

Gov. Whitmer to Deliver 2021 State of the State Address

LANSING, Mich. -- Tonight, Governor Gretchen Whitmer will deliver her third State of the State Address. Please see below for her remarks as prepared for delivery.

Good evening.

Last year, I gave my second State of the State address in the House Chamber here in the capitol.

Like much of the last year, this State of the State is different, because it has to be. Tonight, it's just me and a few people in my Capitol office.

And while it's different, it's an opportunity to speak directly to you -- the people of Michigan -- about the past year, and our priorities in 2021.

At the risk of losing you in the first minutes of this speech, I'm going to use a Latin phrase: *Annus horribilis*: a year of horrors. Before I tell you more, take comfort in knowing that tough years like 2020, our *annus horribilis*, are usually followed by great years -- and yes, there's a Latin phrase for that too: *annus mirabilis*.

2020 was a tough year. Despite incredibly hard decisions and dangerous threats, I know my burden has been lighter than many.

This year didn't pan out like any of us wanted or imagined. It required compassion, strength, and a lot of Michigan grit.

First, let's remember the Michiganders we've lost to COVID.

Every day, I think about the people who lost loved ones to this virus.

Those who said goodbye to their parents over Zoom because it was too dangerous to go to the hospital. The spouses who sleep alone for the first time in years. The Michiganders who still haven't properly mourned.

I think about my friend Sheriff Benny Napoleon, who spent a lifetime serving the people of Wayne County.

We've lost over 14,000 Michiganders to COVID-19.

14,000 people with stories. With loved ones -- parents and siblings, children and friends.

Throughout this crisis, the people of Michigan have harnessed the empathy and courage that make us who we are as Michiganders.

The state of our state ... is resilient.

In the spring, we followed the guidance of public health experts. We took a fact-based approach to fighting this novel virus. We flattened the curve together. We saved countless lives.

Businesses like Detroit Sewn stepped up and retooled their machinery to manufacture masks, hand sanitizer, gloves, or ventilators.

Frontline workers in our hospitals, grocery stores, child care centers, post offices, police and fire departments, and so many others put their lives on the line to protect us.

Our state employees like corrections officers and sanitation workers provided crucial services.

And the vast majority of you did your part.

In the midst of the worst public health crisis in our lifetimes, the world saw just how tough Michiganders are.

When we get knocked down, we dust ourselves off and pull each other back up.

This past year, we confronted historic converging crises – a world wide pandemic, the recession it caused, a 500-year flooding event, a nationwide call against racial inequity, and a deeply divisive election. And we took action together.

The Michigan House recently elected new leadership. I want to congratulate Speaker Jason Wentworth and Democratic Leader Donna Lasinski. And welcome back the Senate Leaders - Leader Shirkey and Leader Ananich.

Based on the political environment this past year, you might think Republicans and Democrats in Lansing can't find common ground on much of anything.

But the reality is: despite all these crises, and the gridlock in Washington, we took real bipartisan action to get things done for you and your family.

I signed two bipartisan budgets – balanced budgets that prioritized public schools, public safety, and public health.

We worked together on the bipartisan Michigan Reconnect Program. That's tuition-free job training and community college for adults looking to earn a postsecondary certificate or associate degree. Thanks to Senators Ananich and Horn and Representatives Anthony and Frederick for their leadership on this.

And bipartisan Clean Slate Legislation making our criminal justice system more fair and expanding opportunities for Michiganders who have served time. I want to thank the bipartisan group of legislators who helped get this done.

And the Michigan Legislative Black Caucus for all of the work they have done on criminal justice reform.

Let's tap into that same energy and end the pandemic, revitalize our economy and get our kids back in school. Let's make good use of this non-election year and work together. After all, we're Michiganders first.

I know the Biden Administration is deeply committed to following science, protecting public health, and building our economy back better.

I am eager to work with President Biden, Vice President Harris, and our congressional delegation to end this pandemic and ramp up our economy.

And I will continue reaching out to Republicans here in Lansing.

While "Common ground" seems less and less common these days, it's never been more important that we work toward it.

I know you're used to me saying "fix the damn roads."

This year, let's also fix the damn road ahead – find common ground to grow our economy and get families and businesses back on their feet. That starts by ending the pandemic.

The health of our economy is inextricably linked to the health of our people. Effectively rebuilding our economy this year requires that we protect public health. That hurdle is cleared easier and quicker if we work together.

A governor's primary responsibility is the safety of the people of her state. During the worst public health crisis in history, we protected and expanded health care access in Michigan.

I signed bipartisan legislation to end surprise medical billing, so Michiganders don't get charged out of the blue for care.

And we've worked to address the high cost of prescription drugs. Prices for lifesaving prescriptions have skyrocketed, forcing people to choose between getting their medicine, paying rent, or buying food.

Last year, I announced a Prescription Drug Task Force. And just yesterday, they announced their plan to lower costs and increase drug price transparency. Members of my cabinet worked with a bipartisan group of leaders on legislation that ensures accountability and affordability to help Michigan families. Many thanks to Senators Brinks and VanderWall and Representatives Witwer and Kuppa, and former Representative Vaupel for their bipartisan work on this. Now, let's get this on the legislature's to do list.

During World War II, Michigan became the arsenal of democracy - building tanks and bombers to defend freedom and crush fascism. This year, we stepped up as the arsenal of health - manufacturing masks, ventilators, and PPE. And we were the epicenter of hope when the world watched the Pfizer vaccine roll out of Portage, Michigan.

Since the beginning of this pandemic, the state partnered with health insurance providers to waive costs for testing and treatment.

And we have performed over 9.6 million tests, which makes us 7th in the nation.

That's thanks in large part to the brave women and men serving in the Michigan National Guard. They helped with COVID, floods, and threats to our safety.

As Commander-in-Chief of the Michigan National Guard, I want to formally acknowledge our Adjutant General Paul Rogers for his leadership.

Our action saved lives - Especially in our most vulnerable communities.

Early on, Dr. Joneigh Khaldun – or “Dr. J” as you’ve heard me call her - saw the disparate impact COVID was having on communities of color. By acknowledging this, we not only saved lives in Michigan, but around the country as other states learned from us. Lieutenant Governor Garlin Gilchrist chaired the Michigan COVID Task Force on Racial Disparities, focusing on education, testing and outreach that further saved lives.

Michigan leads the nation in reducing racial disparities of this pandemic, and the Biden-Harris administration established its own COVID Equity Task Force modeled after ours.

Dr. J and her team have led our effort to get Michiganders vaccinated. Despite many challenges, we’ve made great strides.

We prioritized our brave health care workers, our educators, seniors, and vulnerable populations most at risk.

And we created the bipartisan Protect Michigan vaccine commission to ensure we get this right.

We are now in the second wave of distributing safe, effective vaccines.

Michigan has administered over 800,000 vaccines, which makes us 6th in the nation.

The number of vaccines we have administered has surpassed the number of recorded cases in Michigan.

I know people are anxious and ready to get the vaccine. That's a good thing. The fact of the matter is: we don't have the supply we need yet, but we will – and the good news is that we do have a plan to get 50,000 shots in arms per day when the supply comes in.

Every eligible Michigander who wants a vaccine will get one. This process is like a locomotive – it will be cumbersome and slow in the beginning, but it will get faster and smoother as we go. I just ask for patience as our frontline workers work around the clock to get shots in arms.

Our medical objective is to vaccinate at least 70% of our population age 16 and up as soon as possible. The quicker we do this, the quicker we'll have the normalcy we all crave – family gatherings, travel, graduations, concerts, and more.

In the coming months the vaccine will be available to the general population.

When very little seems in our individual control, the act of getting a vaccine is.

And as we fight the new variant of the virus, we must all continue to wear a mask, practice safe social distancing, and avoid indoor gatherings. The good news is: we know how to fight this virus.

The coming months will determine the strength of our economic recovery.

Let's end this pandemic. Make your plan to get vaccinated, and keep wearing your mask until this pandemic is over. Let's join forces to jumpstart our economy.

That means protecting our small businesses.

This pandemic has taken a massive toll on our small businesses and the people they employ. Where the federal government failed, we the states stepped up.

Last month, I signed a bipartisan, \$106 million relief bill that directed \$55 million to help small businesses impacted by COVID - including restaurant owners, who have made incredible sacrifices to keep their communities safe.

And last week, I announced the Michigan COVID Recovery Plan: distributing vaccines, getting our kids back on track, supporting small businesses, and jumpstarting our economy. My plan includes a call on the Legislature to permanently extend unemployment benefits from 20 weeks to 26 weeks. This would bring Michigan in line with 40 other states and provide hard-hit Michigan workers with the financial security and peace of mind they deserve.

My plan gives crucial support for small businesses and resources to help them thrive long after the pandemic is over.

It helps businesses like All Seasons Communications in Macomb County, owned by Beth Monicatti Blank.

I invite the legislature to partner with me on: the health of our people, the education of our kids, and the resurgence of our economy. Let's get the MI COVID Recovery Plan passed immediately.

Our economy demands every child has a great public education. Despite the budget crisis caused by COVID, we worked across the aisle to support our public schools.

I signed a bipartisan budget that protected our kids from school cuts and took another step towards a weighted funding formula. That means additional support for: students with special needs, economically disadvantaged students, and English language learners.

COVID exposed deep inequities in our education system. Many students and educators in rural or low-income communities lack the technology access fundamental for remote

learning. That's why my budget proposal next month will continue building upon the weighted funding formula.

Like everything else, COVID has disrupted our kids' education. I see it in my own kids' experience. There are students in Michigan who have not been in a classroom since March 13th of last year. The pandemic stole more than 10 months of in-person instruction and support. I set a goal for all schools to offer an in-person learning-opportunity by March 1st. We've seen by following the safety protocols, this can be done successfully.

I'm reconvening the members of the Return to School Advisory Council. By Spring, this group will provide guidance to policymakers, districts and schools about how best to promote comprehensive recovery. And my budget will fund academic recovery, school infrastructure improvements, and support for students' physical and mental health.

And I want to say thank you. Thank you to our incredible educators, administrators, and support staff for their dedication to our students throughout this pandemic.

In gratitude, next month we will reward MI Classroom Heroes grants up to \$500 each for teachers and support staff. These grants will offset some expenses and acknowledge their extraordinary efforts.

In addition to MI Classroom Heroes, we owe a special thank you to frontline health care workers. Including direct care workers who provide nursing and health care for seniors and Michiganders with disabilities. We gave these heroes a \$2 an hour raise. I worked with the legislature to extend it for a few months, and then a few more months. Now it's time to make that pay raise permanent.

Because it's not enough to just say "thank you" – we need to show support.

That is one of the reasons why I created Futures for Frontliners, modeled after the G.I. Bill after World War II - tuition-free postsecondary education opportunities for the heroes on the front lines of the pandemic.

Our frontline workers – health care workers, grocery store employees, child care workers, janitors, and everyone who stepped up to protect us - are heroes. They stayed at work so the rest of us could stay home. And they've earned our full support.

More than 82,000 frontline heroes have been accepted into the program. That's over 82,000 lives that could be changed as a result. 82,000 people who will enhance their skill set and earn higher wages.

Paths to skills are important – we must ensure there are good jobs for Michiganders at the end of the path. And we've been hard at work. Since I was sworn into office, we have announced more than 11,400 auto jobs at GM, Ford, and FCA. Our auto industry helps drive our economy and ensures good-paying jobs for hardworking UAW members and their families.

One of my top priorities this year is growing more great jobs for Michigan workers.

Today, I'm announcing Michigan Back to Work: my plan to help us grow our economy and get Michiganders back on their feet. We will leverage all of the resources of state government to rebuild our economy back better. Working with leaders in state and federal government, business, and beyond to grow good-paying Michigan jobs. Over the next year, we will announce initiatives and projects big and small – from tech, mobility and manufacturing growth, to clean energy and road construction. This will protect, grow, and create more good paying jobs.

It's also time for the legislature to take action extending Good Jobs for Michigan legislation to retain and grow our businesses and create jobs.

You might not know, but Pfizer was the first business to utilize Good Jobs for Michigan. They built their sterile drug manufacturing plant and created 450 good-paying jobs in Portage. Passing this legislation will be good for our families, our businesses, and our economy. Let's get it done.

Growing our economy requires continued focus on our infrastructure. The long infrastructure saga in Michigan impacts our ability to safely navigate our roads without spending hundreds of dollars each year in vehicle repairs.

While we had to focus on the virus, we proved that we can walk and chew gum at the same time. And a lot has happened.

Last year, I announced the Rebuilding Michigan bonding plan to create and sustain tens of thousands of jobs and start fixing the damn roads without an increase at the pump. Because better roads mean better jobs.

Even combatting COVID, we moved a lot of dirt.

In Lansing, we completed the I-496 Rebuilding Michigan project, with hundreds of more projects on the horizon. Including heavily traveled sections of I-96 in Oakland County, I-69 in Calhoun County and I-94 in Berrien County.

And just days after the May flood in Midland, our incredible MDOT workers rebuilt a crucial bridge on US-10 in record time.

Hardworking union construction workers - the Laborers and Operating Engineers - got this done safely in the middle of a pandemic. Thank you.

We're going to forge ahead rebuilding our roads in 2021 to protect our families and keep more money in Michiganders' pockets.

As for your local roads and bridges, last session, legislation was introduced to give local communities more options so they can move some dirt too. It's a good idea – and it's time for the legislature to get it done.

We've also kept moving forward on water infrastructure. Last year, I announced the MI Clean Water plan, a \$500 million investment in Michigan's water infrastructure. Direct dollars to communities for safe, clean water to residents. And it supports over 7,500 Michigan jobs.

It's time for the legislature to pass these bills so we can start rebuilding Michigan's water infrastructure.

I will keep working so every family in Michigan has clean, safe water.

We still have a lot of work to do – to join forces to end the pandemic and grow our economy.

In 2020, thanks to the hard work of Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson and Attorney General Dana Nessel, Michigan held a historic election. Secretary Benson ran a fair and secure election, of which we should all be proud. Attorney General Nessel defended our votes despite attacks from across the country. They, along with our local clerks and staff at the Secretary of State and Attorney General's offices, should be immensely proud.

And yet we know the deep divisions in our country are present here in Michigan too.

This year, I will launch the "Fixing the Damn Road Ahead" tour to engage with and listen to Michiganders – young and old, Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, from Lake Superior to Lake Michigan, Lake Huron, Lake Erie, and everywhere in between.

To focus on what unites us, improve how we talk to each other, and together we'll fix the damn road ahead.

My mission is to find common ground so we can emerge from this crisis stronger than ever.

When we rang in the new year on January 1st, 2020, we had high hopes.

We made resolutions, planned trips, and in my case, a high school graduation, with our families and friends.

It's easy to look back on this last year and focus on the bad. But we cannot forget the action we took to protect ourselves and our families.

To those of you who stepped up and did your part, who listened to medical experts, stayed home, wore a mask, helped out a neighbor, and practiced social distancing – your action saved lives. Your action ensured that more Michiganders will be able to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas 2021 with their loved ones.

On behalf of the entire state of Michigan: Thank you.

Now, to the legislative leaders tuning in: our job now is to fix the damn road ahead – together.

Let's commit to the strong bipartisan action we took last year and focus that same energy to end the pandemic, grow our economy and get our kids back on track.

The people of Michigan are counting on us.

Here's to an annus mirabilis - a great year.

Let's get it done.

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