

AUTOS

Michigan auto stakeholders sound alarm ahead of governor election



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Southfield — The stakes for Michigan's 2026 governor election include automotive businesses going elsewhere if the state doesn't invest in people, places and innovation, said Glenn Stevens, executive director of the Detroit Regional Chamber's automotive arm.

Dozens of representatives from automakers, suppliers, startups and other automotive industry stakeholders met on Thursday across two roundtable discussions at Plante Moran's offices in Southfield to discuss what the Great Lakes State needs to do to maintain its relevance amid conditions unlike anything the industry has seen, Stevens said. They were two of 12 such sessions being held in six cities across the state to gather input for the development of an automobility policy roadmap expected to be released in August ahead of the November election.

"It's extremely consequential," Stevens said of voters' decisions on the next governor. "We need a leader who will be able to look at our signature industry and all of the growing industries as well as invest in innovation, and they are going to have to lead our state into the future. And the key thing they are going to have to do is reach across the aisle to get that done. We need to stop politicizing EVs, and we need to enable EVs, because the world is proliferating EVs."

MichAuto identified artificial intelligence and automation, China and global competition, speed of innovation, trade and regulatory policy, and localization and

manufacturing supply chain evolution as the five "forces" that are creating the challenges that could risk the future of Michigan's leading industry.

Michigan is the largest auto-producing state, has the most business-funded automotive research and development, and has the highest concentration of engineers in the United States that's twice the national average. The state is home to 25 original equipment manufacturers and 95 of the top 100 suppliers to North America. Nearly one in five jobs in Michigan are tied to the automotive and mobility industry, representing \$348 billion in annual economic output. That's about 27% of the state's gross domestic product.

But Michigan has fallen short of creating a long-term strategy for investing in economic development, Stevens said. That includes placemaking, K-12 education, and entrepreneurship and innovation with a focus on supporting its heritage automotive industry and diversifying through the strengths offered from that platform into defense, advanced aerial mobility like drones, robotics, bioscience, agriculture and tourism.

"We don't need to be all things to all people," Stevens said. "We have to recognize, though, that Indiana wants our business, South Carolina wants our business, and China is coming at our business. ... We need to protect those jewels."

More: [Howes: Ford's Farley warns against China entry into U.S. auto market](#)

Automotive executives like Ford Motor Co. CEO Jim Farley have characterized low-cost electric vehicles from Chinese brands as an "existential threat" as they dominate their domestic market and rapidly expand globally, including representing a fifth of sales in Mexico. Canada in January secured tariff relief from China in exchange for allowing [up to 49,000 Chinese EVs](#) into the country at a reduced tariff rate of 6.1%, down from 100% imposed in 2024. U.S. tariffs on Chinese EVs for now have been too high of an obstacle for most Chinese automakers to enter the U.S. market.

But domestic automakers will compete with those vehicles in other countries and one day could face their presence on domestic asphalt.

"The house is on fire, it is," Stevens said. "That's to get attention to say: We can't keep doing things the same way. So, we're also trying to be prescriptive about: How do we put the fire out, and how do we build on top of what we have?"

As an example, Stevens pointed to the debate in the legislature over whether to defund the Going PRO Talent Fund, which awards employers for certain worker training: "That has been an incredible tool for the existing companies to reskill and upskill their workforce as the factory becomes more automated, as AI starts to proliferate, as skilled trades become more and more in demand, and to work with the factories of the future. ... Businesses are looking at that and saying, 'I need consistency to operate my business.'"

He pointed to Indiana and Ohio as examples of states that are offering a long-term vision. Other states that face changes in political party control have done so, too, he said. Michigan has the ability to do it, he added, noting the successful work in places like Detroit, Grand Rapids, Traverse City and Marquette to attract and retain businesses and talent.

"We need to take what those communities are doing well," Stevens said, "and we need Bay City, Flint, Jackson, Lansing — we need more of that."

The ability to accomplish that could depend on the leaders Michigan voters choose later this year. Ask Tom Manganello, founder of MichAuto, partner and co-chair of the auto industry group at law firm Warner Norcross + Judd LLP and a participant in the roundtable. He's skeptical it'll happen: "I'm probably 55-45 pessimistic. I don't see a change in the mentality of our elected officials."

But he hopes the roadmap being developed will depoliticize the efforts toward advancing EVs and other technologies and create a unified agenda that can't be ignored.

"The alternative," he said, "is a long-term, steady decline of our economy, of our educational systems, of our health care systems, of our road system."

Accounting firm Plante Moran is working with MichAuto to put together the strategy, but as a company headquartered in Southfield, its business also relies on a healthy automotive industry, said Mark Barrott, a partner at the company.

"We are deeply invested in the automotive industry," Barrott said. "Many of the people that are impacted or affected by the forces of change that are washing over the industry are our clients. We have a vested interest both from the effect that we're headquartered here, grew up here 102 years ago, are deeply involved in the automotive industry, and many of our clients are impacted by this. We feel we have to be a significant part of how we analyze this problem and how we figure out solutions to it."

In addition to the roundtable, MichAuto has issued a survey to about 1,000 leaders for their input.

"We have opportunity here," Stevens said, "but we're frittering away valuable resources here while we're trying to figure out whether we want to get along or not, and the rest of the world is figuring that out and moving by us and around us, and that is not acceptable."

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