

Michigan

ANN ARBOR NEWS

Peters discusses immigration, other issues facing Ann Arbor and Michigan

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An interview with U.S. Sen. Gary Peters

U.S. Sen. Gary Peters, D-Michigan, sat down with The Ann Arbor News/MLive on Friday, June 9, to talk about a wide range of issues, including everything from federal immigration enforcement to self-driving cars.

He also shared his thoughts on some Ann Arbor-specific topics, including what to do about a toxic chemical plume spreading through the area's groundwater and the city's chances of getting federal funding for a new train station in the Trump era.

He also talked about former FBI Director James Comey's recent testimony and the investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. election.

Continue reading to hear what the senator had to say and why he thinks Michigan should be at the center of the autonomous vehicle revolution.

(Photo: Peters speaks with MLive in October 2014.)

File photo | MLive



Immigration enforcement in Ann Arbor area

Peters said he's familiar with recent immigration enforcement actions in the Ann Arbor area, including the **arrest of employees at Sava's Restaurant** by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"I work on these issues quite a bit," Peters said. "I'm a member of the Homeland Security Committee, so these are issues that are front and center. I do a lot of immigration work within our office, too, and actually let folks know if they have immigration issues I have two members of my staff who that's all they do basically is work on immigration issues. We just help facilitate going through the legal process. We're not immigration attorneys, but we can be helpful."

Peters said his concern is there are limited resources for enforcement and they should be focused on criminals who pose a threat.

"Those limited resources should be focused on people who we're afraid of and who are engaged in violent criminal activity or serious criminal activity, as opposed to, particularly in this case, where they just went into the kitchen, and my understanding is they were looking for somebody else who wasn't there and then they just started asking for papers," he said of the Sava's arrests.

(Photo: Sava's employees work on the line in the kitchen of the Ann Arbor restaurant after ICE agents came through on May 24, 2017.)

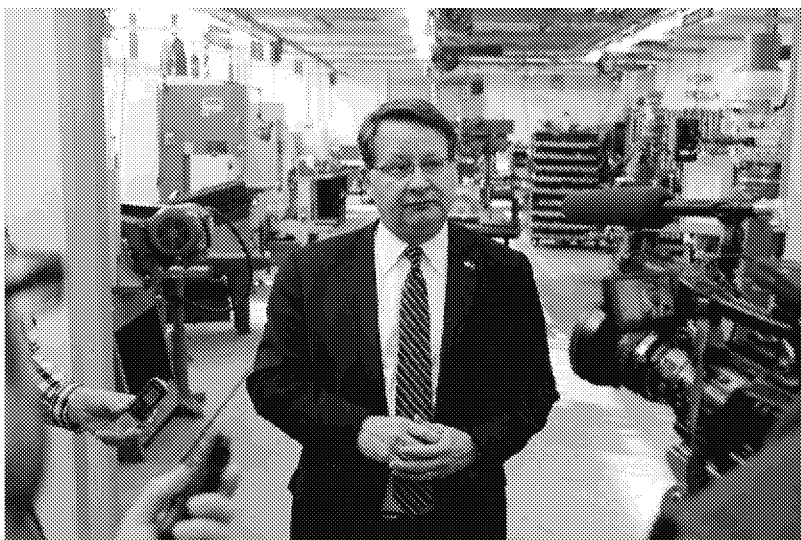
File photo | The Ann Arbor News

Cracking down on 'sanctuary cities'

Peters said there are some in Washington, including President Donald Trump, who want to see more aggressive immigration enforcement and a crackdown on **so-called "sanctuary cities" such as Ann Arbor** that aren't interested in cooperating with the feds on immigration enforcement.

He said the push to penalize those cities by proposing taking away Homeland Security grants and taking away resources and equipment for local law enforcement and first responders isn't the way to go.

"To me, Homeland Security grants should be based on the level of threat that a particular community may face from a Homeland Security perspective, not whether or not their local officials are enforcing federal immigration," he said.



Immigration reform and challenges with work visas

"Comprehensively we need to look at it," Peters said when asked what federal immigration reforms he'd like to see. "But I mean, we have have issues in just getting some work visas as well. It's a big problem in the agricultural community here in Michigan that they simply can't get the workers they need.

"Whenever I'm with an ag group, it's usually the first issue they bring up. They just want a process that people can come here and work and go back as they have, and do it in an organized way, and make sure the laws are being followed. But it's clamped down so much, they can't get people."

Peters said it's a problem particularly throughout parts of Michigan where there's a big need for seasonal workers.

"I mean, when I'm up in Traverse City in particular, it's all I hear, but it's also related to other workers, too," he said.

"I just had the folks from Mackinac Island in my office a couple weeks ago. They don't have enough people working on Mackinac and they can't find it. They work to get people down in Michigan. They do job fairs. They will bus folks up, they'll put them up in housing, all that. They still don't have enough people to work in the restaurants and the hotels ... and it's because they haven't been able to get the kind of visas that they've been able to get in the past."

(Photo: Peters speaks with reporters during a tour of Grand Valley State University's School of Engineering on Feb. 17, 2015.)

Emily Rose Bennett | MLive

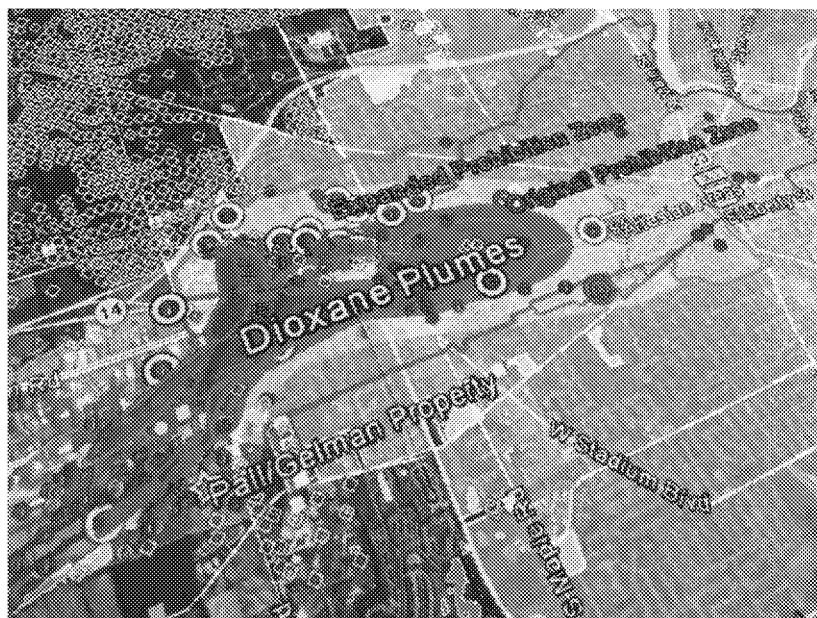
'It's becoming pretty difficult for them'

Peters said there are challenges related to H-1B visas that allows U.S. companies to temporarily employ foreign workers in speciality occupations.

He said it's creating difficulties for employers in places such as Ann Arbor that are looking for people with certain technical and engineering skills.

"It's becoming pretty difficult for them," he said. "So I think it's important that we look at some of those practical concerns."

Peters said allowing those jobs to be filled by foreign workers doesn't take away jobs from Americans. He said it just helps address shortages and ensures employers have the people they need to get the job done.



'Pretty outrageous contamination'

"I'd like to see that happen," Peters said of having the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency oversee a **federal Superfund cleanup** of the Gelman dioxane plume spreading through the Ann Arbor area's groundwater. "We've written letters to that effect, and my staff works regularly with community members, so it's definitely something that we're constantly working on. So hopefully they'll designate that as a Superfund site, which would be helpful."

The EPA indicated in early February it was reviewing the situation and would make a determination by November.

"I know there's a parallel track about some litigation as well, and some of the local communities want to pursue that and think that may be a quicker route, and I'd certainly encourage that route to continue to go forward because that's true," Peters said. "But, you know, this is pretty outrageous contamination that should qualify as a Superfund site and we're going to keep pressing that issue."

(Photo: A map of the Gelman dioxane plume on display at the Mayor's Green Fair in downtown Ann Arbor on June 9, 2017. The map was produced by Roger Rayle.)

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Funding a new Amtrak station in Ann Arbor

Ann Arbor is making **plans for a new train station**, which is expected to cost tens of millions of dollars, and the city is hoping the federal government will fund most of it. Peters said it's hard to say whether that will happen in the Trump era.

"It's hard to answer that because we don't know exactly what to expect from the Trump administration," he said. "You would think that would be part of a major infrastructure package as an important piece of that. But as you're well aware, Trump talks about infrastructure — just recently he was down in Ohio talking about it, and he talked about it in his campaign — but we haven't actually seen any kind of concrete plans in terms of where those are.

"I certainly am a big booster for, I say, the Pontiac-to-Chicago line, as it starts up in Pontiac and runs through Ann Arbor. That should be one of our key infrastructure projects here for Michigan, and it's transformative. And eventually I'd love to have a high-speed rail."

(Photo: Ann Arbor's existing Amtrak station on Depot Street on June 6, 2017.)

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High-speed rail from Chicago to Toronto

Peters said he actually would like to see high-speed rail all the way from Chicago to Toronto, stopping through Ann Arbor. He said it would be one of the most transformative infrastructure projects for the region.

He said he's been working on issues related to customs, as it would have to go across an international border.

"Having state-of-the-art stations is important," he added. "I was actually instrumental in getting funding for the Troy transit center, which is an Amtrak station, when I was the congressman representing the city of Troy, so I think it's important to have that kind of infrastructure along the line.

"We'll be working (with Ann Arbor). Any way we can be helpful to the city, we're going to be helpful to them."

Peters said there aren't earmarks anymore, so it's a whole different process now to secure funding. Though, he said, he's heard from some in Congress that earmarks could come back.



Climate change and electric, self-driving cars

Peters maintains it was irresponsible for Trump to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris climate accord.

He said that puts the U.S. in a category with two other countries that did not sign the agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions: Nicaragua and Syria.

"Basically Syria, which is a dysfunctional country led by a war criminal, that's who we are with on that issue," he said.

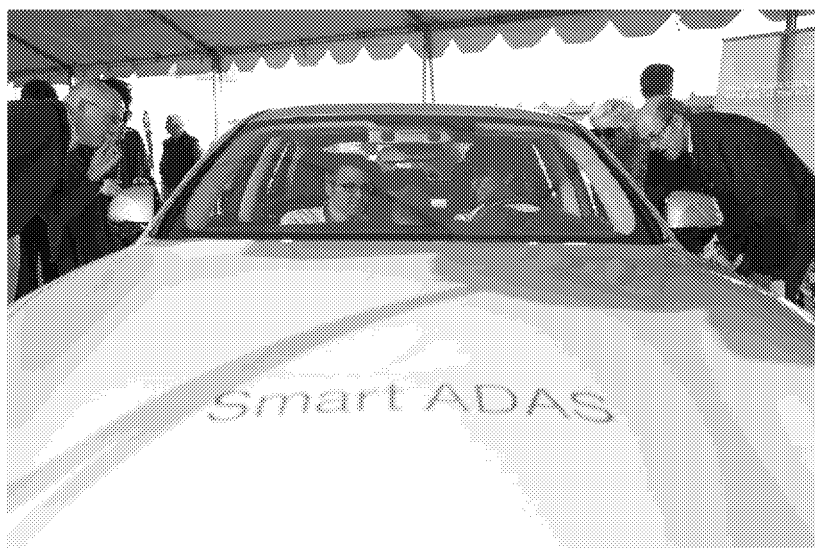
As for what Michigan can still do to reduce pollution and do its part to mitigate the effects of climate change, Peters said the state needs to move to more sustainable energy sources. He said there's already good work being done in the area of wind and solar, and a shift away from coal plants to natural gas.

"We're doing good work here in Michigan. We've got to keep doing that," he said. "But I think longterm, the thing that I'm really excited about, too, is the electrification of the automobile fleet.

"And how that's going to happen — and Michigan is going to be a key player in it — is the advent of autonomous, self-driving vehicles. And I've done a lot of work to get **Willow Run**, for example, designated as a national test facility for that."

(Photo: From left to right, U.S. Sen. Gary Peters, U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, Lt. Gov. Brian Calley, Gov. Rick Snyder, President and CEO of The American Center for Mobility John Maddox and CEO of the Michigan Economic Development Corp. Steve Arwood break ground for The American Center for Mobility on Nov. 21, 2016, at the Willow Run site in Ypsilanti Township.)

File photo | The Ann Arbor News



'Michigan needs to be the center of that'

"You know, we're on the verge of the most transformative technology for autos since the first car came off of the assembly line," Peters said.

Peters said the fact that self-driving cars are ideally electric, as it's easier for computers to drive electric vehicles, is an important aspect.

"You're going to see a movement to electric separate from an environmental debate, separate from what the cost of gasoline is," he said. "It's just from a technological standpoint.

"We're going to see a transformation of the fleet with autonomous vehicles, and I believe Michigan needs to be the center of that. I think that's where Michigan will be a true leader is in transforming transportation and mobility."

Peters said he's working with Sen. John Thune, R-South Dakota, who is the chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, on some legislation in this area, including rewriting federal regulations to accommodate self-driving vehicles without steering wheels and brake pedals.

"The human being is out of it. It's a whole new paradigm. So we are thinking that through," he said.

(Photo: Industry sponsors, including Hitachi's Smart ADAS sensor system, displayed their technology at the Mcity Test Facility open house on the University of Michigan's North Campus in Ann Arbor on May 5, 2016.)

File photo | The Ann Arbor News

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