



**Mayor Richard Bissen, Jr.**

**State of the County Address**

**March 21, 2023**

**Kalana O Maui**

Aloha ‘auinalā kākou a me mahalo no ka hele ana mai. Good afternoon to all of us and thank you for coming here today. This is YOUR county building where our fellow citizens work hard for our community every day to address the many issues facing our residents and visitors.

It is this very spot, on January 22, of this year where our newly formed administration held an ‘aha awa ceremony. 35 directors, deputy directors, and chiefs gathered on this lawn that Sunday morning and with the help of the men of the Hale Mua were served an apu of awa, while making a verbal contract with each other to work collaboratively and with a personal commitment to do their very best as servant leaders for our community. Pa’i ka lima.

And so it is with deep aloha that I welcome each of you to the grounds of Kalana O Maui including all dignitaries or their representatives who have been recognized and a special aloha and mahalo to Mayor and Mrs. Victorino, Mayor and Mrs. Arakawa, and Mayor and Mrs. Apana and from the Garden Isle of Kauai Mayor and Mrs. Kawakami for joining us today.

I want you also to meet those who are very important to me. Taking on incredible challenges and meeting the needs of our community can only happen when you have the encouragement, support and unconditional love of your family. Please join me in sharing my gratefulness to my wife, Ka’ihi, daughters Sayble, Ka’anohi, Keapo, my son-in-laws Chaise and Mark, and my grandsons Lalakea, Naluahi and Kilinahe.

I stand here before you, a simple and humbled son of Maui, honored to have the opportunity to serve the community that nurtured, encouraged and supported me. In fact, I walked to 5<sup>th</sup> grade from my uncle’s Wells Street home just below the county parking lot and would stop at the Dairy Queen on my walk home for an occasional free ice cream cone from my generous Auntie Sandra sitting here today.

My mom would bring my three sisters and I shopping, the next block over on Main Street at National Dollar and Kress Stores. On special occasions, we would go to Peggy's and Johnny's. My first karate dojo was on Market Street where the Wailuku Branch of First Hawaiian Bank now sits and my grandfather's pig farm and catering business, where we spent our weekends and summers, was at the end of Piihana Road below Happy Valley.

It's been a very swift 78 days since I was sworn in and there have been many important moments since then. One of them is the recent confirmation vote by the County Council of the twelve appointees reviewed and recommended by a diverse and dedicated group of Maui citizens to lead our many departments. I extend my appreciation to the council for their careful consideration, and for their votes of confidence. The approval of our directors allows us to move forward with the important work ahead.

Since day one our team has focused on identifying and defining where opportunities and possibilities lie. What are the short-, medium-, and long-term solutions, if any. Every community – including ours, reflects how different its people are. Our priorities, our views, our perspectives and our experiences are not always going to be aligned.

However, I do believe we value many of the same things. We cherish 'ohana. We seek a better life for our families, our keiki, and those yet to be born. We help others. We face medical challenges with our kupuna while honoring their service and sacrifice. We work hard to put food on the table. We celebrate together as we hold our traditions and lifestyles close to us. We are not that different.

Last year, as my team and I worked hard to earn the opportunity for me to serve as your Mayor, I wanted to learn more from residents and businesses about what their needs and priorities were in their neighborhoods. Our team hosted Collective Kuleana workshops throughout our county where we learned from hundreds who attended 9 facilitated sessions. We heard from many voices, many perspectives and what was important to them. It also became apparent that many wanted their priority to become our priority – sometimes at the exclusion of all others. Issues such as illegal fireworks, traffic, and yes, more pickleball courts.

Using the work of the Collective Kuleana workshops as a way forward, our plan of action took shape as a new administration. With just twelve weeks in, our team is focused on common sense priorities of water, housing, infrastructure, economic diversification and the protection of our environment.

Delivering on those needs means we can bring a healthy lifestyle, a healthy economy, and peace of mind for our people while maintaining our number one duty--public safety. Securing new water sources means our farmers can thrive, more housing for our kama'aina assures remaining in one's homeland, providing shelter to the unsheltered restores human dignity, managing and mitigating impacts from axis deer means generating economic opportunity, while also caring for the land and being a leader in renewable energy technologies and in conservation makes our environment cleaner now and for our future generations.

I've assembled internal working groups that are cross-functional. These groups are working to find possibilities and feasible solutions to our administration's priorities. I established the office of innovation and sustainability to keep our focus on what needs to be done. That office, under the leadership of Joshua Cooper as the County's environmental coordinator, Tuki Drake as our administration's houseless solutions lead, Ike Duru as the County's energy commissioner and Maria Ornellas as a grants specialist, the Office of Innovation and Sustainability has hit the ground running and are one of our most enthusiastic and driven teams – bringing together options and solutions in conjunction with stakeholders, County departments, state and federal agencies. They're running so fast I think I just saw them do a 4-minute-mile relay on High Street yesterday. There will be more on their progress in the months ahead. After we buy them new running shoes.

I am pleased to report that the financial state of the County is stable and strong. This Friday I will be sending to the council my administration's proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year. To help advance our work on affordable housing I'm proposing an increase to the Affordable Housing Fund. By statute the Fund requires a minimum 3% contribution of certified real property tax revenue. My proposed budget includes an 8% contribution which equates to approximately \$43 million going towards that specific purpose. To prepare for adverse situations that can impact our county and affect our bond rating I've also increased the County's Emergency Fund by \$40 million. Up from last year's \$3 million contribution. When we leverage the county's financial strength and use our operating budget as a tool we build a stronger fiscal foundation. To help our island families, my proposed budget calls for a reduction in property taxes paid for all owner-occupied homes that are valued at \$3 million and below and to lower the mandatory minimum property tax to \$300. This is intended to support residents who make the islands their home and not a housing investment.

The county will significantly reduce its unfunded liability related to post-employment benefit payments to the state's employer union health benefits trust fund. My administration will be

increasing our annual contribution from \$3 million to \$10 million dollars next year. By doing this, the county will pay off this large debt by 2029. By paying it down faster than initially planned, we will save on interest paid and improve our standing with bond rating agencies. A county with reduced debt and a strong credit rating can do more for its people.

I'm grateful for the generations of leaders who have come before me. Mayors Tam, Cravalho, Hannibal and Charmaine Tavares, Mayors Lingle, Apana, Arakawa, and Mayor Michael Victorino. We have all benefited from their efforts, their courage, and their willingness to lead.

When I reflect on our time in history, here and now, I think about when lava flows and hardens land. Covering and changing the ground we know with either smooth pahoehoe lava or the rough jagged `a`a lava, which is hazardous and extraordinarily difficult to stand on.

Lands covered by lava or rocky terrain will eventually reach a time when a sprout finds its way from below the weight of the rock and breaks through. That point in time, when we see green growth return to a landscape is referred to as kipuka. A time of regrowth following turbulent changes to familiar and usually steady ground. We are in this time of Kipuka. A time to bring forward all that is possible in a new landscape.

Of the four sources the County utilizes to supply our homes and businesses with water, none of them are under the County's control. It's important to develop new sources and equally important to make strides in conservation, use of water catchments and serve our deserving kalo farmers.

The establishment of the East Maui Water Authority that our voters approved will help pave the way to ensure water is supplied appropriately, and responsibly. My administration is working with the respected non-profit Trust for Public Lands to seek ownership of valuable watershed and conservation lands in Na Wai `Eha and we are speaking with and seeking the acquisition of the Wailuku Water Company.

There is no success in government without the success of our people. Yet, the needs of our people are vast and there is not enough time and funding to address every need. By addressing our housing crisis, we can help to strengthen and stabilize families. Help ensure our children will have options to remain where they grew up to become contributing and continuous members of their hometown just as their parents and grandparents have. Complex issues require a multi-prong approach to ensure success.

Because of the work of prior administrations, today the County has 7 projects under construction. In the past 3 years nearly 1,256 units in the West Maui, Haiku, South Maui, and Central Maui areas have been completed. There are 13 housing projects currently in different stages of readiness that will offer over 2,660 affordable housing units.

It takes a few years for a housing development to reach the point where the keys to a new home are presented to the homeowner. We will continue with previous and ongoing projects and accelerate those efforts where possible. We absolutely understand that we are not just building homes, we are building communities, filled with resilient and prosperous families seeking healthy and happy lives.

When it comes to infrastructure, we must work to match our island's growth. Improving infrastructure also means increasing and improving broadband connectivity, thereby, bringing more technology to our islands with a priority on rural communities who depend greatly on connectivity. More capability offers prospects for health, safety, and conducting daily business transactions by providing critical telehealth appointments, educational opportunities and distance learning, better business operations and start-ups, teleworking opportunities, integrative research and digital mapping.

There is currently \$385 billion dollars available to local governments across 9 federal departments for digital inclusion. We intend to pursue all appropriate funding that will provide much needed help for our priorities. In order to gain more of the federal funding to support and expand our programs, I am creating a position in my administration focused on locating, leveraging, and coordinating all federal funding available to the County.

We learned from the Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) that a combined estimate of approximately one hundred thousand axis deer exist on our islands of Maui, Moloka'i, and Lāna'i. This population continues to multiply at staggering numbers. These animals continue to destroy crops, remove critical vegetation causing our lands to be barren, acutely contributing to dangerous flooding and water runoffs and hazardous mud conditions from mauka to makai. By developing a market incentive, we will provide an economic stream of venison products, making use of an existing certified processing plant on Maui, and bringing to fruition a plan to manage and mitigate thousands of axis deer that have started to invade our precious watersheds, valuable grazing and farm lands, backyards and gardens, roadways and public parks. We will make gains in both our local economy and our local environment. The severity of the impacts from a growing population of axis deer require urgency and attention. Therefore, our team under the guidance of my Chief of Staff, Leo Caires, have made this an

actionable priority and will continue the work of State Senator Lynn DeCoite and Council Member Yuki Lei Sugimura on this critical issue. I also extend a mahalo to John Medeiros and the Division of Forestry and Wildlife of the DLNR for issuing the Game Harvest and Wildlife control permits that have assisted with reducing and controlling these herds.

I want to also acknowledge the previous administration's year-long work that started in 2021 to develop a Climate Action and Resiliency Plan put together by a team that included over 20 members of the community from the public and private sector. Their efforts allow us to consider policies and planning steps that ultimately support a healthier and more protected environment for Maui Nui.

Within the first 8 weeks of taking office, my administration entered into a second phase contract with energy services contractor Johnson Controls for a project that is projected to save the County up to \$50 million in energy costs. This endeavor is the next stage that will involve installation of solar panels, the use of battery energy storage systems, and implementation of water conservation technologies. We can and must do better in seeking viable opportunities to reduce our carbon footprint.

We hear the words: mālama `aina, malama i ka wai, mālama i ke kai. These are words that influence our everyday behavior and our policy making. To live it means to recycle, reuse, conserve, and to respect. We will strive to leave for our children and grandchildren a cleaner, safer, and healthier Maui Nui.

Our intensive work ahead to bring affordable housing for the kama`aina will cross into the needs of the unsheltered. But it may not serve everyone unsheltered because not all who are houseless have the same expectations, willingness or ability to comply when it comes to accepting assistance. What's important is a coordinated and comprehensive approach to meet the needs of the 741 unsheltered individuals in our County as of the 2022 point in time count, 18% of which are below the age of 18.

Governor Green's kauhale model will be brought to our county with the use of state, county, and private lands now being identified. These same lands may also be considered for low-income, work force or affordable housing for our local residents.

Just as many other employers across our county are experiencing unprecedented staffing shortages that affect their operations, the county is as well. We have finalized plans to launch

an aggressive recruitment initiative to fill vacancies. I applaud our employees for working through staffing shortages while still providing vital services to our public.

Our rural communities who must work harder to come to our doors here at Kalana O Maui deserve more opportunity to have their government available to them. I am committed to ensuring that our rural areas will have greater access. Last week, our Holomua Kākou initiative took members of our team to the Friendly Isle. We opened a two-day drop-in location staffed by members of my Maui office and stood up the Office of the Mayor in downtown Kaunakakai. For three days, our team of 17 worked with residents who had concerns and specific requests. As part of our Holomua Kākou we hosted our first community talk story and I'm grateful for the over 120 residents of Moloka'i who chose to spend their evening with our team.

Our employees of Moloka'i are valued members of their community, so together with directors of departments and with operations on Moloka'i, we enjoyed hosting talk story sessions with the over 40 employees from 6 departments we were able to visit with at their worksites. My team and I were able to learn more about their work and their needs in order to do their job directly from the employees themselves. One of the most inspiring community organizations I was able to meet with while on island was the Moloka'i Rural Health Community Associations' Kupuna Care Program. Meeting the staff who provide care and services for Moloka'i's several hundred seniors and visiting their location was not just heartwarming, but inspiring to see the aloha they have for the many kupuna they serve.

We completed our visit to Moloka'i by being a part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual Moloka'i Community Resource Fair in Hoolehua attended by hundreds. Putting together the Resource Fair was a successful undertaking by Senator Lynn DeCoite, Rosie Davis, and members of the Moloka'i Farmer's Homestead Alliance. Mahalo to them for putting together an impressive and beneficial event that we thoroughly enjoyed being a part of.

We will be heading to East Maui in the next several weeks and then on to Lāna'i following that. We intend to continue to provide that connection as often as it will be possible throughout the year and run government through the Mayor's office in their towns.

During our first 12 weeks in office, we encountered many unplanned incidents that significantly impacted our communities. Storms and flooding, a fuel spill at the summit of Haleakala, damage to our fragile ocean environment at Honolua Bay by a luxury yacht and at a culturally significant sight at Lāhainā Boat Harbor by a motorboat, a hospital workers' strike, and a high school in Kīhei that is ready for occupancy, but whose students are not permitted to enter its campus.

I believe that the youth of South Maui are best served by their own high school. Spending precious time traveling to high schools outside their district takes them away from their neighborhoods and homes. For many years the opening of Kūlanihākoʻi High School in Kīhei by the State Department of Education has been affected by paperwork, planning, and permit issues.

For the past two months, my team and I have been working with the involved state agencies, Department of Education, Department of Transportation, State Land Use Commission and the Governor's office. We've met with leaders of the Kīhei Community Association and the newly-formed Kīhei Parents Hui. Today, I'm pleased to announce that last week we submitted to Governor Green our terms for an agreement that would indemnify the County from the conditions imposed by the Land Use Commission. After speaking with the Governor today, he is expected to sign the indemnification this week and the County will then be able to issue the much - awaited temporary certificate of occupancy. This would allow Kūlanihākoʻi High School – South Maui's first high school to open its doors to students from their community while at the same time not allowing pedestrian crossing at the now infamous Kīhei Roundabout. The County's efforts together with those of Senator Angus McKelvey and Representative Terez Amato will now give families of South Maui a way to keep their children closer to home.

Leading government is about being responsible for the safety and overall well-being of our people as a community. The services we provide, the initiatives we put in place and the budget we do those with are tools – important, critical tools, to our most important outcome: the condition of our people. I believe we measure the state of our county by measuring the state of our people.

A Mayor's job is to set not only the priorities, but the tone of how we choose to interact and treat each other, especially in times of legitimate and passionate disagreement. In our county, our state, and our country, over the last several years, we have witnessed and experienced a division not seen in a very long time. We do not have to accept this. We can, and must do better by working together, side by side. We need to put the unity back into community. It starts with us, and I will be your voice.

Let's choose respect over retaliation, courtesy over cursing, and friendship over fighting. In this time of Kipuka, where the land's hard surface caused by hardships can be seen through the struggles our people face, our most significant opportunity to puka through is to move



forward together, to combine our strengths -to Holomua Kākou. Because we are truly stronger together.

Mahalo for Coming and God Bless You All.