Gov. Whitmer talks gas tax, roads and literacy in Port Huron

Jackie Smith and Jeremy Ervin, Port Huron Times Herald - March 15, 2019

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer stuck closely to the agenda backing her recently unveiled budget plan when she swung through Port Huron Friday.

As part of a short series of stops, including one in Richmond, the governor’s office promoted the visit as a continuation of her “Road to Opportunity Tour.”

In an interview with the Times Herald Friday morning, she said it was part of a bigger push to educate the state on the issues.

“We’ve spent the two years getting across the state and all 83 counties,” Whitmer said.

“Right after I took my oath of office, I got on a listening tour that informed the budget that I’ve introduced. This is really about making sure people (understand) the magnitude of the problem and what a real solution looks like.”

Whitmer unveiled her first proposed budget plan as governor on March 5.

Among its highlights include three 15-cent fuel tax hikes over the next two years, generating $2.5 billion in new transportation revenue — to be deposited in a budget-specific pot. It also doubles earned income tax credit over two years to offset the burden the tax increase would put on working families. Additionally, her budget puts up $120 million to improve drinking water infrastructure with an extra $1.9 million to be put toward a “drinking water compliance assistance unit” and $60 million put aside for school hydration stations.

On schools for the next 2020 fiscal year, Whitmer proposes $13.8 billion for K-12 systems. That includes $235 million for additional classroom resources and other resources of between $120 and $180 per-pupil funding; $120 million, $102 million and $50 million more for special education, at-risk and career and technical education students, respectively; and $85 million in expanded funding for the state’s Great Start Readiness Program, totally $328.9 million.

On Friday, she spoke about each issue — connecting the dots as if fixing literacy gaps, she said, closes the state’s industry skills gap, drawing residents to communities where roads and water infrastructure systems are being addressed.

“When they see it, they really understand what we’re trying to accomplish,” Whitmer said of her message, “and I think, are more eager to tackle the problem now before it gets so expensive we may never actually recover.”
guarantee the money actually goes to roads,” Whitmer said.

She added, “If someone doesn’t like this way of going about it but has an alternative that gets us to $2.5 billion, I’m certainly open to having that negotiation.”

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer holds a copy of “Rosie Revere, Engineer,” which she read to second grade students at Port Huron’s Crull Elementary School on March 15, 2019 in Port Huron, Michigan. (Photo: Jeremy Ervin/Times Herald)

Whitmer said addressing dwindling population was a concern across the state.

Schools in St. Clair County compete for a shrinking pool of students each year. During the 2013-2014 school year, schools under St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency had 24,005 students, according to the Center of Education Performance and Information. By 2017-18, that number fell to 22,261.

Whitmer also said addressing fundamental services was key to growing Michigan’s population.

“You can’t turn on your drinking water in your home, how is any business going to lure talent into Michigan when we know how we rank and how we stack up on important things like literacy,” she said. “That’s why I keep going back to the fundamentals in growing our population. That is critically important to the long-term success of our state and economic fortitude.”

Whitmer’s budget includes $31.5 million for state-funded literacy coaches — an increase of $24.5 million.

“We know that tripling the number of literacy coaches will make an incredibly important step forward on meeting the needs of kids in this state,” Whitmer said.

She said she had met numerous teachers statewide who want to be successful but feel demoralized in their profession. Providing literacy coaches in schools, she said, would help give teachers the support they need to ensure students are getting the necessary literacy skills.

“We are last in literacy. That means 49 other states are meeting their children’s needs better than the state of Michigan is,” Whitmer said. “That is an abomination.

“If we don’t fix that outcome, our future is not solid, our economy is undermined, our ability to compete is undermined as well.”

Port Huron Schools Superintendent Jamie Cain said he was honored to host Whitmer at the schools, and he was encouraged by the content of her budget proposal.

“I think it’s aggressive and bold, I think it’s necessary for the state of Michigan,” Cain said. “It’s long overdue.”