

East Village Magazine

August 2026



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Issue No. 752 August 2026

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Layout by Kate Stockrahm. Printing by PrintComm Inc., 3040 S. Dye Rd., Flint, MI 48507.

East Village Magazine is a program of the Village Information Center Inc., a nonprofit corporation. We welcome material from readers, but all submissions become the property of the publication and if published will be edited to conform to the editorial style and policies of the publication. All inquiries about the publication should be mailed to *East Village Magazine*, Village Information Center, 720 E. Second St., Flint, Mich. 48503. Distribution is the first Thursday of each month. Display advertising rates are \$34 a column-inch plus any other costs. Unclassified ads are \$2.50 a printed line or part of a printed line. Rates subject to change without notice. The deadline for advertising is at least 14 days before each publication date.

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Commentary

You might be a socialist if...

By Paul Rozycki

With the victory of Democratic Socialist Zohran Mamdani as Mayor of New York, the activism of Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Abdul El-Sayed's recent Michigan primary win, the rise of the Democratic Socialist/progressive wing of the Democratic Party seems evident around the nation. And while the movement has inspired a number of voters, it has also caused division within the party and raised concerns from traditional Democrats over electability this November.

Some Republicans have already begun to label the Democratic Party as the Socialist Party, and as a result of the recent primaries I expect one of the featured charges in fall campaigns will be that electing Democrats will bring "SOCIALISM" to the nation.

For some, that charge conjures up visions of Russian peasants breaking rocks in one of Stalin's Siberian Gulags or vast armies of toiling Chinese farmers chanting the words of Chairman Mao as they harvest rice. Yeah, those guys were socialists – but if every form of government activity is socialist, that includes a lot of things far short of Stalin or Mao.

So what is socialism? The Encyclopedia Britannica defines socialism as the social and economic doctrine calling for public ownership and control over property and natural resources. Beyond that there are a number of other definitions and nuances, but in its most basic form a socialist government does a lot of "stuff"

– including providing many services and playing a significant role in the economy. What that stuff is can vary greatly from one nation to another, and many of those who cringe at the "socialist" label might find that some of that stuff, and many of those services, are things they appreciate and expect from today's U.S. government.

In a nod to Jeff Foxworthy and his lauded 1990s comedy routine, "You might be a redneck if..." below are a few things that might actually make you a socialist of one variety or another.

You might be a socialist if...

1. You think that Medicare and Social Security are working out okay for your grandparents.
2. You feel that the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) is a good idea.
3. You are glad that there are programs for the poor such as SNAP or subsidized housing.
4. You support the right for unions to organize.
5. You appreciate the fact that there is unemployment insurance for those who need it.
6. Your children attend public schools.
7. You make good use of the county or city library.
8. You like to take a walk at For Mar, go to Crossroads Village, or any of the other Genesee County parks.
9. You appreciate the safety and protection your local police and firefighters provide.
10. You think the interstate high-

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Cover: Silo mural on Spring Grove grounds in Flint. (Photo by Edwin D. Custer)



Photo of the Month: A view from Tunes at Noon, a free downtown Flint music series presented by the Greater Flint Arts Council on July 7, 2026. (Photo by Edwin D. Custer)

Technology Beat

Data centers, AI, and the growth of tech industry demand in Flint and beyond

By Nathan Waters

Data centers are one of the hottest and most contentious topics in the current discourse across Michigan and the United States at large. The requirements for digital storage and increased development of online services by big tech companies like Meta (parent company of Facebook), Microsoft, and Google are driving the boom to build data centers further afield – and nearer to home.

With potential data center site plan reviews, permits, and facility installations in Flint halted by a 12-month moratorium passed by city council in June, it seems time for East Village Magazine (EVM) to provide an overview of the landscape surrounding these controversial developments in Flint and beyond.

What are data centers?

A data center, at the basest level,

is storage space for large quantities of computers called servers, which are essentially more powerful versions of computers similar to what would be available to everyday consumers. Both have the same basic components – such as a motherboard, central processing unit (CPU), random access memory (RAM), and connections to power and a network – but the key difference between a home computer and a server is that a server has no “interface peripherals” like a screen, keyboard, or mouse.

A server does not require a typical interface as the information it provides is shared through a network, typically the internet. When an external computer requests information held on a server, the server receives a request to “serve” the information to the requesting computer – hence the name “server.”

“Most people just understand

data centers as just the structure,” Dr. Changxin Bai, assistant professor of the Computer Science Department at Kettering University, told EVM, “but it is all of the infrastructure, chips, cooling, network connection.”

The size of a data center is described by how much power the facility consumes at “peak load,” which is measured in mega-watts (MW) or giga-watts (GW). This is the amount of power used in an instant while the facility is running at full capacity. Dr. Bai explains, “Electricity is the main infrastructure [of a data center], but it is not just the electricity used by the chips. [There] is the usage of the server, the storage, the networking and the cooling.”

Data centers can also vary widely in physical size, from “a network closet or a warehouse holding servers” to a “multi-location campus”

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Data centers..

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comprising multiple warehouses. Though the average data center is between five to 10 MW according to the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME), for simplicity's sake, let's consider a one MW data center, meaning a data center that uses one mega-watt of power in one hour (MWh).

The average American home used about 0.9 MWh per month in 2022 according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, and by comparison, a one MW data center running full-time would use 730 MWh over that same time period.

Data center growth

According to recent reporting by the Pew Research Center, nearly 1,500 new data centers are being planned or under various stages of development across the United States. At the time of publishing, there were 79 data centers in Michigan, according to the industry research site Data Center Map. But what is causing this data center boom, and why are they spread out across the country?

The tech industry's push for data centers has largely been fueled by the implementation of AI into just about every product, with major companies and start-ups alike creating their own AI models. Giant companies such as Google, Microsoft, and xAI have Gemini, CoPilot, and Grok respectively, while startups such as OpenAI and Anthropic have produced ChatGPT and Claude.

All of these programs are what are called Large Language Models (LLM). Such programs take a large amount of data to "teach" the AI how to respond. Teaching, in this instance, isn't similar to how a human being is taught. LLMs use a massive number of data points, or parameters, numbering in the billions to greater than one trillion, to make each piece of feedback. These parameters are processed

using a method called matrix multiplication to provide the statistically most-likely next word in the model's response.

The many calculations needed for response to every inquiry (at a speed that's appealing to a user) currently requires many processing units to divide those calculations into smaller portions. The method needs enormous amounts of power, and therefore the data centers that make those calculations possible use an enormous amount of power.

As reported by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Technology Review, it is estimated to have taken 50GWh, or 50,000 MWh, just to train OpenAI's Chat GPT-4. This equates to the power usage of approximately 4,600 average homes in a year, or about 113% of all of the solar power generated in Genesee County annually. This is before any user makes a request for information, called a "query."

Sam Altman, OpenAI's CEO has claimed that each query uses 0.34 watt-hours on average for the GPT-4 model, with Axios reporting that OpenAI claims to receive 2.5 billion queries per day. This equates to around 850 MWh per day of power usage, or the equivalent of 78 homes' yearly power consumption.

Unlike other industries, which look for low-cost labor in developing nations and can ship products worldwide, the data center business requires a directly opposing approach. The requirement for reliable power and network connection combined with the requirement for rapid response to users has pushed the building of data centers into every state across the U.S. Long distance communication of the data causes delays (called latency) which are only portions of a second, but that time rapidly expands with the large amount of data being processed. Together, all of these requirements push corporations to seek expansion into locations with low-cost land, reliable power (with the capacity to easily

generate more power), and stable, high speed connection to the internet.

Environmental impact

Opponents of data centers will point to environmental and infrastructure impacts as a reason data centers should be kept out of a community. These impacts usually involve concern over land usage, water usage, and carbon emissions/pollution. "People talk about pollution and carbon emission, but it depends on where [the power] is coming from. Oil and gas, sure," Dr. Bai explained of possible pollution from source fuels, but "green or nuclear... maybe wind, you may have a nice [low] emission of carbon."

While it is worth mentioning that solar, wind, and nuclear energy may have their own set of environmental concerns due to equipment manufacturing or waste disposal, most energy in the United States is generated using coal, natural gas, or oil byproducts known as "fossil fuels." Fossil fuels are burned to create energy, they emit greenhouse gasses, chief among which is carbon dioxide (CO₂), and the emission of these gasses contribute to the ongoing heating of the Earth's atmosphere and the change in climate and patterns across the globe, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

The United States generates roughly 384g CO₂ per a kWh, based on a mix of power sources including coal, natural gas, wind, solar, and nuclear, according to the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health.

While that's below the global average of 422g CO₂/kWh, the addition of 8.5 GWh (8,500 MWh) of data center compute power to the U.S. in 2025 generated 3,264 metric tons (7,165,000 lbs) of CO₂ into the atmosphere – or the rough equivalent of the emissions from an additional 8 million miles driven by the average

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Data centers ...

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American car. This is only the newly-realized data center power, excluding what existed before 2025.

Atop carbon emissions, the electricity used by data centers is also ultimately converted to heat – and that heat needs to go somewhere, lest it melt the equipment that is making use of this power.

The cooling solutions for data centers can vary, but are typically either one or some combination of the following methods – most of which require water, more power, or both.

Mechanical cooling

Mechanical cooling is an industrial-sized version of a home air-conditioner. It requires a more open layout for a data center with wide rows between server racks to allow cold air to flow. This uses a relatively large amount of power and comparable water to other average cooling methods, on a scale of 0.7 to 3 liters per watt-hour (L/Wh).

When considering this at scale for our one MW data center example above, that data center could use between 511,000 to 2,190,000 liters (135,000 - 579,000 gallons) of water per month. A range that can be described as 20-90% of the volume of an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

Air cooling

Air cooling is the use of mechanical coolers, typically using some type of refrigerant, to cool the air within the facility where the humidity and cleanliness of the air can be controlled. This is the most common, and energy demanding, process.

Free air cooling

Free air cooling is a low-water and low-power option that essentially uses regular air to cool servers. By blowing outside air through a server room, or leaving it exposed to air, heat

will be pulled away at the whims of nature. However, this method is limited to some of the coldest regions on earth.

Adiabatic cooling

Adiabatic cooling uses the properties of water to pull heat away from a radiator (similar to that used in mechanical cooling) and as the water evaporates, it helps pull heat from the system, thereby cooling it. This method is limited mainly to dry climates as humid climates limit the water's ability to evaporate.

Using the numbers from the hypothetical one MW data center discussed previously, the water usage would amount to ~4.4 million gallons of water per day or more in this method.

Noting the environmental concerns surrounding data centers is not to say that they are completely not worth building, as data centers have proven an invaluable part of modern internet infrastructure. They hold the websites, records, personal information, and back-end computer work that much of the modern world uses every day. For example, in October 2025, Amazon Web Services (AWS) US-EAST-1 data center had a 15-hour outage. The outage shut down many major websites and services such as Snapchat, McDonalds App, United Airlines, and The New York Times, showing just how much of daily life is now tied to just one data center.

Data centers and Flint

On June 3, Flint City Council President Candice Mushatt introduced a resolution for a 12-month moratorium on the planning or development of new data centers within the City of Flint.

"The moratorium was introduced simply to give us time, right, to understand any environmental impacts that may happen as a result, to understand the true benefits of having it in our community, to understand the true economic benefits," Councilwoman Mushatt told EVM. "There was just

so much happening that I thought 12 months would give us time to conduct studies as well as speak with residents and just hear [their] feelings and concerns."

When asked about how the moratorium timing will be used to help better plan out the future for Flint, Mushatt said: "Everyone needs to come to the table and have a conversation. I think EGLE (Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy) needs to come and discuss how our water will be protected."

She added that she thinks the planning "will at least begin within the month of August."

It should be noted that Flint is already home to one data center. While not nearly on the scale of Amazon, Google, or Microsoft, OTAVA, a cloud storage and data protection services company, runs its mid-Michigan facility – a 32,500 square foot, 1.5 MW facility according to the company's website – locally.

On June 8 Flint City Council voted in favor of the 12-month data center moratorium resolution 7-1, with Fourth Ward Councilwoman Judy Priestley as the sole "no" vote.

EVM reached out to Councilwoman Priestley for this article but she declined to comment by press time. ●



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Commentary ...

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way system is a pretty good way to get around.

11. You attended a state university or community college.
12. You think the Army, Navy or Air Force do a great job of protecting the nation.
13. You saw Ken Burns' National Parks documentary on public TV and think the national parks really are "America's best idea."
14. You are happy to hear that the government is acting to protect the environment.
15. You watch public TV or listen to public radio.
16. You are glad to have regular trash pickup at your home.
17. You appreciate that snow is plowed from your street after a heavy winter blast.
18. You were relieved over the action the government took when General Motors and Chrysler faced financial challenges.
19. You really get a kick out of the Blue Angels at the summer air shows.
20. You are glad they are finally "fixing the damn roads."
21. You are a veteran and receive educational or medical benefits.
22. You are glad to have the mail delivered to your door every day.
23. You appreciate the fact that you can mail a letter to Key West, Florida or Barrow, Alaska or any point between for the same price.
24. You are glad there's a city bus system to get you around.
25. You were proud when Americans first landed on the moon.
26. You're glad there's a place to lock up the bad guys and courts and prosecutors to put them there.
27. You are glad that there is emergency help for those harmed by floods, hurricanes or other

natural disasters.

28. You appreciated the response to the Flint Water Crisis, however flawed it may have been.
29. You are reassured to know that the government can regulate data centers (and other businesses) in your area.
30. Heck, you might even be a socialist if you think that selling Bibles, gym shoes, and gold coins out of the White House is a good idea.

And the list can go on from there.

The number of nations that can be considered democratic socialist is substantial and includes many democratic countries that are not dictatorships, such as Finland, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Australia, France, Portugal, and Spain among many others. While these nations all vary in the services the government provides, all still have private enterprise, market economies, and are vital democracies.

Perhaps you already get my point here: Just because the government provides something for people hardly makes it a model for Soviet or Chinese Marxist/Leninist dictatorships, which grew from a history of violent revolutions rather than democratic elections. Like any organization, governments of any type can do some things well and others badly.

There are certainly many things right and wrong with current U.S. government programs – and any program deserves a fair examination and evaluation to assure it delivers the promised results. But the discussion is not helped with overblown charges that anything the government does must somehow be "socialist" and will lead the nation to become another Soviet Union or Communist China dictatorship. My hope is that we all can remember that as this election season continues. ●

THIS MONTH IN THE VILLAGE

Below is a selection of events available to our readers, beginning after our August publication date. To submit events for our September issue, email information about your event to eastvillagemagazineflint@gmail.com by September 1.

Back to the Bricks: Main Event

Saturday, Aug. 15 | 8 am - 5 pm

Thousands will stroll Flint's brick streets to admire vehicles of every age and description, take pictures, buy souvenirs, and enjoy the fun. Beginning with the Opening Ceremony at 10 a.m., you will want to be there to experience the excitement, see the amazing car show, check out the automotive vendors, and taste the delicious food that is synonymous with Back to the Bricks®, one of the best Classic Car Events in the Nation!

Downtown Flint

125 E. Kearsley St., Flint

Back to the Books One-Day Book Sale

Saturday, Aug. 15 | 10 am - 3 pm

Join the Friends of the Gloria Coles Flint Public Library for this fun, one-day-only book sale, where you can also join the Friends or renew your existing membership! Proceeds from the sale go toward supporting GCFLP programs and services throughout the year.

Gloria Coles Flint Public Library

1026 E. Kearsley St., Flint

Edible Flint's 16th Annual Food Garden Tour

Wednesday, Aug. 19 | 4 - 8 pm

Each summer, the Food Garden Tour celebrates the hard work and success of food gardeners all over the city.

Tour participants are invited to visit garden projects by bus or bike, and the tour concludes with a celebration with food, ice cream, music, and conversation. Tickets available at <https://www.edibleflint.org/gardentour.html>. Kids 16 and under are free with guardian.

Flint Farmers' Market

300 E. First St., Flint

Flint United in Prayer: Three Day Revival

Thursday, Aug. 20 - Saturday, Aug. 22 | Various times

Starting with a Prayer Walk from 6 p.m. - 9 p.m. on Thursday and culminating in a full day of outdoor activities on Saturday, join with community for three days of prayer, worship, and unity. Bishop Alvernus Johnson to give intercessory prayer on Friday at 5:30 p.m. For more information contact flintunitedinprayer@gmail.com.

Heritage & Harmony Outdoor Space

1401 W. Dayton Ave., Flint

Crim Festival of Races

Friday, Aug. 21 and Saturday, Aug. 22 | Various times

The 2026 Health Alliance Plan Crim Festival of Races marks the 49th anniversary of the Crim 10-mile, which started in 1977. Join us downtown on the bricks for the best weekend in Flint for the 10-mile, 5-mile, 5K, Michigan Mile, and Teddy Bear Trot events! Visit crimraces.org for more information and registration.

125 W. Kearsley St., Flint

Music Mystery Game Night: Misheard Lyrics

Thursday, Aug. 27 | 7 - 9 pm

Have you been singing the wrong words all along? Now's your chance to prove it! Join us for a hilarious night of music, laughs, and unforgettable mistakes at Music Mystery Game Night! Hosted by, DeLynn, the game is free to play and will test your team's knowledge of famous songs, funny lyric fails, and classic music moments! Top 3 teams win prizes! Whether you're a music expert or just here for the laughs, this is guaranteed to be one of the most entertaining game nights of the year!

Timothy's Pub

2890 Robert T. Longway, Flint

Levitt AMP Flint Music Series: Colleen Orender

Tuesday, Aug. 18 | 6:30 - 8:30 pm

Hailing from Nashville, TN, Colleen Orender will bring her unique blend of soul, Americana, pop and blues to the stage behind Totem Books. Bring your lawn chairs and blankets to this free event and enjoy an evening of live music in a relaxed, community atmosphere.

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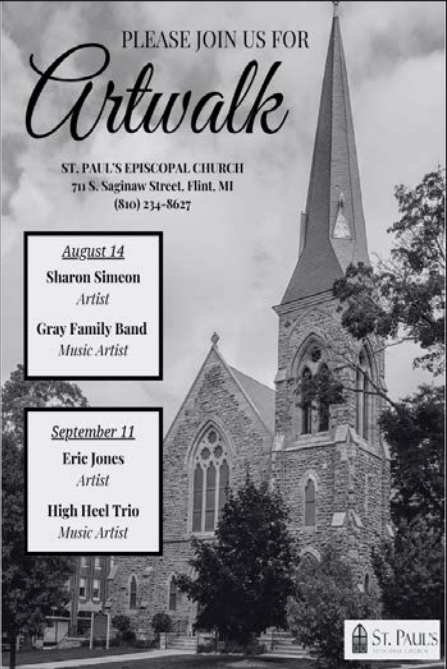
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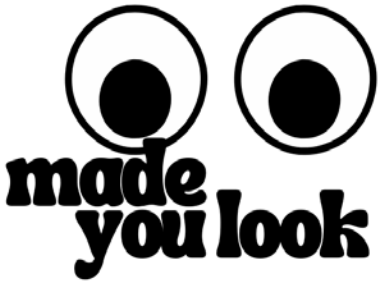
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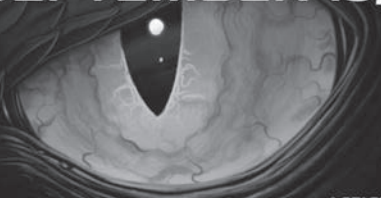


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Attorney General Nessel sues Trump administration over Medicaid work requirements, MDHHS offers response

By Madeleine Graham

In late June, as part of a coalition of 24 attorneys general and two governors, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel filed a lawsuit in response to the Trump administration's implementation of new Medicaid work requirements included in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

According to a July 1 press release from Nessel's office, the lawsuit specifically challenges provisions of an interim final rule — "Community Engagement Requirement for Certain Individuals" — which she and her co-plaintiffs argue "adopted a new interpretation of key terms like 'medically frail,'" and "makes it harder for medically vulnerable individuals to be excused from the work requirements."

Medicaid is the largest health-care program in the United States, providing healthcare coverage for some of the nation's most vulnerable populations including low-income families, elderly and disabled individuals, and pregnant women.

Nessel and the lawsuit's other plaintiffs argue that Congress created exemptions from Medicaid's work requirements to ensure that people with serious illnesses and disabilities do not lose coverage or face interruptions in care, but the new rule instead "creates new requirements that constrain who is exempt" and will result in loss of coverage for many such individuals and "cause harm and chaos" for the plaintiffs' State Medicaid agencies to implement.

"Medicaid exists to protect our most vulnerable, but this arbitrary rule would strip healthcare from thousands of Michiganders who would otherwise qualify and who desperately need it," said Nessel in the July 1 press release. "On top of that, state Medicaid agencies remain

in the dark on how to even administer these new requirements, which could cost Michigan millions."

In March 2025, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) cited that one in four Michiganders was covered by Medicaid. In a separate report from KFF (formerly Kaiser Family Foundation) issued around the same time, it was estimated 71% of the state's adult Medicaid recipients were working.

While the work requirement provision becomes effective January 1, 2027, states must notify Medicaid recipients about the modifications by August 31, 2026. Nessel and her co-plaintiffs note that to do so requires significant advance notice to prepare those communications and develop eligibility systems and methods for operation.

To further complicate the landscape, Medicaid recipients will have to file for renewal twice annually instead of just annually to keep their coverage, which a MDHHS representative told East Village Magazine: "will create more administrative steps for recipients, which may lead to coverage loss, especially for individuals who struggle with documentation, technology access or frequent changes in work status."

"States already made substantial investments to ensure compliance with the One Big Beautiful Bill Act and now face the risk of harsh financial penalties if they are unable to comply with the interim final rule," Nessel's press release reads. "As a result, through the lawsuit, the attorneys general are seeking to block implementation of the interim final rule's illegal provisions and to have them ultimately struck down."

Lynn Sutfin, Public Information Officer for MDHHS, had the following

to offer in relation to the work and reporting requirements in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (also called H.R. 1): "Ensuring Michigan residents have access to affordable health care remains a core priority for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services," Sutfin stated over email. "Starting in January 2027, Healthy Michigan Plan (HMP) beneficiaries will be subject to new federal work requirements included in H.R.1." She noted that "awareness notices" are being mailed to HMP (Michigan's Medicaid expansion program) enrollees now, and formal notices will follow in September 2026.

Sutfin added that, in cooperation with the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS), "text messages and emails from CMS are going out this month to those who have opted in to electronic communications from MDHHS. These messages will provide early awareness about work requirements and will point beneficiaries back to CMS and state resources." East Village Magazine also asked Sutfin how the increased reporting requirements for Medicaid recipients will play into the situation ahead for MDHHS and HMP recipients.

"We're anticipating 200,000 people will lose Medicaid coverage in Michigan over the next few years once work requirements, more frequent redeterminations and eligibility changes are fully implemented by H.R. 1," she wrote back, adding that MDHHS is expanding staffing to meet the needs around more frequent redeterminations and new compliance requirements. Ultimately, Sutfin offered: "Our focus is on reducing barriers for beneficiaries, maintaining program integrity and helping eligible individuals stay covered." ●

Arts & Culture

On “Exploring Mid-Michigan: A Guide to Flint, the Saginaw Valley, and the Thumb”

By Gordon Young

There are some travel guides you want beside you on the car seat. Remember the old AAA TripTik? It still exists, though in a more practical but less satisfying digital form. The dashboard touchscreen display is just not the same as flipping the pages as the miles roll by on a road trip.

But other guides are more at home on your front porch on a summer afternoon or beside your favorite living room chair. They won't provide any great hotel options. Instead, they capture the mood, feel, and history of a place. You'll have a deeper understanding of the region when you finish, even if you never leave the house.

“Exploring Mid-Michigan: A Guide to Flint, the Saginaw Valley, and the Thumb” is an ambitious effort that racks up more than 400 pages. It mixes and mingles a traditional travel guide with in-depth ethnography, geography, and literary essays, along with a smattering of poetry, photos, and drawings. It's an encyclopedia of Mid-Michigan vibes that invites you to jump from topic to topic in no particular order.

Edited by Mary Jo Kietzman, a UM-Flint English professor, and Paul M. Gifford, a former archivist at the university, it is modeled on the incredible state guides produced by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) in the 1930s. That New Deal project put to work thousands of unemployed journalists, writers, librarians, teachers and editors during the Great Depression to create a roadmap of “the nation's social and cultural landscape,” according to historian David A. Taylor. John Steinbeck called the original guides “the most comprehensive account of the United States ever got together, and nothing since has even approached it.”

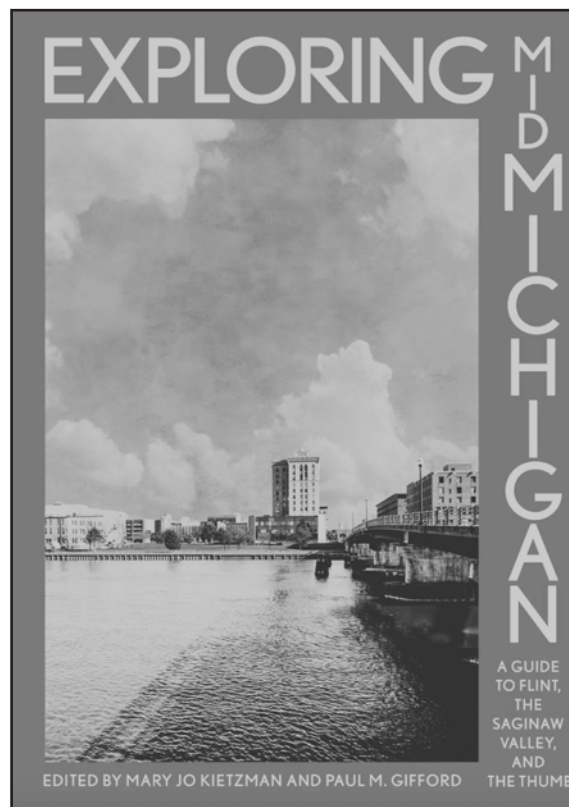
In that spirit, “Exploring Mid-Michigan” relies on nearly 30 contributors to cover everything from the racial dynamics of the Flint Water Crisis to the chicken dinners at Zehnder's in Frankenmuth. An essay on the archeology of the area is followed by a profile of the Golden Leaf, one of the oldest Black-owned clubs in the country. A profile of James Stevens and his Paul Bunyan stories shares space with Philip Levine's poetry:

*These are the children of Flint,
their fathers / work at the spark
plug factory or truck / bottled
water in five-gallon sea-blue jugs
to the widows of the suburbs.*

The list of past, present, and future cultural components detailed

in “Exploring Mid-Michigan” could seemingly go on forever. And that may be the point. Anyone with a real connection to Flint and mid-Michigan has no doubt grown weary of the drive-by press coverage over the years, chronicling the all-too-real tragedy but somehow failing to capture the optimism, grit and, yes, humor of the place. Without too much boosterism, this opinionated guide highlights some of the reasons people still want to live here, and why so many who have left still consider it home. ●

Editor's note: Multiple East Village Magazine writers submitted work for “Exploring Mid-Michigan” including Paul Rozycki and Harold Ford.



“Exploring Mid-Michigan: A Guide to Flint, the Saginaw Valley, and the Thumb” is published by Michigan State University Press and edited by Mary Jo Kietzman and Paul M. Gifford. It is available on msupress.org, Amazon, and through other book retailers.

(Image courtesy Michigan State University Press)

Village Life

A bit of 'Mario Kart' in Mexico City

By Kate Stockrahm

There are few experiences more humbling than visiting a place where you cannot speak the language well, if at all.

We're here in Mexico City (CDMX), which is larger than New York City in both land area and population to many a foreigner's surprise, for a friend's belated 40th birthday celebration.

We're visiting during a less-touristy time of year as it's the height of the city's rainy season, which certainly has its perks (fewer crowds, cheaper tickets) as well as its downfalls (more on this aspect, shortly.)

The birthday boy in question is staying with family in an area about an hour's drive north from our place in the Coyoacán neighborhood of the city, so we've had to make do with the little Spanish shared among our plucky bunch before meeting up with him each day for activities and defacto translation support.

Of course this has resulted in a few awkward moments – such as when no one knew the waiter was asking if we wanted to add a tip (called “propina,” by the way) to our bill – alongside some incredibly kind encounters, like the time an older gentleman on the plaza walked one of us all the way to the restaurant when it was clear she didn't understand his verbal directions.

We've also ordered the wrong item roughly 100 times – but hey, I highly recommend a banana matcha frappé if you're curious; chuckled at my formality in a couple casual social settings (though I appreciate that Duolingo has led me to speak Spanish in overly-polite terms rather than not); and generally managed to get by, even grow a bit more assured, in our broken communications over the course of the trip.

But no matter how confident we'd become, nothing could prepare

us for last night's Uber ride in Mexico City traffic during a torrential rain – aka one of those “downfalls” I mentioned earlier about visiting during the rainy season.

Now, the deluge itself wasn't the issue. In fact, we'd finally broken down and purchased some over-priced parasols (umbrellas) before the skies opened wide yesterday night, so we waited relatively comfortably as Francisco pulled up in his dark gray Chevrolet Aveo to take us back to Coyoacán after our delicious dinner in La Condesa.

Having left our friend to navigate back north to his family, the three of us remaining, soggy travelers piled in as Francisco smiled, said hola, and clocked our lack of fluent Spanish before even tapping “start trip” on the phone mounted to the center console.

It was about two blocks later that we realized the Aveo was manual – trying to temperature control for the forever-clouded windshield was proving incredibly tricky for Francisco with no free hands – and that we'd be getting on the highway in near-blinding storm conditions.

I mention the highway as a concern not because elsewhere in CDMX is necessarily that much better for my American driving sensibilities – there are very few stop signs, and it seems folks decide how they will manage intersections based on vibes and guesswork – but because it cannot be overstated that even in perfect weather most highway drivers in the city could be described as “aggressive,” or, in my most honest assessment, “clearly unafraid of death.”

So, Francisco's way of managing the three of us clearly terrified, impossible-to-communicate-with-and-thereby-reassure foreigners was simply to get this trip over with as fast as possible.

This meant turning off the radio for better focus (my fiancé often jokes about cutting the music so we can “see” better when we're navigating new streets), some very big splashes, a smattering of quick honks to let other cars know we wouldn't be stopping, and A LOT of weaving around other vehicles with their hazards flashing.

My friend texted from her full-view front seat position: “What in the Mario Kart?” And we tried to giggle despite our white-knuckle grips on the seats, handles, and, sometimes, each other.

And Francisco? God bless him, he got us home without any of us saying more than 10 words.

Despite the language barrier, it was clear that even he, a seasoned CDMX driver, had been slightly freaked out at the conditions we'd just navigated as the rain lightened up toward the end of our journey. (One of those 10 words I'd definitely heard him mutter was “peligroso” – or dangerous – when we got to a flooded, sharp curve to cut back toward our neighborhood from the highway.)

So, as Francisco dropped us off with a polite “¿aquí está bien?” we all said yes and muchas, muchas gracias – in unison and perhaps too quickly to hide the relief behind our stilted Spanish.

And then, because none of us could help it – or maybe because we all needed to – we laughed.

We all laughed and shook hands, us and Francisco, because so human an experience as cheating death together needs no common tongue. Then we hopped out of the Aveo, its finicky windshield finally de-fogged, and walked through the rain to our apartment complex's gate, our new umbrellas still closed in our hands. ●