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What to watch for during tonight's GOP presidential debate in Detroit

Flint water. Trade. The automotive industry.

Look for most, if not all, of these topics tonight when the four remaining* Republican presidential candidates debate on the Fox Theatre stage.

(*Assumes Ben Carson's recent statement that he sees no "political path forward" to the nomination and will skip tonight's debate in Detroit is an inevitable sign he will suspend his campaign.)

With Super Tuesday done, Michigan and its 59 GOP delegates are up for grabs five days before the state's presidential primary.

"You can sense that people realize that it's kind of a do-or-die situation," said Aaron Kall, director of debate at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, who has credentials for tonight's Republican debate. "There's a lot of pressure, but expect everyone to perform well."

Though celebrity businessman Donald Trump is the party's front-runner and has double-digit leads in recent Michigan polling, undecided voters — especially those who were backing Carson, a retired neurosurgeon and Detroit native — undoubtedly will use the debate to get behind a candidate, Kall said.

Michigan landed tonight's Republican debate and a debate Sunday in Flint between Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders not only as the state formally kicks off its presidential election season, but as it deals with the escalating fallout from a lead-poisoning crisis in Flint's drinking water.

The public health crisis is also a political one, as newly released emails from Gov. Rick Snyder and his staffers show some in the administration knew about problems with the city's water supply earlier than they were publicly disclosed.

Snyder, a Republican, won't endorse for president as his party's candidates descend on his state; academics who study politics and public policy say that's not surprising, given the national attention paid to the scandal.

Tonight, look for:

Michigan to play prominently: With the historic Fox Theatre as event backdrop, visitors to downtown will notice ongoing construction of the M-1 Rail streetcar line and new The District Detroit development, along with other evidence of Detroit's post-bankruptcy comeback.

Candidates may try to capitalize on the city's revitalization, said Jenny Tatsak, a professor of business communications at Walsh College, who has a background in political science and managing political campaigns.

Immigration also is a likely topic, she said, especially given that Southeast Michigan is home to a large Arab population.

Immigration is a topic on which other candidates "can differentiate," she said of U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida and Ohio Gov. John Kasich. "You can make Donald Trump look very extreme and yourself look less extreme as a more attractive alternative."

Kall said Michigan's manufacturing and automotive history should make trade, jobs and the economy ripe topics for discussion. (Trump has criticized both illegal immigration and Ford Motor Co. for investing in Mexico.)

But the water crisis in Flint is unavoidable, several people said. The crisis stemmed from a decision made under a state-appointed emergency manager to switch drinking water sources from the Detroit system to the Flint River. That, plus a lack of corrosion controls to treat the river water, caused lead to leach from pipes and infect the blood of city kids.

Lead poisoning can cause educational and behavioral problems, and the effects are permanent.

GOP candidates to attack Trump: Trump's rise reflects the coalescing of a "nativist constituency" that is opposed to foreign trade and immigration, said Matt Grossman, director of the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research at Michigan State University.

He also has been able to leverage his celebrity cachet to increase his base of support, Grossman said, in that he is not part of the Washington establishment and is seen as a political outsider.

"In some sense, we're a microcosm of the national Republican electorate," he said of Michigan. "The one difference here is that John Kasich is a more plausible candidate because he's the governor next door. He's somewhat similar to our governor in positions and in reputation, and so that makes the dominant problem of the race — who is the Trump alternative in Michigan? — even worse because we have three potential alternatives, rather than just two."

The Ohio governor was endorsed by both the Detroit Free Press and The Detroit News.

"The major kind of X-factor and wild card is whether Kasich joins the anti-Trump card" and teams with Rubio and Cruz during the debate to try to slow down Trump, Kall said. On the smallest debate stage yet, "it's really difficult for someone to be fending off attacks from all different directions — literally — and being able to salvage having a good night."

Michigan tends to lean Democrat in presidential races, but the state also should be important for the GOP. The Michigan Republican Party recently launched a website, DetroitGOP.com, in its efforts to gain traction in the city.

A media spectacle: Crain's reporter Bill Shea will be reporting from the scene tonight, including covering the more than 400 journalists who received credentials for the debate. Read his coverage here and follow him on Twitter at @Bill_Shea19.

The debate begins at 9 p.m. and will air on Fox News Channel.