

Deliberative deliberation

PBS documentary at Lansing Center aims to capture the most informed opinions about the state of our state

by Neal McNamara

When Gov. Jennifer Granholm addressed a room full of Michigan citizens at the Radisson Hotel on Friday night, she was, if the pollsters had their science right, speaking to a representative sampling of the state's population.

They were mostly white, some from rural areas, some from the Upper Peninsula, some young, many middle-aged, but all in tune to Granholm's message that Michigan is in tough shape and is likely a bellwether.

"We as a state are the poster child for what other states will go through," she said, before she rehashed Michigan's economic woes.

The crowd, though, wasn't there to rehash problems but to help fix them. An estimated 315 came to Lansing this weekend for a "deliberative poll" that was being filmed by the McNeil/Lehrer production company, the operators of the "Newshour with Jim Lehrer," for a documentary in its By the People series called "Hard times, hard choices: Michigan citizens deliberate."

A deliberative poll is the opposite of a regular poll — where you get a phone call around dinnertime to be quizzed off the top of your head about a hot-button issue. Deliberative polling finds a representative sample of a populous, surveys them, and puts them through several days of intensive discussion with fellow citizens and experts. At the end, participants are polled again to see if their initial opinions changed.

Stanford University communication Professor James S. Fishkin invented deliberative polling in response to the limitations of regular polling. Fishkin recently wrote a book, "When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation," about how to motivate the public to give opinions to change government policy.

"I wanted to see what people think before and after they've had a chance to discuss issues," he said. Fishkin has held deliberative polls across the country and the world — after this past weekend's event in Lansing, he was off to Poland.

The results of this weekend's deliberative polling, and the reactions of Michigan residents to issues such as poverty, education, unemployment, housing and the economy will air on public TV stations in Michigan on Jan. 18.

Questions were formulated with the input of Michigan-based public policy experts. The event was sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation.

On Friday night, before Granholm's speech, all participants took a 100-question survey. Participants were chosen scientifically based on Michigan's racial, gender and economic makeup. They were compensated for their travel, time and accommodations at the Radisson.

Yen Chen, 35, who came from Ann Arbor, at first thought it was a scam. But, he came ready with his opinions.

"In order to increase employment, Michigan still needs manufacturing jobs. I don't think 'green' jobs is a solution for Michigan," he said was one of the answers he gave on Friday night's survey.

On Saturday morning, participants met in 17 individual discussion groups. Group No. 3, which was located in the Governor's Room at the Lansing Center and contained about 20 people, focused on education. Education, some said, is an avenue for residents to rise out of poverty. But most also felt that the state's education system is broken — because schools lack discipline, employ unqualified teachers or waste money or because some students come from broken homes and are unable to focus on school.

"How do we motivate the society to want schools to do better?" said one woman. "How do we reform the schools?"

Eventually, the group whittled its discussion down to one question: What is being done to identify best practices and cross-pollinate that with other school districts?

Each of the 17 groups was asked to come up with one question to ask a panel of experts, called a "plenary." The first plenary experts included Martha Gonzales-Cortez of the Hispanic Center of West Michigan, Stephen Rapundulo, an Ann Arbor City Councilman and president of MichBio, Luther Keith, executive director of Arise Detroit!, and Jack McHugh, legislative analyst for the Mackinac Center.

Questions ranged from how to hold school systems accountable for tax dollars, to reforming the welfare system but not hurt the poor, to what happens to older workers who get laid off and have to start over.

Many experts' answers were broader than the questions asked of them, but Fishkin said it's all part of the weekend-long process of the deliberative poll. There were two more small group discussions and subsequent plenary sessions on Saturday, and one more on Sunday.

"There's something going on in Michigan where people want to have their voices heard," Fishkin said.