

# An Interview with Governor Rick Snyder

By Naseem Stecker

**"R**elentless positive action"—these three words sum up a philosophy close to the heart of Michigan Governor Rick Snyder. It's a strategy he has used successfully as a teenager planning his educational path and later in business as a venture capitalist. Now, almost a year in public office, he's doing more of the same—translating his deeply thought out, long-term vision into reality.

Since taking office in January, Snyder has quarterbacked one reform after another in taxes, health care coverage, education, teacher tenure, welfare, and, with the help of a GOP-dominated legislature, passed a controversial new law that gives significant power to emergency financial managers in struggling cities and school districts. These moves have prompted a backlash by some citizens infuriated with his actions. But recall efforts and loud demonstrations in front of the Capitol do not faze this governor, who says he has developed a thicker skin. What matters most to him is "[creating] a new culture and long-term environment for success in Michigan" so others can do an even better job after his tenure.

"When I got here, too much of the culture was about people simply asking for money," Snyder said. "It wasn't about results or outcomes. After people say 'hi,' they'll say 'we want money' and that's not acceptable.

Government isn't here to write checks, but to give great customer service to our citizens."

Snyder, who has a law degree from the University of Michigan and views the law as "a great tool kit to have in one's bag of skills," was interviewed for the *Michigan Bar Journal* in September. Edited excerpts from that brief interview appear below.

*You used your law degree in a very nontraditional way. Do you have any advice for young lawyers?*

Think about what your career goals are. A lot of times, people don't come up with outcomes or what they're trying to achieve. What I have found very helpful in my career is I typically think fairly long term and come up with a vision and a plan for what I want to do, and I use a philosophy of relentless positive action to get there.

*Who were your mentors?*

My parents were the biggest role models in my life. When I was a teenager, I built a plan. I wanted a bachelor's in liberal arts, an MBA, and a law degree. I built a plan to do it in six years instead of nine. I got my bachelor's when I was 19, my MBA when I was 20, and my law degree when I was 23. I love teaching. I was a teaching assistant when I was in law school and taught a tax class in business school. I had an opportunity to



be an adjunct professor in the MBA program teaching tax when I was 24, and taught for three years—because I loved it, and also I would have a credential I could show when I'm 67 years old that I was able to teach in Michigan's MBA program. That's vision.

*What did your parents do that made you so focused?*

I got the two greatest gifts from my parents. First, they taught me about family and love—they were going to love me even if I did something not so bright. That love would always be there, which was an important lesson for us to know about our family. They also taught me how to make a decision, which is a huge distinction from making decisions for me.... They would say I had to make the decision and they would be there to give advice and support me even if I might not have made the best decision in their view.

*Let's change course here and focus on the legal landscape. There have been a number of recent initiatives calling for restructuring of the justice system—the State Bar's Judicial Crossroads Task Force recommendations, for one. What do you think of those recommendations?*

I am very supportive of many of the report's recommendations. It was good work,

I typically think fairly long term and come up with a vision and a plan for what I want to do, and I use a philosophy of relentless positive action to get there.

I was hired to do this job. I'm very honored to have it and our voters hired me based on what I said I was going to do.

and so I'm excited and will support the reforms going through the legislature. Let's go!

### *Anything specific in the report you would single out?*

Just as an illustration—the ability for cross-jurisdictional opportunities, or basically the district court can hear circuit court cases or probate court cases. Our judges are qualified enough that this could actually improve performance, costs, and results.

### *What about business courts?*

I think they're a good idea, and we're working with the judiciary on structuring a business court proposal the right way. I can appreciate this because, as a businessperson, I have done some fairly sophisticated intellectual property work. It's important to have a background in such a specialized area. Otherwise, it might be difficult for a lot of judges to address this issue appropriately.... It would be a good achievement in a business court program to find a way to deal with them at the state level.

### *What about the State Court Administrative Office's recommendations on judicial downsizing? Do you agree with them?*

Yes, let's do it. And at the same time, part of it was to make sure that we have enough resources for, say, research attorneys and others using technology to make sure we can actually improve performance with fewer judges.

### *It's estimated that downsizing will create \$8 million in savings. Will this be plowed back into the justice system in terms of better technology, for example?*

We're still in difficult financial times, so it's important to save money but, secondly,

some portion of the savings should be available for investments and things like technology because that leads to improved performance. So again we're not stopping with one level of improvement. I'm a big advocate of best practices and continuous improvement.

### *Would that be one of your priorities in the court system?*

Well, that's one of the cases. As one example, I would like to have the judiciary look longer term at law enforcement officer appearances for minor traffic offenses. Quite often today, officers still have to go to court and spend a lot of time potentially waiting or go during off hours, depending on their shift, to do those things. Part of the question is.... can we use video, get on Skype, or do their court appearance over a video connection? These ideas would result in huge savings and be much more efficient for all of us.

### *The National Legal Aid and Defender Association found in its 2008 study that the state has "abdicated its constitutional mandate to provide for adequate representation of poor people facing potential loss of liberty in its criminal courts by passing on their responsibility to their counties as an unfunded mandate." Is there any plan to reform that system?*

We are working in conjunction with the judiciary, looking at what might be possible to improve how we do indigent defense of the state. I believe there are areas to improve and we are looking at reforms to address these areas.

### *Can you be more specific about what kind of reforms?*

We're not ready to roll those out yet. They will come up this fall. It could be quite an extensive agenda.

### *How often do you unveil new initiatives?*

The state of the state [address] was in January and we did economic development. February was budget and tax reform, which were both huge. March was government reform and April was education reform. September was health and wellness, October was infrastructure, and November is talent.

Basically, we outlined these initiatives in the state of the state address. So in January I said, "here's the road map for the whole year." I view it as a very simple philosophy, which is not true of traditional career politicians because I am not one. I was hired to do this job. [I'm] very honored to have it and our voters hired me based on what I said I was going to do. I keep a list nearby and say, "OK, here are the things I said I was going to do." We're systemically going through the list, taking on these serious structural problems one after another, solving them with relentless positive action, which means we saw problems; we don't blame anyone for anything and we don't take credit for anything. We just solve problems, and it's worked. It's going to keep working.

### *You've been in office for nine months and have made some dramatic changes in the tax system, welfare, and education. When do you foresee that the Michigan economy will start showing improvements as a result of these changes?*

Some of the early statements have already happened. I have met a lot of companies that have increased their hiring plans; they are being more proactive about their business activities, and this is going to continue. It takes time for the impact of these things to happen and many haven't even taken legal effect yet. But based on the actions we're taking, we're seeing positive improvement already. It's difficult given the national and international environment, but Michigan has been doing better relative to the rest of the country.

### *Can you project that things will be better next year?*

Well, that's the goal and we're on path to see it happen.

### What would you like to achieve by the end of your four years?

I've set a benchmark. My measure of success when I'm done being governor—whether it's four years or eight years—[in-

cludes] two measures. One is, did I do what I said I was going to do? The second is, was it all done in the context of creating a long-term environment for success that had nothing to do with me being governor? Was this

part of a path that could go on for 10, 20, 30, or 40 years? To say there's a vision for Michigan, there's a plan, there's a new culture based on relentless positive action; it's not about Rick Snyder ever being governor, but people taking what we have accomplished and continuing to grow—smarter, better people doing an even better job for the long term. That would be success. ■

People taking what we have accomplished and continuing to grow.... That would be success.

*Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal. She can be contacted by e-mail at [nstecker@mail.michbar.org](mailto:nstecker@mail.michbar.org).*

## Update: Commission to Study How to Boost Legal Aid for the Indigent

Governor Rick Snyder issued an executive order October 13 that creates a bipartisan commission to investigate and improve legal representation for low-income criminal defendants in Michigan. The governor said the commission was needed because the quality of representation provided to defendants who are unable to pay for their own legal defense varied greatly across the state. "A core principle of our criminal justice system is to guarantee that an individual charged with a crime be entitled to legal representation, even if they are unable to hire private counsel," Snyder said. "The commission will work to ensure that all criminal defendants receive effective assistance of counsel." The recommendations of the Indigent Defense Advisory Commission are due to the governor and legislature by July 15, 2012.

Retired Barry County Circuit Judge Jim Fisher will head the 14-member commission, which includes four lawmakers. The legislative members are Sen. Bruce Caswell, Hillsdale; Sen. Bert Johnson, Highland Park;



Hon. James Fisher convened the first meeting of the Indigent Defense Advisory Commission at the State Bar October 20.

Rep. Tom McMillin, Rochester Hills; and Rep. Ellen Cogen Lipton, Huntington Woods. The other members are:

- Hon. Tom Boyd, Ingham County district judge, representing the interests of the judiciary
- Michael Brown, pastor and executive director of Kalamazoo Gospel Mission, representing the general public

- Judith Gracey, Oakland County attorney, representing the State Bar of Michigan
- Maggie Jones, Livingston County commissioner, representing local government
- Hon. Colleen O'Brien, Oakland County circuit judge, representing the interests of the judiciary
- Andrew Richner, Grosse Pointe Park, representing the general public
- Suzanne Sareini, Dearborn, representing the general public
- Ron Schafer, Ionia County prosecutor, representing prosecutors
- John Shea, Washtenaw County defense attorney, representing defense attorneys

Julie Fershtman, president of the State Bar of Michigan, described the commission as a "significant step forward in guaranteeing that Michigan has a criminal justice system that works for all and that upholds core constitutional rights for Michigan's citizens."

For details and responses to the creation of the commission, visit [www.michbar.org](http://www.michbar.org)