



## Population Council Report Leaves Off Funding Recommendations – 12/15/23

The Growing Michigan Together Council voted 19-1 today to approve [the final draft of its report to the Legislature](#), with Rep. [Pauline WENDZEL \(R-Coloma\)](#) the lone no vote.

Wendzel, who spoke about her vote during a 9 a.m. virtual meeting held to finalize the vote, said she believes Michigan's population decline is a “very serious and important problem,” adding that there have been good ideas to come out of these recommendations.

“But, unfortunately, I also disagree with a lot of things that have been recommended,” she said, “and I believe that many of them are already being done by our government in some capacity, or they're able to already do (so) without legislation.”

Wendzel said she voted no because the committee did not fulfill one of the directives put forth by Gov. [Gretchen WHITMER](#) when creating the Council - finding funding solutions and new revenue to implement policy suggestions (See [“Whitmer Announces Population Council, Appoints Co-Chairs,”](#) 6/1/23).

The final draft as approved is similar to a draft copy obtained by *MIRS* in late November, with a focus on overhauling the state's education system, attracting international immigrants to come to Michigan schools, and increasing statewide housing and public transportation options (See [“Education, Transportation Funding Overhaul Recommended By Growth Council,”](#) 11/30/23).

The Council set a goal that by 2050, Michigan will be a top-10 state for population growth, which followed an analysis of why Michigan's population is declining, citing one reason as a decline in median income compared to a national scale - from 114% of the national average to 34th in median income among U.S. states.

It also highlighted how the state's declining population diminishes political representation, as Michigan has gone from 19 U.S. House members in 1970 to 13 in 2020, which means “our priorities are less likely to be considered in federal budget and policy deliberations that directly affect our communities.”

“Michigan isn't the only state in the fight against these challenges, but we are the first to address them head on,” the report reads, later adding that “the challenges facing our state are even greater than the Council expected before beginning their work.”

House Minority Leader [Matt HALL \(R-Kalamazoo\)](#) said Whitmer spent \$2 million in taxpayer money to get a “one-star review” from the Council.

“The governor hand-picked the Council and excluded other voices, but the report is a searing indictment of Gretchen Whitmer's failure these past five years,” Hall said. “It acknowledges



problems that were already identified in 2016 and 2017 — our roads are broken, our schools are failing and Michiganders are leaving the state . . . She hasn't moved the needle.

"Now, most of the solutions her population Council recommends just repeat recommendations from prior reports, and we're back to square one after the Council's six months of work," Hall added.

Whitmer, however, praised the Council's focus on "actions we can take to grow our state's population and economy while protecting our quality of life and cost of living."

"I am grateful to the bipartisan members of the Council and the workgroups for doing the hard work of tackling these big questions," she said. "In the months ahead, I look forward to reviewing the Council's report in detail and working with my partners in the Legislature on solutions to grow the economy and population."

The recommendations that followed were threefold, a slightly different format than the 10-step system proposed in the November draft.

Instead of starting with education, the finalized report began with a goal of establishing Michigan as the "innovation hub of the Midwest," which the Council said should be accomplished by developing an economic growth plan and making investments in Michigan's innovation districts.

In the short term, the Council suggested refreshing economic and workforce development incentives, a public-private evergreen fund investing in industry and increasing access to child care and training.

There was a specific focus on increasing international immigration through developing a state-led support service for language access, driver's license and identification documentation and training, along with creating a process to ensure non-U.S. credentialed professionals can have documents translated and applied to Michigan standards.

Education was next up, with recommendations based on information that Michigan is a net-exporter of college-educated talent, especially Black college graduates, and inflation-adjusted education spending is almost \$5 billion below levels from 15 years ago, from 8th to 31st in the nation as of 2021.

Education recommendations were more specific, starting with a "Michigan Education Guarantee," for all students to develop the necessary learning skills by grade 12. If those are not reached, a 13th year of education would be provided by the state at a local community college.

The Council also recommended moving from a pre-k to 12 system to a pre-k to 14 system by providing access to two years of postsecondary credit-bearing coursework at a high school,



public university or career and technical education (CTE) pathway, limited to those who reach the Michigan Education Guarantee standard.

The Council suggested rethinking school schedules to allow teachers more time for collaboration, improving teacher career progress and incentivizing highly-accomplished teachers to relocate to rural districts.

It also noted that “Neither the governance structure nor the funding of Michigan’s pre-K–12 and postsecondary systems are aligned to high performance.”

And it recommended enabling Michigan’s governor to appoint the state superintendent.

The third recommendation, largely unchanged from points eight, nine and 10 in the initial draft, involved making Michigan cities “thriving, resilient communities” by developing public transit, increasing housing stock and “future-proofing” infrastructure.

The report noted that “since 2000, Michigan has spent substantially less than other states on capital investment in infrastructure,” and while “recent investments have improved Michigan’s overall infrastructure rating, Michigan still earns only a C – according to the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) annual report card.”

Suggested changes included developing rapid and regional public transit systems, creating regional transportation authorities to work with local road agencies, establishing a more robust passenger rail system and conducting a feasibility study on developing direct service between Grand Rapids and Detroit, along with improving service on the Wolverine line between Chicago and Detroit.

On housing, the Council recommended increasing the supply of dense state housing stock and live-work options, modernizing zoning codes to encourage smaller and mixed-use housing, providing incentives to developers and expanding housing down-payment assistance programs.

Other infrastructure suggestions were to incentivize local government placemaking, examine alternative funding sources to maintain roads, like vehicle miles traveled fees or tolling, along with to partner with federal funding sources to build up climate mitigation infrastructure.

**Rob COPPERSMITH**, executive vice president of the Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association (MITA) said the recommendations “highlight just how far we need to go to get our core infrastructure, the roads and bridges that millions of Michiganders rely on, back on track for generations to come.”

But despite nearly every recommendation accompanied by the acknowledgment of a financial barrier or lack of investment, the Council did not include specific funding recommendations or ideas for new revenue streams.



“The work’s ambitious timeline limited the council’s ability to complete a full cost and revenue source assessment that is critical for prioritizing and implementing these ideas,” the report read, adding that “Council members’ expertise did not allow for the detailed exploration of how the systems, once rebuilt to function most effectively in a 21st-century economy, should be funded.

“As a council, we did not believe it would be responsible for us to publish a specific estimate when our recommended strategies require systematic changes,” the report read. “For example, our education-related recommendations propose the creation of a new system, the cost of which will need to be assessed relative to the current system.”

The report recommended the Governor and Legislature conduct a return-on-investment analysis for each recommendation, followed by a framework for optimizing government spending, maximizing federal resources and capturing private-sector investments.

Wendzel said one of the most difficult parts of policymaking is how to pay for the programs while garnering taxpayer support.

“The fact that the Governor's Council skirted this aspect is playing politics to protect the Governor from being associated with the tax increases necessary to fulfill the climate agenda within the report,” she said.

Hall again called the Council’s recommendations a roadmap to a tax increase, and said “expensive programs” recommended will come with “billions of dollars in new taxes, proving that the Governor’s whole point for the Council was to give Democrats political cover for unpopular tax hikes.

“Of course, the commission didn’t offer any specific recommendations about which taxes to raise to pay for new spending, and Democrats wasted our entire \$9 billion surplus before hearing from the Council,” he said.

Senate Minority Leader [Aric NESBITT \(R-Lawton\)](#) said “while I’m glad Gov. Whitmer’s Council didn't give her every tax hike on her Christmas wish list, I’m sure she’ll still use this report as an excuse to raid the pocketbooks of struggling Michiganders.”

And the West Michigan Policy Forum’s Jase **BOLGER** criticized the report for not including [the nine policy initiatives recommended by the forum to the Council](#).

“Sadly, this is not a plan to grow Michigan’s population,” Bolger said. “The fear is that when the additional spending is paid for, it’ll become a how-to manual for Tennessee, Texas and Florida to attract even more Michigan transplants.”