



The 2025 Detroit Policy Conference brought together **more than 1,000** business, government, and community leaders to discuss Driving the Innovation Economy.

Sixty state and regional voices spent the day discussing the Detroit Region's dedication to winning the global competition for business investment and talent and leveraging its assets to foster innovation, particularly between Detroit and Ann Arbor and policy prescriptions needed to grow the state and Region's population and make it an attractive destination for talent and business development.

WHO ATTENDED?

57%

of attendees are employed
in the city of Detroit.

43%

of attendees are
employed **outside**
the city of Detroit.



BUSINESS

49%



GOVERNMENT

15%



EDUCATION

10%



MEDIA

6%



PHILANTHROPY AND NONPROFIT

20%

Businesses Driving the Innovation Economy

Moderator: **Richard Florida**, Founder, Creative Class Group



“It is the city center that will provide the fundamental urban amenities that are necessary for innovators that want to grow their companies [in Detroit].”

Kofi Bonner

Chief Executive Officer,
Bedrock



“Transit really comes to mind for folks in Ann Arbor. The geographic expanse of this Region is real, [and] it can be hard to attract talent, particularly in the Gen Z workforce [where] people don’t really want to drive.”

John McLaughlin

Global ESG Leader and
Ann Arbor Site Lead,
KLA



“I think the physical revitalization of Michigan Central has allowed us to build this innovation platform. We are attracting startups ... we have the policy infrastructure ... and then the social infrastructure.”

Carolina Pluszczynski

Chief Operating Officer,
Michigan Central



“What drives the overall health of the economy is strong education and academic access. Strong access to jobs ... and then sites that become a destination and a desire for people to congregate and create density.”

Robert G. Riney

President and Chief Executive Officer,
Henry Ford Health



Accelerating Innovation

Moderator: **Richard Florida**, Founder, Creative Class Group



“What I see looking out in the opportunity ahead of us ... is to really take those ingredients that are strong and [that] can do so much, and organize them together to have a common strategy, bringing together our big business, our founders, our funders, to then work a strategy, to work a recipe ... [and] share the benefits across our community.”

Dr. Kimberly Andrews Espy
President,
Wayne State University



“We want to be a talent activator, and we want to keep our graduates in the state of Michigan and hopefully attract other businesses and companies that want to come here to latch onto that talent. So, we need to hear from the community. We need to hear from the business leaders.”

Dr. Kevin M. Guskiewicz
President,
Michigan State University



“We have focused strategically on thematic areas. This year, we’re coming together to talk about what we can do in clean water and technologies surrounding water. But we also have areas like artificial intelligence and collaborative opportunities. These intersections are where we see tremendous potential.”

Dr. Santa J. Ono
President,
University of Michigan

A Conversation With Josh Sirefman and Mary Culler

“We didn’t wait for the building to be created. We went to Cornell Tech and started to see that it was important to get [innovation] up and running, and what we learned was that nobody was bringing the pieces together like we wanted to be doing.”

Mary Culler

President, Ford Philanthropy;
Chair, Michigan Central

“If you create the conditions for people to thrive — which includes developing a community around them — it can really work. Community is essential. But we still do need access to capital. We’re not competitive on investment capital here in the market. We’re learning; we need more tools and scale-up infrastructure in the state — and it’s not just Michigan Central; it’s everybody.”

Josh Sirefman

Chief Executive Officer,
Michigan Central



A Conversation With Tricia A. Keith

Interviewer: **Christy McDonald**, Chief Executive Officer, Sammac Communications Inc.



“The market has changed, and so bringing that innovation, bringing the technological advances with a relentless focus on affordability and customer experience is what I intend to bring [to BCBSM].”

Tricia A. Keith

President and Chief Executive Officer,
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan

A Conversation With Alexa and Johnnie Turnage

Moderator: **Ebony JJ Curry**, Senior Reporter, Michigan Chronicle

As a city and as a state, too often, people have counted Detroiters out, Michiganders out. As we continue to build innovation here, all of us together are the calling card. All of us coming together to really shape what innovation can do here.

Alexa Turnage

Founder,
Black Tech Saturdays

It's a lot about access, opportunity, and us, as an organization, how we connect to the greater ecosystem. How are we putting pipelines to opportunities to pilot, opportunities for mentorship, and really getting people as many swings at bat as possible.

Johnnie Turnage

Founder,
Black Tech Saturdays



A Conversation With Nia Batts and Dennis W. Archer Jr.

If you look at other states that are doing better, there is that cooperation between state government, local government, philanthropy, and the business community, where you have the significant business players writing big checks to early stage companies.

Dennis W. Archer Jr.

Chairman and Chief Executive Officer,
Sixteen42 Ventures

If we want to stay on the momentum, we have to pay attention to who is getting the funding . . . If we don't and decide to ignore the data, the gaps in funding for Black and Brown funders will be greatest where they are most prevalent. We have to make sure that founders are being supported and allocators are being supported as well.

Nia Batts

Managing Director and Chief Operating Officer,
Union Heritage



Leaders on Driving Innovation

“This city has no future if our residents can’t get a good-paying job. That’s why we have to make Detroit the easiest place in America to put a manufacturing plant.”

Mike Duggan
Mayor,
City of Detroit

A Conversation With Mayor Duggan

Interviewer: **Paul W. Smith**, Host, WJR NewsTalk 760 AM



This session was sponsored by Comcast Business.

The Case for a Detroit-Ann Arbor Innovation Corridor

“If you look at any great innovation region or any great innovation economy, it’s comprised of . . . a great city and metro area combined with a great college town, and this is why the [Detroit to Ann Arbor] Corridor is so important.”

Richard Florida
Founder,
Creative Class Group



“For ecosystems to work, there has to be a community of people who actively engage with and support one another. Ecosystems need verbs, not just nouns. Verbs like connect and collaborate. Promote. Advocate.”

Dug Song
Co-founder and President,
Song Foundation

Keynote Address: Dug Song

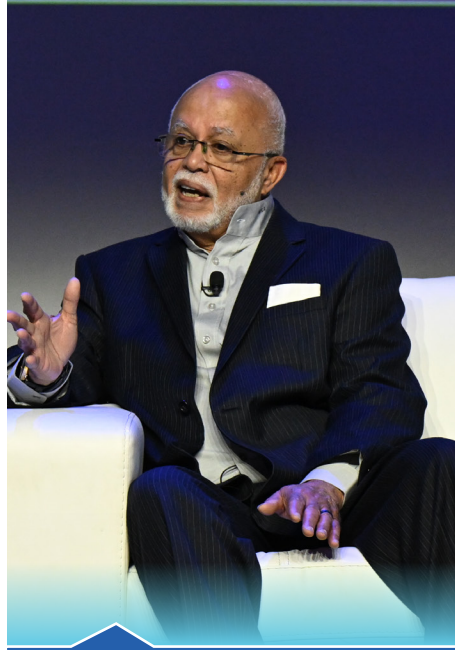


Conversations With County Executives



“A key part of the success of Oakland County is the density of high-paying technology jobs.”

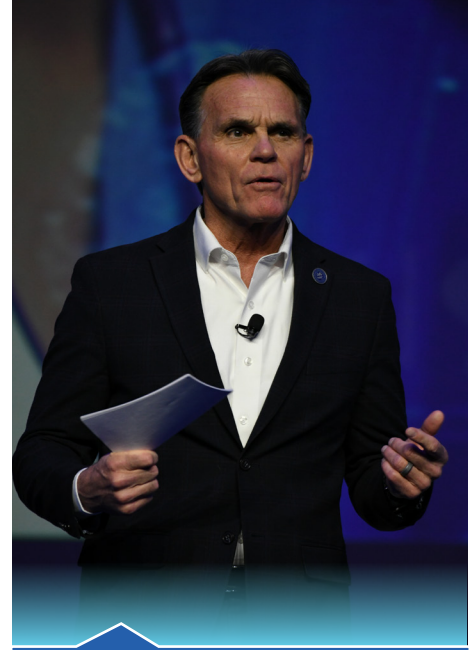
David Coulter
Executive,
Oakland County



“Transit is one of the big issues we need to address. The health of some of our communities is going to be based on transit, whether they understand it or not, because these communities are aging out.”

Warren Evans
Executive,
Wayne County

This session was sponsored by Miller Johnson.



“As a county, we have key partners to support talent needs. All of our schools work together with purposeful partnerships, finding kids early to connect them to opportunities.”

Mark Hackel
Executive,
Macomb County



MICHIGAN ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Investing in Innovation

Moderator: **Daniel Howes**, Senior Editor, Business, and Columnist, The Detroit News

“We are behind compared to some of our peer states. Ohio is certainly one that we regularly look to, and we’ve got to think a lot bigger and be a little bit spicier in terms of some of the ‘how big we’re willing to go’ to be able to play catch up.”

Ben Marchionna

Chief Innovation Officer,
Michigan Economic Development Corporation



“We have some of the best engineering, with a concentration of engineering talent in the country. These are folks at some of your companies or from our research universities that want to build here, stay here, and succeed.”

Rishi Moudgil

Executive Director,
Michigan Founders Fund



“At Renaissance, we’re a fund of funds, so we invest in venture capital funds around the country under the condition that they are willing to look at Michigan startups. Michigan is now a place people are willing to consider.”

Chris Rizik

Managing Partner,
Renaissance Venture Capital



“We have a new generation of engineers in Michigan that know how to do things like mechatronics ... Even if these larger companies aren’t going to move forward with programs at the same speed they may have previously thought, those engineers are still going to do what they do well ...”

Jessica Robinson

Co-founder and Partner,
Assembly Ventures

Innovation in the Automotive Industry

Moderator: **Guy Gordon**, Host, JR Morning, WJR NewsTalk 760 AM

“People flock to the money because they think they can get it. I think being more adventurous with it, if you want that environment around you, putting up creating VC funds, and split arms and doing more of that, people follow the money.”

Abass El-Hage

Founder and Chief Executive Officer,
Red E Charge



“So, joysticks and gaming and all of that kind of stuff are very new to me. But you got a kid that is engaging [and] learning critical thinking in that way, then why not change the way that we do the training to engage that?”

Lisa Lunsford

Co-founder and Chief
Executive Officer, GS3



“We’re seeing a lot of interesting areas where AI can come into play. We’ve had some real success in finding design space and designs that we wouldn’t have been able to come up with using our traditional methods that produce products that have better attributes, better efficiency, or are lower mass.”

Tony Pistagnesi

Executive Director, Innovation and
Strategic Business Development, AAM



“What Sandy [Baruah] said: ‘lead or lag [in EV manufacturing],? We want to lead and be at the forefront ... Lagging is not an option. That’s a death knell.”

Glenn Stevens Jr.

Executive Director, MichAuto;
Vice President,
Automotive and Mobility Initiatives
Detroit Regional Chamber

Power Perspectives

40% of the top computer science programs are within a six-hour drive. We have the people; we have the ideas. \$2.3 billion [from current statewide innovation funding] is not enough money.

Lorne Groe

Chief Executive Officer,
BlueConduit



There are a few test sites around the country, but they're often in the middle of nowhere in an airport. No commerce can be done there.

Michael Healander

Chief Executive Officer,
President, and Co-founder,
Airspace Link



We're supporting Detroit's future. We believe in it . . . policy and sole policy of momentum don't rest on who's in those spaces. We got the momentum; we want to maintain the momentum.

Kevin Johnson

President and Chief Executive Officer,
Detroit Economic Growth Corporation



“We have the skilled workforce; we have the cost-of-living advantages . . . [and] already have a number of excited founders from other states coming to Michigan. We’re in a killer position, and I’m really excited to see where we go from here.”

Lisa McLaughlin

Founder and Chief Executive Officer,
Workit Health



“Before you put something in that community, you have to get permission from the community . . . so they have fewer anxieties of that device and what you’re doing.”

Darren Riley

Co-founder and Chief Executive Officer,
JustAir

“We are going to invest \$450 million over the next three years . . . and we expect a direct return. If we do this right, we are going to create thousands of good-paying, high-wage jobs, and we’re going to make money doing it.”

Ned Staebler

Vice President, Economic Development,
Wayne State University;
President and Chief Executive Officer,
TechTown



THE
KRESGE
FOUNDATION

Highlights From The Kresge Foundation Theatre

Renaissance Center Development

Moderator: **Brad Williams**, Vice President,
Political Affairs, Detroit Regional Chamber



“The Renaissance Center today is obsolete, and it embodies many mistakes of the past. But it truly can be transformed into something special and extraordinarily positive for the city and for the long-term development of Detroit’s international riverfront.”

Jared Fleisher

Vice President,
Rock Family of Companies



“GM is really driving jobs, innovation, and U.S. competitiveness globally. The way we did that, in part, was a shift in how we work. And it led to, right now, what is the most competitive product portfolio we’ve ever had, and by far the best product portfolio in the industry.”

David Massaron

Vice President, Infrastructure
and Corporate Citizenship,
General Motors

A Conversation With Detroit City Council

Moderator: **Lloyd Jackson**, Senior News Analyst,
WJR NewsTalk 760 AM

I think that many barriers still exist around poverty, around Detroit making more of a living wage, growing our population, and more importantly, how we retain Detroiters here in the city. One of the things for me that I'm really trying to work on . . . for people to not only want to work and play but actually live in the great city of Detroit.

Mary Sheffield

President,
Detroit City Council, District 5



One of the main issues we've been working on now and continue to do so in overdrive is affordable, accessible, and attainable housing ... We, at one point in time, had the highest homeowner rate in the entire country. Now, we are relegated to talking about renting.

James Tate

President Pro Tem,
Detroit City Council, District 1



I want to continue to really focus on wealth generation, attracting and supporting young families, moving people out of poverty into the middle class, retaining our existing middle class, and then making Detroit a space where middle-class families and wealthy families want to come back to the City of Detroit.

Scott Benson

Member,
Detroit City Council, District 3



The biggest issue that we are facing is investment in our residents, investment in our business, and investment in our city. The question becomes how we do that on the side of the government.

Fred Durhal III

Member,
Detroit City Council, District 7



The [COVID-19] pandemic showed us that housing is very important, and a lot of people are [still] struggling with that.

Coleman A. Young II

Detroit City Council,
Member-at-Large

NeighborHUB Discussion

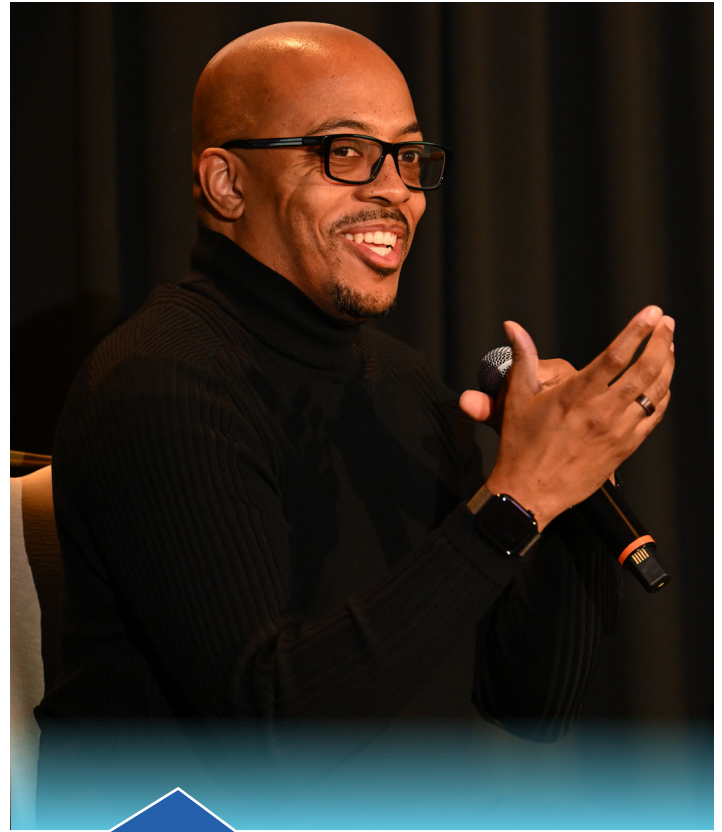
Moderator: **Devon O'Reilly**, Senior Director, Community Engagement and Leadership Development, Detroit Regional Chamber



“There’s been so many long-standing problems – environmental, sustainability, mobility, health care, and even access to technology – that some of the families that live in our community just feel like this is just the way it is.”

Alicia McKay

Founder and Chief Executive Officer,
No Fear Café



“What we try to tell the youth every day is, ‘everyone here is a user of technology on a day-to-day basis, but we’re trying to let you not just be a consumer of technology but actually be a producer.’”

Bartel Welch

Founder and Executive Director,
CODE313; Chief Executive Officer,
Red Diamond Digital

Rocket

Rocket Companies Exhibit Hall



SHARING THE STORY

In the Media:

Nearly **60** credentialed media attended, netting approximately **82** media placements across broadcast, print, and digital platforms. These included stories in Axios Detroit, Bridge Michigan, CBS Detroit, Crain's Detroit Business, Detroit Free Press, Detroit PBS, Michigan Chronicle, The Detroit News, WDET, and WJR-AM.

External Engagement:



Youtube:

665 Post-event Views

140 Views on Highest-viewed Video



Livestream:

996 Unique Viewers

18 Average Minutes



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Blue Shield
Blue Care Network
of Michigan



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For 2026 sponsorship opportunities or more information, contact **Jim Connarn** at
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