

# Whitmer Lays Out What's Next

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*Article courtesy MIRS News for SBAM's Lansing Watchdog newsletter*

Editor's Note: SBAM will be closely watching all issues with the potential to impact Michigan small businesses. Of particular interest is the proposed paid leave mandate, which SBAM opposes. You can watch SBAM President & CEO Brian Calley talk more about this issue in our Monday, August 28th [Small Business Briefing](#).

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Gov. [Gretchen WHITMER](#) called for a 100% clean energy standard, a drug affordability board to flag expensive pharmaceuticals, a paid family leave policy and state regulation of the siting of solar farms and wind turbines, during a new "What's Next?" address this morning.

The Governor also proposed to a receptive audience of Democratic legislators the repeal of Snyder-and Engler-era abortion restrictions, the state codification of the federal Affordable Care Act and streamlining the state's permitting process.

Whitmer didn't mention the likelihood of the fall session being cut to about nine weeks so the law creating the Feb. 27 presidential primary can take effect before the planned Election Day.

Instead, she closed her 23-minute address by testing out a couple of new inspiring locker room lines that may be heard again.

Speaking about the Democratic majority's accomplishments up to now, Whitmer said, "Let's tell the world Michiganders are known for our kindness and humility. We got a lot done, but we are not the best at telling our story.

"Today, that ends. Today we go from just believing in Michigan to bragging about Michigan."

The Governor sold Michigan as having personal freedoms, economic opportunities, the Great Lakes, majestic forests, growing small towns, grit and grace.

"We have it all," Whitmer said. "So, let's tell the story because we're Michiganders, dammit. And there's nothing better than that."

This first-ever mini-State of the State address was delivered a couple blocks from the Capitol at the Lansing Shuffle, an indoor food court and community entertainment center overlooking the Grand River.

Behind the scenes, there's a healthy cynicism about how many of these weighty subjects Democrats can reasonably tackle in the condensed time frame, and whether the Governor will call a special session after Thanksgiving to take on a few of them.

Legislative leaders dodged the subject when asked directly about. Possibly a bigger question that won't be answered immediately is how big of a priority will the House and Senate make the Governor's agenda. After the Governor, House, and Senate celebrated lay up after lay up in the spring session, how much will their priorities deviate in the fall? And to what extent will they use the Governor's priorities as leverage to advance their own?

For now, anyway, the mood among legislative Democrats is positive, even if the takeaways from Whitmer's speech were as varied as the content itself.

### ***Don't Expect A Sabbatical On Paid Family Leave Legislation, Dems Say***

Expanding the scope of paid family leave was among the issues considered top of mind for several House Democrats interviewed by *MIRS* following Gov. [Gretchen WHITMER](#)'s "What's Next Address."

Whitmer highlighted paid family leave legislation as one of Democrats' top priorities during her address, referencing the 77% – or about 3.7 million Michigan workers – who do not have access to paid family leave.

She was joined in support of the House and Senate Democratic legislation by Rep. [Donavan MCKINNEY \(D-Detroit\)](#), who said his experiences with both new life and loss have highlighted the importance of giving Michiganders more options for taking leave.

He and his wife have a 19-month-old boy at home, McKinney said, and he added that his wife lost her father less than two weeks ago.

"Her job is expecting her to come back, and she needs some time," he said "We understand that you can't be out of your job for long periods of time, but you need time to heal and recover, whether it's delivering a baby, whether it's the loss of a loved one."

McKinney said legislators need to ensure that people have access to paid leave so they can take the necessary time to heal, and "they'll be better employees for it."

"But we need to ensure that we've got enough funding, and the policy set up, to ensure that people are able to take advantage of this," he said.

So far, Sen. [Erika GEISS \(D-Taylor\)](#)'s [SB 332](#) and Rep. [Helena SCOTT \(D-Detroit\)](#)'s [HB 4574](#) provide for 15 weeks of family leave to cover the birth or adoption of a child, child's sickness, a physical or mental health issue or family sickness. (See "[Manufacturers Concerned Paid Leave Equals \\$1.5B Payroll Tax](#)," 8/25/23)

The sliding scale would allow lower income Michiganders to receive closer to 90% of their weekly wage, but nobody can earn more than 65% of the state's

average weekly wage.

Following Whitmer's address, the focus on paid family leave was supported by the non-profit group Michigan's Children, and CEO Matt **GILLARD** said the call deserves "immediate attention in the Legislature."

"With a slim Democratic majority, party leaders won't always have the chance to make the case for paid family leave in Michigan," he said. "We believe they would be wise to act quickly, and incorporate the growing need for a reliable state child care funding stream."

He also noted that without requiring all businesses to offer a paid leave program, smaller businesses may not be able to properly compete.

But the business community has expressed concern that the legislation could result in a hefty payroll tax for Michigan businesses. Based on a similar model in Minnesota, a payroll tax was created to raise \$1 billion to fund the program.

"Michigan's job providers recognize competitive employee benefits are key to attracting and retaining talent and they are currently providing what is economically feasible," said Wendy **BLOCK**, the Michigan Chamber's Senior Vice President of Business Advocacy. "A one-size-fits-all mandate of this type and magnitude would result in higher taxes, bloated government bureaucracy and hurt the very people it is intending to help – especially small businesses and Michiganders living paycheck-to-paycheck."

When asked about the possibility that final legislation could include compromises, making it less ambitious, McKinney said, "that just means we've got more work to do. It's incremental steps.

"This is more than 40 years of policies that have been left untreated, and not given the attention that they desperately need," he said. "Now, we're coming back and trying to clean up some of the legislation for the first time."

Speaker Pro Tempore [Laurie POHUTSKY \(D-Livonia\)](#) said paid family leave is something the Progressive Women's Caucus has worked on before, "but obviously, things look a little bit different now that we know we're actually going to be able to get them done."

Geiss said the package is "long overdue."

[.SenErikaGeiss](#) on [GovWhitmer](#) discussing paid family leave in her “What’s Next Address” today: [pic.twitter.com/xMyUStlgey](https://pic.twitter.com/xMyUStlgey)

— MI Senate Dems (@MISenDems) [August 30, 2023](#)

But she didn’t express concern about the MMA’s position.

“Anytime we try to do anything that’s positive for workers, they push back,” she said. “They forget that it’s the workers in those companies that make them profitable.”

Geiss said lots of companies have good paid leave policies, but 77% of Michiganders still don’t have access.

Since the country hasn’t acted, it’s up to the states to act, she said.

When asked about the potential for a paid leave requirement for businesses added to the legislation, Geiss responded, “stay tuned for the hearing.”

She said herself and other sponsors have been working on the package all summer and shoring up the language, but are taking concerns and considerations into account.

It will be an ongoing conversation, she said.

Rep. [Julie ROGERS \(D-Kalamazoo\)](#), who chairs the House Health Policy Committee, said the legislation is something that hasn’t really been focused on yet, but noted that she’s excited about the potential to attract talent to the state.