



2025 DETROIT FOCUS GROUPS

A Report by the Michigan League of Conservation Voters

Methodology

Ahead of Detroit's 2025 municipal elections, Michigan LCV's Democracy for All team led a citywide community engagement process to surface the environmental, economic, and democratic challenges facing Detroiters. This included:

- A general focus group held
- A Black women's Detroit focus group
- A Precinct Delegate roundtable
- Follow-up conversations with partner organizations and grassroots leaders

The findings reflect both common concerns and distinct insights, all pointing to the urgent need for policies rooted in justice, community leadership, and long-term investment in neighborhoods.

Key Themes and Community Findings

Water Injustice and Infrastructure Failures

Water insecurity emerged as the most immediate and emotionally charged issue raised across all groups.

Affordability: Water bills of \$200+ per month are now routine. Lifeline programs exist, but most are temporary, poorly advertised, or come with burdensome eligibility rules. Residents noted a constant tradeoff between paying for water and buying food or medicine.

Quality: Brown water, chemical smells, and sediment in tap water were commonly reported—especially in Southwest Detroit and aging multi-unit buildings. Residents said they no longer trust that city water is safe to drink.

Infrastructure collapse: The 2021 floods were a tipping point. Residents described chronic water main breaks, sewer backups, and decades-old infrastructure that's never been modernized. A third of lateral sewer lines are disconnected, and alleyway drainage systems are no longer maintained.

Governance and regional control: Many Detroiters feel betrayed by the city's shift to the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA) during emergency management. This "sharecropping of our own infrastructure," as one participant put it, has created a system where Detroit maintains the system but lacks decision-making power.



We provide water to 40% of Michigan, and we can't afford it ourselves."



Air Pollution and Public Health

Air quality is a daily crisis for many Detroiters, particularly in Southwest Detroit and the East Side.

Chronic illness: Asthma, sinus conditions, and even cancer were frequently mentioned. Residents talked about “tasting the air” on bad days and described how thick, chemical-laden air impacts children, elders, and entire households.

Pollution sources: Marathon Petroleum, incinerators, freight traffic on I-75, and industrial facilities near residential streets were named as major contributors.

Zoning failures and racial injustice: Residents emphasized that zoning laws allow polluting industries to operate next to homes, schools, and playgrounds—especially in Black and immigrant communities. This structural overlap was described as a form of environmental violence.

Housing and Land Displacement

The conversation around housing revealed how land use, speculation, and policy combine to exclude long-term Detroiters.

Gentrification and speculation: Residents reported being priced out of their own neighborhoods—even those long neglected by developers. Many pointed to investors buying up properties en masse, making affordable homeownership out of reach.

The Detroit Land Bank: Deep distrust emerged around the Land Bank’s processes. Residents said it’s easier for developers to acquire property than for residents to buy the vacant house next door.

Lack of green space access: While the city boasts new trails and park projects, many participants—especially women and elders—reported that these spaces are hard to reach without a car and often feel unsafe or under-maintained.

Historical trauma: From the destruction of Black Bottom to the proposed “Minnesota Project,” residents described a pattern of land loss that disproportionately harms Black families.



They took our neighborhoods, paved them over, and now they’re back to take what’s left.”



Energy Insecurity and Utility Exploitation

Electricity was framed not just as a service, but a site of harm.

Power outages: Residents in neighborhoods from Midtown to the West Side reported losing power during calm weather. For some, the outages lasted hours or days. Generators have become necessary purchases—not for convenience, but survival.

Unaffordable bills: Many reported winter gas/electric bills exceeding \$500 or \$600/month. One participant’s mother left Detroit altogether during the winter, staying with friends in the suburbs to avoid heating an empty home.

Disconnection trauma: Stories of sudden shutoffs—despite recent payments—were common. A visually impaired resident came home to total darkness after his electricity was cut off the week he had paid.

Corporate unaccountability: DTE and Consumers Energy were criticized for raising rates while worsening service. People questioned how utilities are allowed to profit off essential services while putting lives at risk.

Mental and emotional toll: Beyond physical inconvenience, participants described feeling constant anxiety about their power being cut—especially during heat waves or freezing temperatures.



Utilities are supposed to keep us alive. Instead, they leave us in the dark.”

Democratic Disempowerment and Governance Barriers

Despite being deeply informed and active, Detroiters expressed consistent frustration with the city’s political system.

Closed-door governance: City meetings are poorly publicized, held during business hours, and often feel performative. Public comment periods are seen as “ignored formalities.”

Strong-mayor system: Residents called Detroit’s current power structure undemocratic. Many advocated for a weak-mayor system and stronger council oversight—along with full implementation of Proposal P, the “People’s Bill of Rights.”

Low turnout and corporate influence: With citywide turnout hovering at 15–25%, residents worry that elections are being decided by moneyed interests rather than communities.

Exclusion of youth and returning citizens: Youth political education was suggested as early as age 12. Participants also called for reinvestment in job training, housing, and mental health services for formerly incarcerated residents.



We don’t lack ideas. We lack power.”



Vision for Detroit's Future

During a shared visioning exercise, participants described what a thriving Detroit could look like:

- Clean air and water for everyone
- Elders relaxing on porches without fear of bills or displacement
- Children playing freely in walkable, green neighborhoods
- Local government that responds to the people, not just developers
- Neighborhoods full of fruit trees, gardens, and joy

Words like “lavender,” “frolicking,” “fruit trees,” and “community” came up repeatedly—expressing a vision not just for survival, but beauty and liberation.

Community Recommendations for Michigan LCV and Candidates

01 Invest in Grassroots Partnerships

- Directly fund neighborhood-based groups organizing around water, air, and housing justice.
- Include grassroots leaders in campaign strategy and messaging.

02 Prioritize Civic Education and Policy Literacy

- Host teach-ins on zoning, utility regulation, regional water governance, and budgeting.
- Help Detroiters understand and intervene in decisions made by GLWA, DWSD, DTE, and the Land Bank.

03 Support Values-Aligned Candidates

- Endorse candidates based on accountability and movement alignment—not just “viability.”
- Encourage campaigns that reject corporate PAC money and prioritize policy rooted in justice.

04 Deepen Youth and Reentry Programming

- Start voter and civic education at middle school age.
- Expand access to job training, housing, and trauma-informed services for returning citizens.

05 Transform Candidate Engagement

- Organize community-led forums where residents—not moderators—ask questions.
- Focus forums on real issues like water, energy, and displacement, not just crime or development.

Conclusion

Detroiters are not apathetic. They are informed, visionary, and organized. What they seek is not charity—but power, transparency, and justice.

With intentional partnership, radical listening, and deep investment in neighborhood leadership, Michigan LCV and aligned candidates can help bring forth a Detroit that is cleaner, greener, and governed by its people.