

The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy >> University of Michigan

Michigan Public Policy Survey September 2014

Beyond the coast, a tenuous relationship between Michigan local governments and the Great Lakes

By Tom Ivacko and Sarah Mills

This report presents the opinions of Michigan's local government leaders regarding the bonds – economic and otherwise – between their jurisdictions and the Great Lakes, their support or opposition to policies designed to protect the health of the Lakes, and their views on which level of government should be responsible for taking such action. The findings in this report are based on a statewide survey of local government leaders in the Fall 2013 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS).

>> The **Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)** is a census survey of all 1,856 general purpose local governments in Michigan conducted by the **Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP)** at the University of Michigan in partnership with the **Michigan Municipal League, Michigan Townships Association, and Michigan Association of Counties**. The MPPS takes place twice each year and investigates local officials' opinions and perspectives on a variety of important public policy issues. Respondents for the Fall 2013 wave of the MPPS include county administrators and board chairs, city mayors and managers, village presidents, managers and clerks, and township supervisors, managers and clerks from over 1,350 jurisdictions across the state.

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Key Findings

- Nearly all (99%) of Michigan's local leaders see the Great Lakes as a valuable economic resource for the state overall.
- A majority (58%) of local leaders also see the Lakes as an economic asset for their own jurisdiction, but these perceived economic bonds begin to weaken quickly as distance from the Lakes' shorelines increases, even among jurisdictions located as near as 10 miles from the coast.
 - » Officials of jurisdictions along the lakeshore overwhelmingly (97%) see the Great Lakes as a local economic resource. However, beyond 40 miles inland, the majority (58%) of local officials disagree that there are valuable local economic benefits from the Lakes.
- Most (60%) local leaders think that their own jurisdiction's policies and operations do *not* impact the health of the Great Lakes.
 - » This is true in 60% or more of jurisdictions located more than 10 miles inland, but also in over half (51%) of local governments located on the Great Lakes shorelines.
 - » Jurisdiction population size is also a factor in these views, with officials from larger jurisdictions more often reporting that their policies do impact the Lakes, compared to leaders from small jurisdictions.
- Local leaders express significant support for policies and regulations to protect the health of the Great Lakes. Of 12 possible actions presented in the MPPS, a majority of local officials support strengthening or adopting 10 of them, even in some cases when there are specific costs involved.
 - » The action gaining the highest support (85%) is strengthening regulations to limit water diversions from the Great Lakes.
 - » The only action with overall opposition (71%) among local leaders is increasing the cost of water for households and businesses to encourage consumers to use less water.
- Local leaders believe that state governments in the Great Lakes region should have the most responsibility for protecting the Lakes, followed in order by the federal governments of the U.S. and Canada, business/industry, individuals, and local governments.

Background

Holding about 20% of the world’s fresh water, the Great Lakes in many ways help define Michigan, and play a large role in the state’s history, economy, land use, climate, transportation systems, and more. Providing the boundaries for Michigan’s split peninsulas, the Lakes literally put the state on the map, and provide at least a partially shared identity for its nearly 10 million residents.

Responding to recent calls for cultivating a “Blue economy” in Michigan — through protecting and restoring the waters and coastlines as drivers for tourism, and leveraging innovation in water technology and research related to freshwater systems¹ — would significantly promote the role of the Lakes in the state’s economic policy. Some of these activities would clearly be a boon for local jurisdictions along the shores of the Lakes, and perhaps for others too. Yet, it is unclear how such a message has resonated with local officials across the state.

To learn more about how Michigan’s local governments view and relate to the Great Lakes, in Fall 2013 the MPPS asked local leaders a range of questions about the Lakes: how important the Lakes are to local economic development, what impact they have more generally on local jurisdictions, and conversely, how local leaders think their jurisdictions’ policies affect the health of the Lakes. The survey also gauged support for a range of possible regulatory and policy actions to protect or improve the Lakes, and asked local leaders which entities should be taking a lead in caring for the Lakes.

Economic impact of the Great Lakes felt differently in coastal and inland jurisdictions

Based on their responses to the Fall 2013 MPPS, the idea that the Lakes are an important resource for the state’s economy at-large resonates strongly with Michigan’s local officials, both those in jurisdictions along the shoreline as well as those much farther inland (see *Figure 1*). Nearly all (99%) local leaders agree that the Great Lakes are a valuable economic resource for the state overall, including 89% who strongly agree with this sentiment (see *Figure 2*).

Below the state level, however, views about the Lakes’ local economic impacts are mixed. Statewide, 58% of local officials believe the Great Lakes are indeed a valuable economic resource for their own jurisdictions, but there are significant differences based on their proximity to the coast.

Figure 1
Distance from the coast of the nearest Great Lake to inland jurisdictions

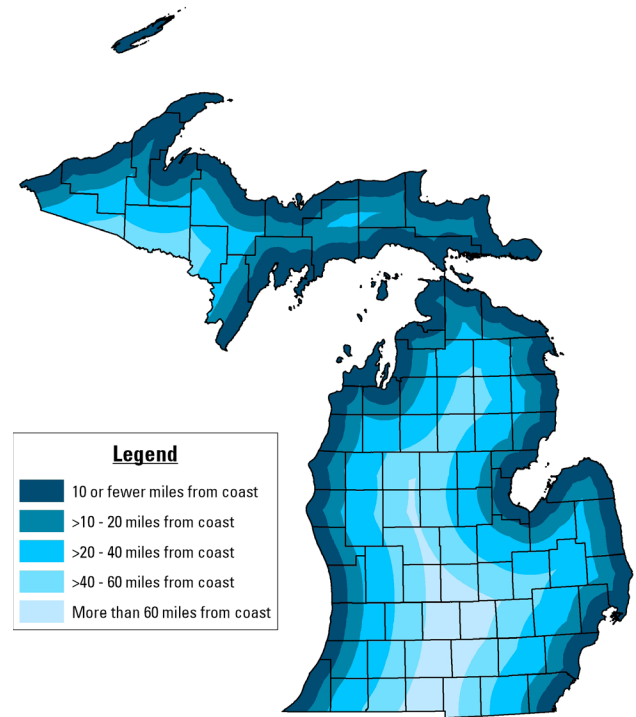
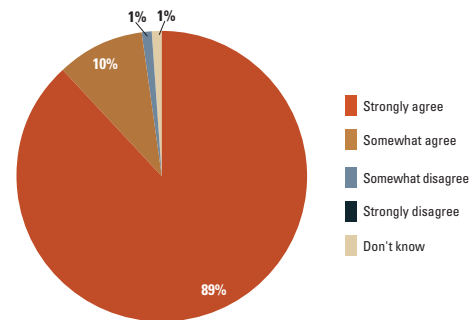


Figure 2
Local leaders’ views on whether the Great Lakes are a valuable economic resource for Michigan overall



Note: Though “strongly disagree” was offered as a response option, only 0.15% of local leaders selected it, and so it is not shown on *Figure 2*.



Among coastal jurisdictions, local leaders overwhelmingly (97%) see the Great Lakes as an economic resource for their jurisdictions (see *Figure 3a*). However, as distance from the shoreline increases, the Lakes' perceived local economic impact quickly decreases. For example, the percentage of local leaders who strongly agree that the Lakes are a valuable local economic resource drops sharply from 71% among coastal jurisdictions to just 21% among inland jurisdictions located even within 10 miles of the coast. In jurisdictions located between 20 and 40 miles inland, views on the local economic impacts of the Lakes are evenly split, with 45% of local leaders agreeing that the Great Lakes are a valuable economic resource for their jurisdictions but 45% disagreeing. And in jurisdictions that are more than 40 miles from the nearest Great Lake, the majority of officials (58%) disagree that the Lakes are a valuable local economic resource.

The effect of distance from the Lakes, however, is most prominent among townships and villages, and among jurisdictions with smaller population sizes more generally. The majority (52%) of local officials in cities even 60 miles or more from the coast agree that the Great Lakes are a valuable economic resource for their jurisdiction (see *Figure 3b*). By contrast, only 29% of township officials and 15% of village officials 60 miles or more inland agree. This may be a result of these types of jurisdictions being somewhat less involved in economic development efforts, whether lake-related or otherwise, compared to cities.

Figure 3a
Percentage of local leaders who agree or disagree that “The Great Lakes are a valuable economic resource for my jurisdiction,” by proximity to the coast

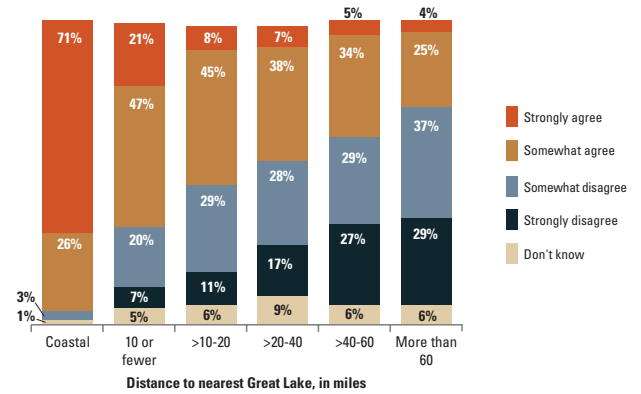
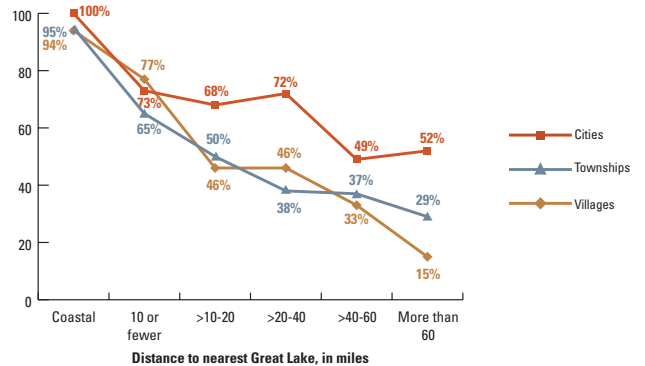


Figure 3b
Percentage of local officials who agree that “The Great Lakes are a valuable economic resource for my jurisdiction,” by jurisdiction type and proximity to the coast



Beyond economic issues, local leaders believe the Lakes impact their jurisdictions significantly more than their jurisdictions’ policies impact the Lakes

Beyond providing economic opportunities, the Great Lakes may impact local communities’ culture, climate, history, and more. When asked whether the Great Lakes have a significant impact on their jurisdictions in general, nearly two in three (64%) local leaders think that the Lakes do indeed impact their jurisdictions. However, much like local leaders’ views on the Lakes’ economic impacts, there are again significant differences in these views based on their jurisdiction’s proximity to the coast.

Not surprisingly, among coastal jurisdictions, local leaders almost universally (98%) believe that the Great Lakes have a significant impact on their jurisdiction, including 83% who strongly feel this way (see *Figure 4*). But again, as distance from the coast increases, there is a sharp change in opinion, especially in the percentage of leaders who feel strongly about the impact of the Lakes on their jurisdictions. For example, while a majority (76%) of officials within 10 miles of the shoreline feel that the Lakes significantly impact their jurisdictions, only 28% strongly feel this way. Between 40 and 60 miles from the coast, opinion is about equally split between those who agree (45%) and disagree (49%) that the Lakes significantly impact their jurisdiction. And beyond 60 miles from shore, an outright majority (60%) believe the Great Lakes do *not* have a significant impact on their jurisdictions.

When asked about the reverse relationship—whether their local jurisdiction’s policies and operations impact the health of the Great Lakes—most (60%) local leaders think that their jurisdictions do *not* impact the health of the Lakes. This is true in 60% or more of jurisdictions located more than 10 miles from the coast, as well as in 51% of coastal jurisdiction (see *Figure 5a*).

It may be that many local leaders see their own jurisdictions as simply too small to impact the health of the Great Lakes. There are, indeed, differences based on the population size of Michigan’s jurisdictions. In places across the state with more than 10,000 residents, opinion is evenly split, with about 48% of local leaders reporting their jurisdiction’s policies have no impact on Lake health, and about 48% saying that their local policies *do* have an impact. By contrast, in the state’s smallest jurisdictions—those with populations less than 1,500 residents—68% of local leaders agree that the jurisdiction’s policies have no impact on the Great Lakes, compared to 28% of local officials who do see an impact (see *Figure 5b*).

Figure 4
Percentage of local leaders who agree or disagree that “The Great Lakes have a significant impact on my jurisdiction,” by proximity to the coast

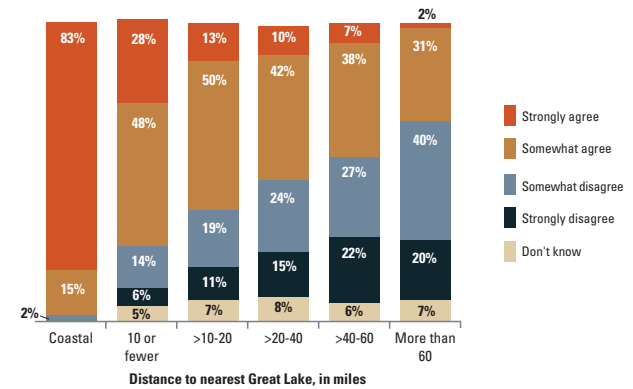


Figure 5a
Percentage of local leaders who agree or disagree that “My jurisdiction’s policies and operations do not impact the health of the Great Lakes,” by proximity to the coast

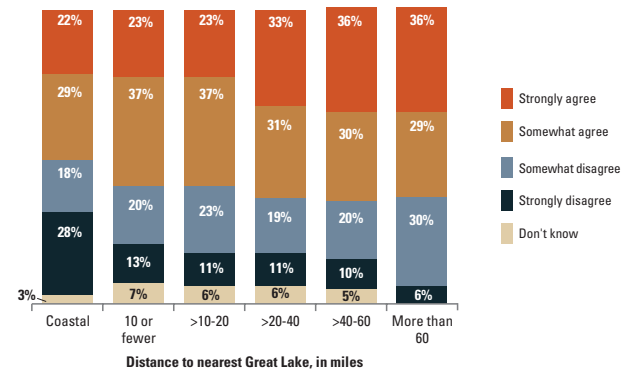
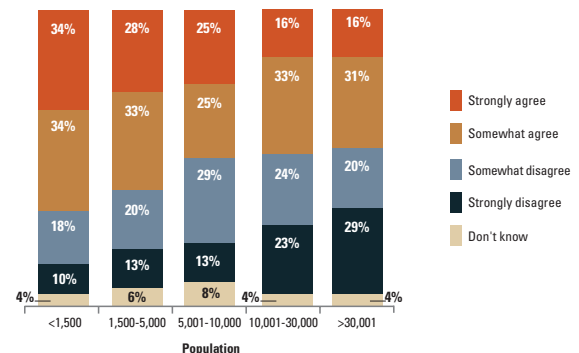


Figure 5b
Percentage of local leaders who agree or disagree that “My jurisdiction’s policies and operations do not impact the health of the Great Lakes,” by population size





Most officials think the Lakes are in good condition, but still support policies to further improve their health

For the most part, local leaders believe that the Great Lakes are currently in good health overall. While only 4% of officials rate them as being in excellent condition, 54% say that they are in good condition (see *Figure 6*). Meanwhile, a third of local officials believe the Lakes are in fair condition, while just 4% think they are in poor condition. Unlike in so many of the previous findings, there are no major differences in these views based on the local official’s proximity to the coast.

Given that so many local officials believe the Lakes are in good or excellent condition today, one might expect somewhat limited support to add or further strengthen regulations to protect the health of the Lakes. Yet the MPPS finds a majority of local leaders express significant support for 10 of the 12 possible regulatory and policy actions presented to them (see *Figure 7a*).

The most popular of the possible actions is to strengthen regulations limiting water diversions from the Great Lakes, which received 85% net support (the percentage of local officials supporting the policy minus the percentage opposing such action). Strengthening regulation on waste water systems’ overflow release and strengthening regulations on runoff from farms and the agriculture sector ranked as the next highest priorities, receiving 74% and 69% net support, respectively, from local officials. Support for these actions could be even higher now, following the recent contamination of drinking water in Monroe County, Michigan (and Toledo, Ohio), linked to algal blooms which result largely from untreated sewage overflow and agricultural runoff.³

Figure 6
Local officials’ assessments of the current condition of the Great Lakes overall

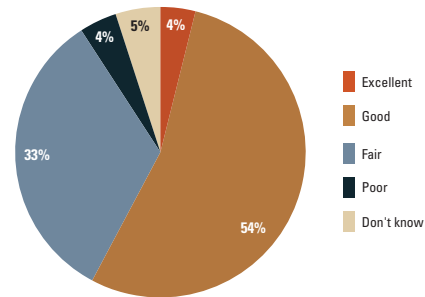
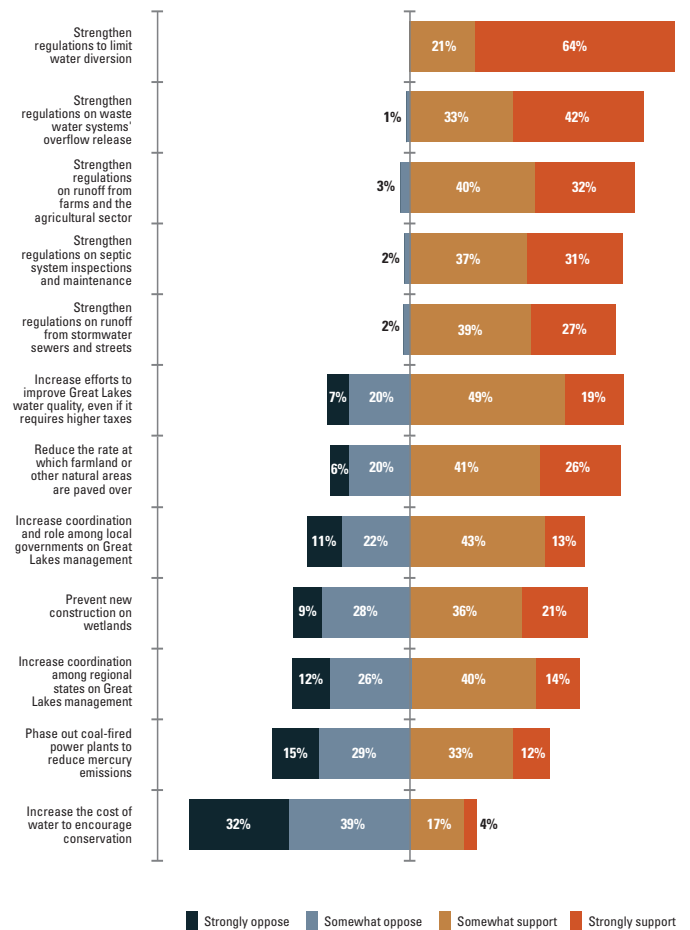


Figure 7a
Local officials’ support for and opposition to a range of new and strengthened Great Lakes-related policies and actions



Note: This figure combines responses from two separate questions using slightly different response options, and truncates some of the policy options. See Note 2 at the end of this report for more information.

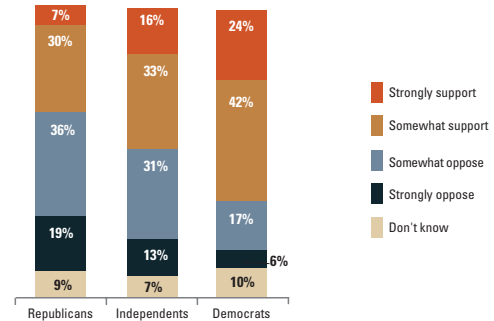
Of the remaining policy actions presented, one had about evenly split support and opposition: 45% of local leaders support phasing out coal-fired power plants to reduce mercury emissions in the Great Lakes region, even if the cost of electricity increases, while 44% oppose such action.

The only policy that received overwhelming opposition was related to water conservation. Overall, 71% of local officials oppose increasing the cost of water for households and businesses to encourage consumers to use less water, while 21% support this action (resulting in a net 50% opposition level).

For each of the 12 possible policies, there were no major differences in opinion based on proximity to the Lakes. Officials in inland jurisdictions were in general just as supportive of these policies as officials in coastal jurisdictions. There was also general agreement among Republicans as well as Democrats that additional or strengthened regulations should be put in place. In fact, the only area where there was a true partisan divide was on phasing out coal-fired power plants. While the majority (55%) of Republican local officials oppose such an action, Democrats are largely (66%) in support of a phase-out (see *Figure 7b*).

Figure 7b

Local officials' support for and opposition to phasing out coal-fired power plants to reduce mercury emissions in the Great Lakes region, even if the cost of electricity increases, by partisanship





Local officials think state governments should have the most responsibility for protecting the Lakes, see small role for their own government

Finally, the MPPS asked local leaders which entities should have responsibility for taking action to protect the Great Lakes. Overall, local officials see a shared responsibility among all levels of government as well as business and industry, and individual citizens. In priority order of which entity should have a great deal of this responsibility, local leaders list state governments in the Great Lakes Region, followed in order by the federal governments of the United States and Canada, businesses/industries, individuals, and local governments in general (see *Figure 8*).

At the bottom of this list is the respondent’s own local government, with only 15% of local leaders saying that their government should have a great deal of responsibility to protect the Lakes. Even so, two in three (67%) local officials say that their government should have at least some responsibility in protecting the Great Lakes, and this increases with proximity to the coast. For example, 91% of local leaders in coastal jurisdictions think that their government should have some responsibility, compared to only 47% in jurisdictions located more than 60 inland (see *Figure 9*).

As might be expected, there is a strong correlation between local leaders’ views on whether their own jurisdictions’ policies and operations impact the health of the Great Lakes, and whether they think their own jurisdiction should have at least some responsibility to protect the Lakes. Among those who strongly believe that their jurisdiction’s actions do *not* impact the Lakes, only 46% think they should have at least some responsibility to protect the Lakes; by contrast, this increases to 92% among those who think their policies and actions *do* impact the Great Lakes.

Figure 8
Local officials’ views on which entities should have responsibility for taking actions to protect the Great Lakes

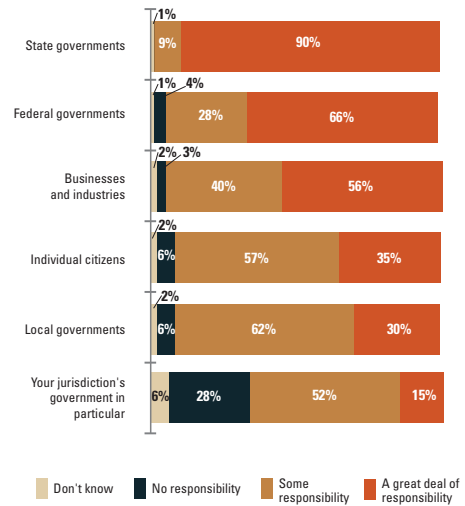
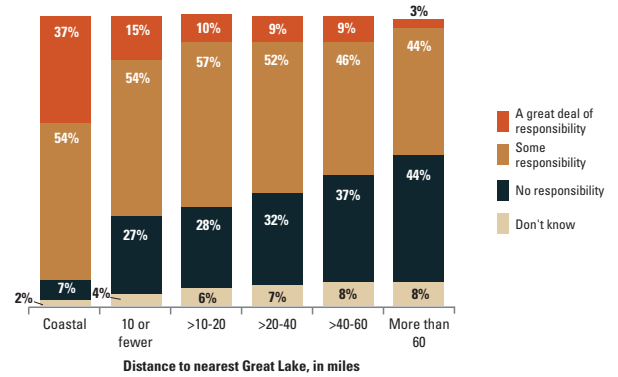


Figure 9
Local officials’ views on how much responsibility their own jurisdiction’s government should have for taking actions to protect the Great Lakes, by proximity to the coast



Conclusion

The MPPS finds that nearly all of Michigan's local leaders see the Great Lakes as a valuable economic resource for the state as a whole, and the majority also view the Lakes as a valuable local economic asset for their own jurisdictions. These economic ties to the Lakes, though, are felt more acutely in coastal jurisdictions compared to jurisdictions farther inland. In fact, these bonds essentially break for a majority of jurisdictions located more than 40 miles from the shoreline.

Proximity to the Lakes is also a factor in whether or not local officials believe that their jurisdiction's policies and operations impact the health of the Great Lakes, though a jurisdiction's population size plays a role in this, too.

Though most local officials believe the Great Lakes are currently in good condition, there is majority support for adding or strengthening a wide range of policies to protect the Lakes. Local leaders believe that state governments should bear the greatest responsibility for protecting the Lakes, though they also agree that local governments, federal governments, business, industry, and citizens have at least some share in this responsibility.

Notes

1. Austin, J. (2013). *Water, Michigan, and the growing "blue economy."* White paper commissioned by the Governor's Office of the Great Lakes for Michigan's Water Strategy. Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Economic Center at Prima Civitas Foundation. Retrieved from <http://issuu.com/michiganeconomiccenter/docs/blue-economy-white-paper>
2. Responses in *Figure 7a* are from questions 5 and 6 in the Fall 2013 MPPS survey. Question 5 asked whether a set of existing regulations should be strengthened or eased, while Question 6 asked whether the respondent would support or oppose a set of policy actions. See the CLOSUP website for exact question text. For ease of display and interpretation in *Figure 7a*, answers to Question 5 have been labeled as support/oppose in terms of strengthening regulations.
3. Detroit Free Press Editorial Board. (2014, August 5). *Toledo water crisis must be a wake-up call.* Detroit Free Press. Retrieved from <http://www.freep.com/article/20140804/OPINION01/308040197/Lake-Erie-algae>

Survey Background and Methodology

The MPPS is a biannual census survey of Michigan's 1,856 units of general purpose local government (83 counties, 277 cities, 256 villages, and 1,240 townships), conducted once each spring and fall. While the spring surveys consist of multiple batteries of the same "core" fiscal, budgetary and operational policy questions and are designed to build up a multi-year time-series of data, the fall surveys focus on various other topics.

In the Fall 2013 iteration, surveys were sent by the Center for Local, State and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) via the internet and hardcopy to top elected and appointed officials (including county administrators and board chairs, city mayors and managers, village presidents, managers and clerks, and township supervisors, managers and clerks).

The Fall 2013 wave was conducted from October 7 to December 17, 2013. A total of 1,353 jurisdictions in the Fall 2013 wave returned valid surveys, resulting in a 73% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.4%. The key relationships discussed in the above report are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level or below, unless otherwise specified. Missing responses are not included in the tabulations, unless otherwise specified. Some report figures may not add to 100% due to rounding within response categories. Data are weighted to account for non-response. Contact CLOSUP staff for more information.

Detailed tables of the data analyzed in this report—by jurisdiction type (county, city, township, or village); by population size of the respondent's community; and by the region of the respondent's jurisdiction—are available online at the MPPS homepage: <http://closup.umich.edu/mpps.php>.

The survey responses presented here are those of local Michigan officials, while further analysis represents the views of the authors. Neither necessarily reflects the views of the University of Michigan, or of other partners in the MPPS.



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The **Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP)**, housed at the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, conducts and supports applied policy research designed to inform state, local, and urban policy issues. Through integrated research, teaching, and outreach involving academic researchers, students, policymakers and practitioners, CLOSUP seeks to foster understanding of today's state and local policy problems, and to find effective solutions to those problems.

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