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Whitmer Calls For Urgency To Address State's 'Hard Truths'

A long-term funding plan for the state's roads, attacking the literacy crisis among children and fixing a broken state permitting and licensing system must happen this year, [Governor Gretchen Whitmer](#) said Wednesday in her seventh State of the State speech.

Whitmer's speech to a joint convention of the Legislature was a significant departure – in tone, substance and even delivery – from her lighthearted 2024 edition, which was rife with 1980s pop culture references and at times felt like a rally for the Detroit Lions, who were about to play for a trip to the Super Bowl.

The governor sounded like someone aware the clock is ticking on her tenure with 22 months to go, wanting action on a couple topics that will be a big part of her legacy, hoping to avoid partisan wars of her first term and – perhaps – emphasizing some centrist and even conservative themes that would help position her for a possible future run for national office.

"I took an oath to serve the people of Michigan – all the people," Whitmer said. "That's my commitment to you no matter who is in the White House or who is on the other side of the table in Lansing. Yes, I do hope to find common ground with President Trump and work with the Democratic-led Senate and Republican-led House on our shared priorities. I'm not looking for fights, but I won't back down from them either."

The tone was somber. Twice, the governor used the phrase "hard truths" to describe where Michigan stands on key issues.

From a policy agenda standpoint, the governor made significant asks of the Legislature on roads and overhauling the state's licensing and permitting processes (see separate stories). The third pillar in her

agenda was to increase jobs, but Whitmer did not offer anything new on how the state should attract and retain businesses. The state's primary mechanism, the Strategic Outreach and Attraction Reserve Fund, is set to expire this year, and a combination of Republican objection to interference with the market and Democratic opposition to earmarking taxpayer funds to corporations has halted the governor's priorities.

The priorities had a centrist feel: taxing vapes, banning cell phones from classrooms, addressing the fall in the number of male high school graduates enrolling in college, roads, housing.

The vibe in the House Chamber was different.

Democrats, many of whom are unhappy with Whitmer not confronting Trump on his actions, were more sedate, especially as Whitmer talked about the need to cut spending to other programs to help fund roads, clamp down on earmarks and called for a revamp of the licensing and permitting system. Afterward, several Democrats highlighted issues they said they wished Whitmer had addressed.

Republicans, as has been the case for Whitmer's previous six speeches, mostly remained seated, but it was – by far – the most positive reception the governor has had in the five speeches she delivered in the House Chamber (the 2021 and 2022 speeches were delivered elsewhere due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Whitmer appeared determined to get them out of their seats with a big pitch about reining in legislative spending earmarks – a top priority for House [Speaker Matt Hall](#) (R-Richland Township) – and turned around to engage him.

"I know Speaker Hall is passionate about bringing accountability to the process, and I agree. In this year's budget, let's have total transparency on all earmarks," she said. "Because if you want to invest taxpayer money, you should put your name on it, right Matt?"

Hall, who had been nodding his head throughout, stood up as the governor turned around, and the two shook hands. Republicans stood and applauded. Republicans also applauded calls for permitting and licensing reform, restarting the Palisades nuclear plant and the governor mentioning she met with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth about a new fighter mission at Selfridge Air National Guard base.

For the first half of the speech, Whitmer struggled with her voice, frequently having to clear her throat and drink water. At one point, [Rep. Tom Kunse](#) (R-Clare) pulled out a bag of Hall's lozenges at his desk in

the chamber and quipped that maybe he should toss one to the governor.

Eventually, Whitmer acknowledged she was getting over a cold, and then seemed to power through.

The speech had the usual State of the State victory lap flair with Whitmer recounting achievements like the soon-to-open Gordie Howe International Bridge, Palisades nearing reopening as the first restarted nuclear power plant in U.S. history and the state having more than a billion in additional unexpected revenue.

The governor talked up growth in the state's gross domestic product and median household incomes. But she did not mention the state's unemployment rate, which grew from 3.9 percent to 5 percent from February-December 2024, and Whitmer offered a message that was more subdued than rah-rah.

"Ultimately, the 'state of the state' isn't about lines on a chart or metrics on a spreadsheet. It's about how people feel and how people think about Michigan," she said. "Tonight, we'll center their stories and recommit ourselves to building a Michigan we can all be proud to call home. My fellow Michiganders, the state of our state is strong, and it's on all of us to make it stronger and kinder too."

During the speech, Whitmer said "there's no sugarcoating it" when it comes to politics – division is rampant, but she also said she believes people are not as divided as the nation's politics.

Whitmer reiterated her warnings that Trump's tariffs on Canada would cause severe damage to Michigan's economy but also said she was "grateful the president decided to pause" implementation of them.

Carrying through with the tariffs would slow construction, shutter businesses, prompt auto industry layoffs and cost consumers more, Whitmer warned.

"I'm not opposed to tariffs outright. But they're a blunt tool when the Michigan economy is on the line," she said. "It would be a disaster."

It was on the education front where Whitmer struck a much different note than she has in the past.

There was overt acknowledgement that despite large spending increases for K-12 schools during her first six years in office, including targeting more funds to students with greater barriers like those from

impoverished backgrounds, needing special education services and for whom English is not their first language, funding alone has failed to improve academic performance from the state's K-12 pupils.

For the Democratic governor who has taken great pride in touting "record funding" for K-12 schools each year of her term, it was a significant departure.

"We've done a lot of good, but here are some hard truths," she said. "Just 24 percent of fourth-graders can read proficiently. The same percentage of eighth-graders are proficient in math. I get that this is a national trend, but the reality is that we invest more per pupil than most states and achieve bottom 10 results. We spend more and we get less. It's not acceptable."

Whitmer called for more emphasis on reading strategies and the metrics and transparency measures in her 2025-26 fiscal year budget recommendation.

The governor also looked to the recent signing into law of [SB 8](#) and [HB 4002](#), bipartisan compromises to change the minimum wage and sick time laws.

"This was a bipartisan effort, and I am proud that we were able to get it done," she said. "These last few weeks showed us that we can work through hard problems to deliver real solutions for Michigan."

The governor closed her speech on a similar note.

"Whether we're negotiating here in Lansing, or driving down a two-lane farm road, or holding open a door, let's be the Michigan that Michiganders know we can be," she said. "At a dark moment when bullying and lying seem to be in style, let's be intentional about putting light out into the world. Let's welcome challenges, embrace our differences, and work together to get things done."

— By Zach Gorchow

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