campaign

A growing number of public employees in the United States are learning something their union never told them: They have a constitutional right not to join a union or pay for the political causes it promotes. The Mackinac Center's national My Pay, My Say campaign exists to make sure workers understand that right — and to give them the tools they need to exercise it.

That message recently received a major national boost when U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon released a video telling public school teachers about their right to resign from a union. The video promoted the Mackinac Center and the My Pay, My Say website. McMahon underscored the core principle behind our campaign: Workers should never be forced to fund political advocacy.

The recognition quickly translated into results. McMahon's endorsement drove nearly 30,000 people to the website. About 3,500 visitors downloaded opt-out forms to resign from their union. In just a few days, unions lost \$2.8 million in annual dues.

The Mackinac Center then amplified the message through a targeted digital campaign aimed primarily at teachers across the country. The results were striking. Roughly 300,000 people saw the advertising campaign. Tens of thousands clicked through, and more than a thousand commented on or shared the video.

These efforts continue to help government employees exercise their rights under the 2018 U.S. Supreme Court Janus ruling that public employees cannot





**By Jarrett Skorup**  
*Vice President for Marketing  
 and Communications*

be forced to join or fund unions, which are private political groups. Since that decision, public sector unions have lost more than \$4.6 billion in revenue, including \$895 million in the past year alone, as workers learn that they can say no to the union.

The Mackinac Center is also taking the campaign into states long dominated by organized labor, including California, Illinois, Ohio, and, of course, Michigan. All told, more than one out of every four government workers around the nation have resigned from union membership. ■

# BY THE NUMBERS



**300,000**

Number of people who saw Secretary McMahon's video on Mackinac Center social media



**3,500**

Teachers who opted out of union membership within a few days of the video's release



**1.4 million**

Number of public employees who rejected union membership in 2025



# DOES TAKING OFFICE MEAN GIVING UP YOUR VOICE?

Mackinac Center Legal Foundation Takes the Question to Court



Photo by MCPP

Carol Beth Litkouhi ran for the Rochester Community Schools Board of Education because she wanted to serve her community. Earlier this year, that commitment led her to court.

Litkouhi is an elected trustee on the Rochester board. Last fall, various officials in Oakland County began considering a countywide tax increase. Several school districts discussed the proposal openly with their communities. Rochester took a different approach: The superintendent and board majority elected to support the proposed increase and keep the matter away from the public.

Litkouhi disagreed with that approach. Believing her constituents had a right to know about a potential tax increase, she wrote an op-ed for The Detroit News.

The board swiftly accused her of disclosing confidential information, then voted to censure her and remove her from all board committees. She retains her seat and her vote, but the message was clear:

In February, the Mackinac Center Legal Foundation filed a lawsuit on Litkouhi's behalf in the 52nd District Court of Oakland County.

The lawsuit names the Rochester Community Schools District and the individual trustees, acting in their official capacity, who voted to censure her. At issue is a newly revised board bylaw that restricts what trustees may say publicly. The Mackinac Center argues that the bylaw is unconstitutionally overbroad and violates Litkouhi's First Amendment rights.

The question is: Does taking elected office mean giving up your right to speak freely with the people who elected you?

The Mackinac Center's position is that it does not.

Elected officials retain their First Amendment rights, and those rights matter most when officials speak on issues of public concern, such as a potential tax increase affecting every family in the district. A bylaw that punishes a trustee for writing an opinion piece in a local newspaper raises serious constitutional questions, regardless of whether the board agrees with what she wrote.

"Elected officials do not surrender their First Amendment rights when they take office," said Derk Wilcox, senior attorney at the Mackinac Center Legal Foundation, in the press release announcing the lawsuit. "Rochester's policy attempts to silence trustees and keep their constituents in the dark about decisions that directly affect them."

For Litkouhi, the case is also personal. She didn't write the op-ed to create conflict. She wrote it because she thought residents deserved to know what was being discussed at the county level before decisions were made on their behalf. The censure and committee removal followed anyway.

"I ran for this office because I care deeply about our community and our schools," Litkouhi said in the press release. "Silencing trustees only hurts the families we're supposed to serve. I will always choose openness over secrecy, because the people who elected me deserve transparency from their officials."





Photo by MCPP

This isn't a case about a trustee going rogue or undermining her colleagues for political gain. It's about whether a school board can use a bylaw to discipline an elected official for communicating with her constituents on a matter of public interest. The board never specified what confidential information Litkouhi supposedly disclosed. They simply didn't like that she spoke.

Cases like this one tend to attract attention because they sit at the intersection of local governance and constitutional rights, two areas where the rules are usually unclear until they're tested. School board politics can move quickly, and informal pressure can often substitute for careful deliberation. What's less common is a trustee who is willing to push back through legal channels, and an organization positioned to help her do it.

The Mackinac Center Legal Foundation exists for situations like Carol Beth's, where an individual faces

institutional pressure and needs someone willing to make the constitutional argument. The goal isn't to win every political dispute that plays out in a school board meeting but to ensure that when government bodies overstep, there's a mechanism to hold them accountable.

The case of *Litkouhi v. Rochester Community Schools District* is ongoing. The outcome could have implications beyond Rochester, touching on how much latitude school boards and other local bodies possess to regulate their members' speech.

For now, Carol Beth Litkouhi still has her seat, her vote, and her willingness to speak. ■



**By Jess Wyeth**  
*Marketing Content Manager*



The Mackinac Center for Public Policy cordially invites you to an evening of fellowship and celebration as we honor America's 250th anniversary. Featuring Mr. Walter Isaacson, author of *The Greatest Sentence Ever Written*, which explores the origins of the most revolutionary sentence in the Declaration of Independence.

**GUEST SPEAKER**

# Walter Isaacson

*Bestselling Author; Acclaimed Historian and Journalist;  
Professor of History, Tulane University*

**WHEN**

**Friday, June 5, 2026**

5:30 pm | Cocktail Reception

7:00 pm | Dinner

8:00 pm | Program

**WHERE**

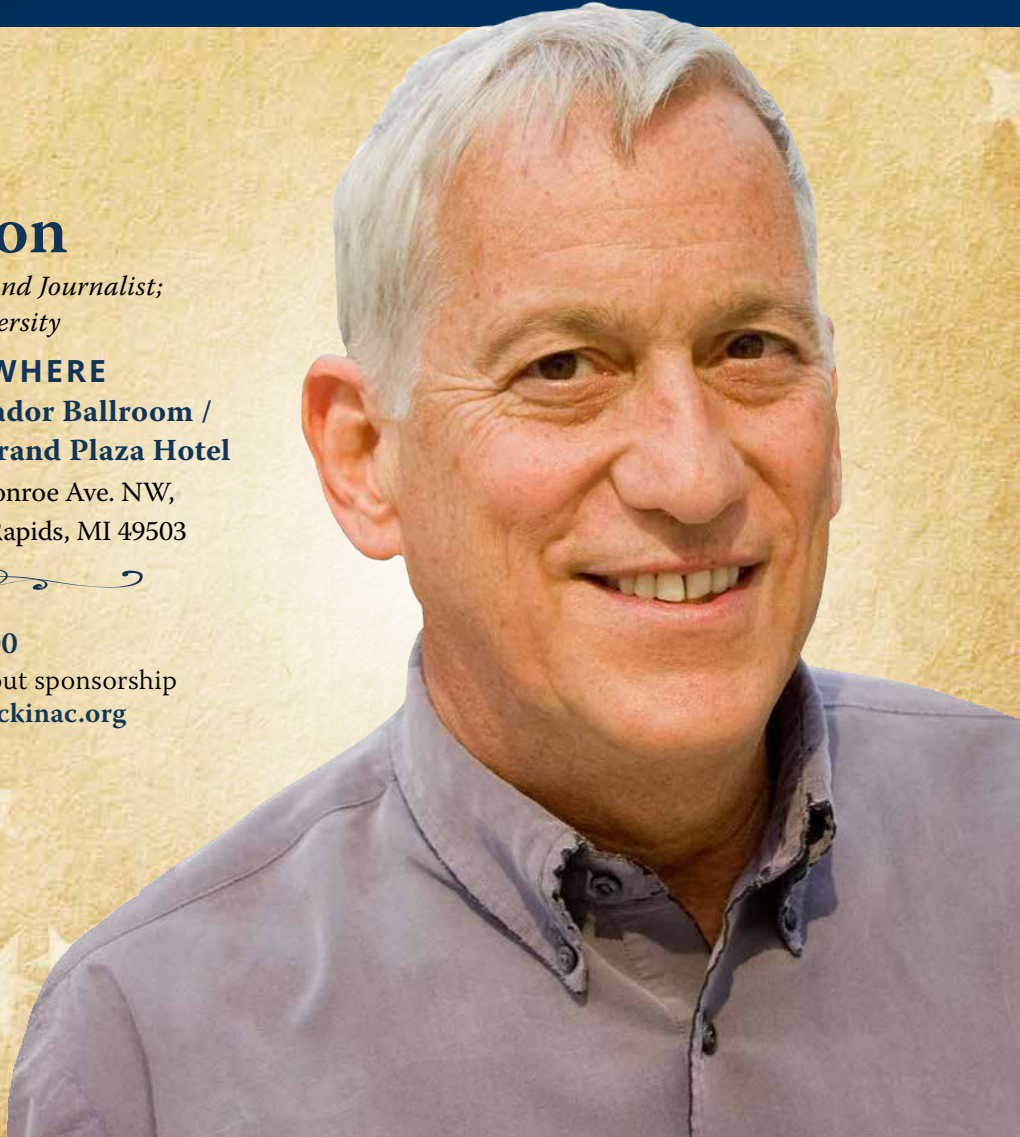
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**Individual Tickets: \$325.00**

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April  
**15**

Wednesday



What Michigan Can  
Learn About Reading  
From Mississippi

April  
**22**

Wednesday



Water, Watts and Wealth: The  
Costs and Benefits of Data  
Centers in Michigan

May  
**14**

Thursday



Freeing Health Care Markets:  
State Solutions for Coverage,  
Costs, and Innovation



# MICHIGAN PUTS OFF EVALUATING EMERGENCY POWERS SIX YEARS AFTER LOCKDOWN

Six years after the COVID-19 pandemic hit Michigan, the state's response remains shrouded in ambiguity. Despite the profound consequences of lockdowns, important questions about their effectiveness and legality remain unanswered. The Whitmer administration's secrecy leaves Michigan ill-prepared for future public health crises.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has yet to order a review of the state's COVID-era lockdowns. The reluctance to revisit past decisions is understandable, given concerns that the findings might reflect poorly on the governor. But unless Michigan addresses these issues, we risk repeating past mistakes when the next pandemic strikes.

Critical questions remain about the governor's use of emergency powers during the pandemic. The Michigan Supreme Court ruled that one law granting broad power to the executive branch was

unconstitutional. But it has since refused to evaluate a similar law the governor used to impose a second lockdown. The court's current position, apparently, is that it is illegal for the governor to use unconstrained emergency authority but not if one of her appointees, such as the state health director, does the same.

If a future governor and Legislature do nothing before the next emergency, we'll have a replay of Whitmer's COVID-19 response. The state's current pandemic plan still concentrates all authority in the hands of the state health director. The Legislature will be shut out of all decisions. The director will have full authority to regulate virtually anything.

The aggressive lockdown measures implemented by the Whitmer administration had significant repercussions on Michigan's economy and society. Businesses and schools faced unprecedented disruptions, the effects of which are still felt today.

“The aggressive lockdown measures implemented by the Whitmer administration had significant repercussions on Michigan’s economy and society.”

And there were many harder-to-quantify consequences, such as induced depression, loneliness, stress, and fear. How do you calculate the pain of watching a loved one die alone?

Michigan must prepare for future pandemics by learning from experience. The Mackinac Center plays a critical role by advocating for necessary reforms and ensuring that political challenges do not obstruct essential policy discussions. It is imperative that the state thoroughly review its previous pandemic response to ensure preparedness and prevent harmful legal controversies. ■



**By Michael Van Beek**  
*Director of Research*

# ONLINE RESOURCES



## **MichCapCon.com**

Michigan Capitol Confidential reports with a free-market news perspective.



## **WorkersForOpportunity.org**

Advancing the liberty of employees across the country and protecting First Amendment rights.



## **Mackinac.org/MCLF**

Our public interest law firm advances individual freedom and the rule of law in Michigan.



## **OpportunityMichigan.org**

Want to get more engaged with public policy in Michigan? Opportunity Michigan is right for you.



## **FrankBeckmannCenterForJournalism.com**

Keeping citizens informed with news and analysis that expose government overreach and abuse.



## **MichiganVotes.org**

Track every bill, amendment and roll call vote in the Michigan Legislature from 2001 to today.



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140 West Main Street, P.O. Box 568  
Midland, Michigan 48640 | 989-631-0900  
Mackinac.org | mcpp@mackinac.org

**Project Manager**  
Jessica Wyeth

**Editors**  
John LaPlante  
Tim Cavanaugh

**Designers**  
Mick McArt  
Hannah Golab

# SHE USED TO SELL PRODUCTS – NOW SHE SELLS FREEDOM

## *A Profile of Nicole Irrer, Mackinac Center Director of Advancement*



Photo by Natalie Grace Photography

Nicole Irrer wanted to go to college, get a degree in international sales, and travel the world. Instead, the girl born and raised in mid-Michigan has stayed here her whole life, and she wouldn't have it any other way. Today, she helps people in Michigan, across the United States, and even around the world.

Nicole is the director of advancement at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. She credits her upbringing and early work experiences for shaping both her entrepreneurial mindset and her commitment to showing up and delivering results.

Her parents moved to Midland for her father's work, selling industrial machines used in automotive manufacturing. They decided to stay after finding a strong church community. Their emphasis on faith, family, and hard work would become a defining influence in Nicole's life.

Nicole got her first taste of responsibility early. At just seven years old, she took on a paper route, a job she still points to as formative.

"I loved it," she says. "Working with people, figuring out what worked for them, earning tips, and learning the importance of showing up no matter what — rain, sleet, or shine."

Her early start sparked a drive that led Nicole to take on a wide variety of jobs throughout her youth: babysitting, mowing lawns, shoveling snow, and working at the local farmers market.

Each experience reinforced her ease in working with people and solving problems.

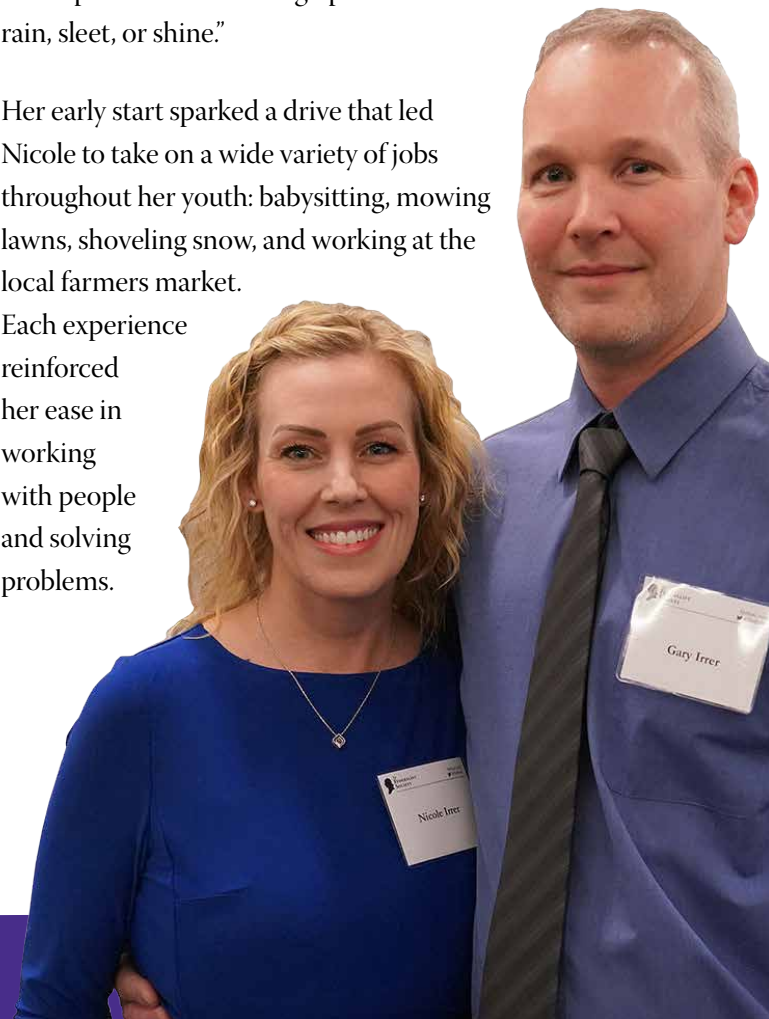


Photo by MCPP



**MACKINAC  
STAFF  
PROFILE**

After attending Calvary Baptist Academy and Church and graduating from Midland High School, Nicole attended Northwood University, where she earned a bachelor's and master's degree in business administration. She married, started a family, and built a successful 20-year career at Verizon, a Fortune 15 company, where she held a variety of leadership roles. She ran retail stores and managed districts responsible for tens of millions in annual sales revenue and assets before moving into business-to-business sales.

After leaving Verizon, she joined a startup founded by former colleagues. When that venture began to struggle, she started exploring new opportunities and soon learned about an opening at the Mackinac Center. She recalled what Amy Green, then the



**“I want to help fix problems and find solutions. Our donors are the real superheroes here. We just get to be part of the work that makes life better for people and their families for generations to come.”**

assistant to Mackinac Center Joseph G. Lehman, had once shared with her about the organization.

After digging deeper into its mission, she quickly realized it was the perfect fit for her.

“Part of my background was selling products to people,” she said. “Now I sell freedom.”

At the Mackinac Center, Nicole leads the advancement team, works closely with donors and manages staff, identifying new opportunities and helping shape long-term growth strategy. She views

donors as essential partners in the Center's work.

“I've always had a bit of a superhero complex,” she says. “I want to help fix problems and find solutions. Our donors are the real superheroes here. We just get to be part of the work that makes life better for people and their families for generations to come.”

Outside of work, Nicole prioritizes family. For decades, her family has gathered for a weekly game night at her mother's home, a tradition that now includes her husband and children. She stays active outdoors through hiking and rock hunting, feeds her curiosity through reading and audiobooks, and worships alongside her family at church. ■



**By Jarrett Skorup**  
*Vice President for Marketing  
and Communications*



# The Mississippi Miracle Shows What Michigan Can Learn About Literacy

As the reading skills of young Michigan students trend downward, Mississippi is producing impressive gains in elementary school literacy. In a new report, “Mississippi Learning: Lessons on Literacy Laws for Michigan Lawmakers,” the Mackinac Center examines the policies and implementation strategies that pulled the Magnolia State out of a literacy crisis.

Michigan fourth graders placed 44th among the states in reading in the latest results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In Mississippi, by contrast, fourth grade reading performance improved so dramatically that the state went from 49th to ninth in a little more than 10 years. Its low-income students

performed better than similarly situated students in any other state.

Mississippi made these gains after it passed the Literacy-Based Promotion Act in 2013. The literacy law requires universal screening and early intervention for reading deficiencies. Instruction in Mississippi schools must be grounded in the science of reading, and third-grade students must be proficient in reading before advancing to fourth grade.

While Mississippi’s literacy law does include some good-cause exemptions, it prohibits students from being socially promoted to the next grade level based



Mississippi



Michigan

on age or “any other factors that constitute social promotion.” Lawmakers recognized that students must develop certain skills to be successful in future grades — especially fourth grade, when a student needs a stronger reading foundation to learn more complex subject material.

Passing a good law wasn’t enough to produce results of this magnitude. Mississippi also needed teachers, school officials, and parents to support the new rules. Implementing the law effectively required a concerted, statewide effort by education professionals and state leaders dedicated to improving student outcomes.

In Michigan, state leaders have taken recent steps to address the state’s ominous literacy trend. In 2024, lawmakers passed reading legislation that will take effect in the 2027-28 school year. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer declared that literacy would be a priority for her final year in office, dedicating \$625 million to support literacy efforts.

But Michigan’s literacy law lacks the accountability measures needed to ensure its success. Unlike Mississippi’s Literacy-Based Promotion Act,

Michigan’s new law allows social promotion regardless of a student’s ability to read. Without accountability requirements, students are more likely to advance through the system without the literacy skills needed to thrive.

In Mississippi, the combination of good policy, accountability, dedicated educators, and an intentional focus on implementation delivered dramatic gains in fourth-grade reading proficiency. By applying lessons learned from Mississippi, Michigan can turn around its literacy crisis.

The new report, “Mississippi Learning: Lessons on Literacy Laws for Michigan Lawmakers,” is available at [mackinac.org](http://mackinac.org). ■



By Molly Macek  
Director of Education Policy



# WHITMER SUPPORTS POLICY IDEAS ENDORSED BY MACKINAC CENTER

# “The governor called for bipartisanship in efforts to make housing more affordable, reduce the cost of health care, and improve childhood literacy.”

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s eighth and final State of the State address in February endorsed a bipartisan package of bills that the Mackinac Center believes will improve life for many state residents.

The governor called for bipartisanship in efforts to make housing more affordable, reduce the cost of health care, and improve childhood literacy.

Some of the legislation Whitmer endorsed would streamline zoning, reduce red tape, and make it easier to build all types of homes, bringing more housing to the market.

Whitmer’s speech reflected the current split in state government between Republicans, who control the House, and Democrats, who control the Senate and executive branch.

Whitmer thanked Speaker of the House Matt Hall for his efforts to enact several key pieces of legislation last year. These bills provided dedicated road funding and repealed the tax on overtime and Social Security benefits. Other new laws revised the minimum wage for tipped workers and deferred a paid sick leave requirement that had threatened the continued viability of many small businesses and restaurants.

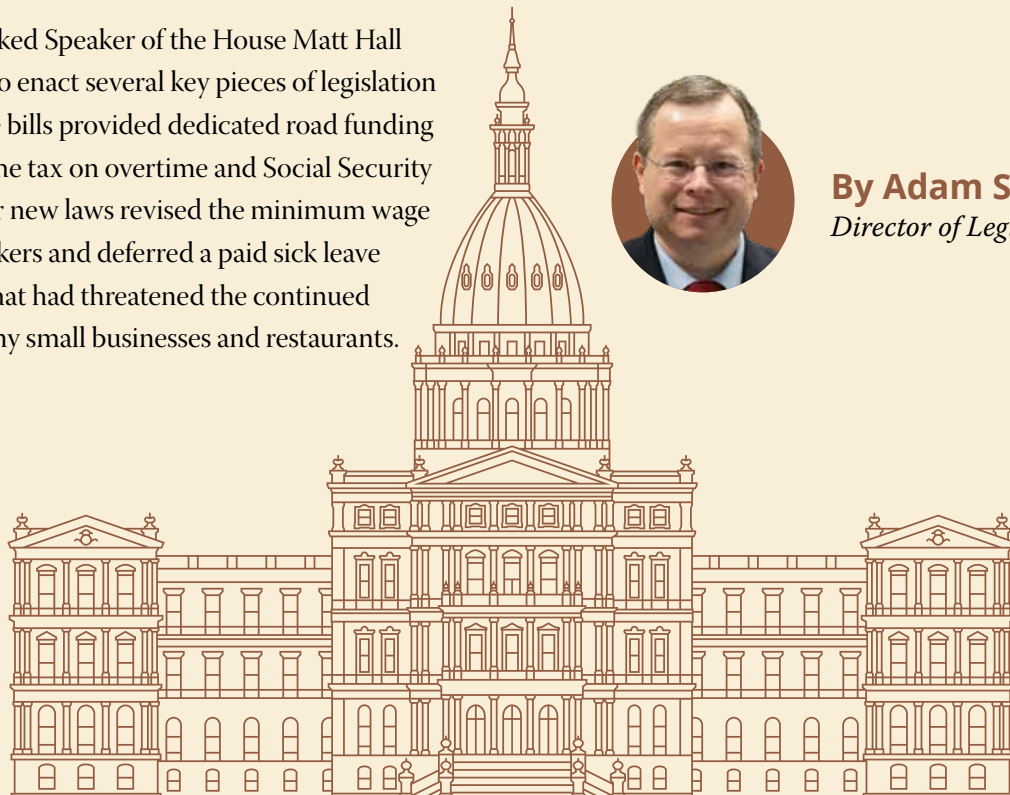
The 2026 legislative calendar will be very compressed, and there is little appetite in either the House or the Senate to reenact last year’s prolonged budget negotiation. The budgetary deadlock delayed action on a variety of issues.

Lawmakers will be reluctant to spend much time in Lansing this fall with the election looming on Nov. 3. Expect a flurry of activity in June, followed by another round during the lame duck session in late November, which will continue through December.

The Mackinac Center looks forward to working with the governor and members of the 103rd Legislature. Together, we can improve children’s reading ability and make Michigan a more affordable place to live by applying free-market solutions to the many public policy challenges facing our state. ■



**By Adam Stacey**  
*Director of Legislative Affairs*



## *What We Inherit*

Two hundred and fifty years ago, a small group of people made a decision that changed the world. They didn't know if it would work. They only knew it was right.

What they built was more than just a government. It was a proposition: that freedom is worth defending, that ordinary people deserve a voice, that the rule of law belongs to everyone, not just the powerful.

That proposition still needs defenders.

Last year, a Mackinac Center donor stepped forward with a matching gift to support the Mackinac Center Legal Foundation. The response from people like you was extraordinary. So extraordinary, in fact, that it moved another donor to do the same thing this year. That is what inspiration looks like: one act of generosity lighting the way for the next.

That donor will now match every dollar you give to MCLF, up to \$500,000. One million dollars in legal resources, ready to fight for the people of Michigan.

Dick Sullivan just wanted to care for his son without a powerful union skimming the modest payment he received from the state. Carol Beth Litkouhi simply told her community the truth (see page 16).

These and other ordinary Michigan residents find themselves facing institutions with far more power than they will ever have, and we are there when they need somebody to turn to.

The founders knew their work would never really be finished. They built the tools and trusted future generations to use them. The Mackinac Center Legal Foundation is one of those tools, and you are the reason it works.

Two hundred and fifty years in, the proposition still holds. And so do you.

Thank you. ■



**By Elizabeth Posthumus**  
*Director of Donor Communications*



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