

Mayor Michael Victorino: 2021 State of the County Address Transcript

Aloha and good evening.

In my previous State of the County Address, I said our people are our greatest strength. I asked each of you to accept the kuleana for making Maui County a better place. I asked you to volunteer for community service and to be a good steward of our environment and to give a friendly shaka to your neighbors.

Our County 'ohana is like no other. Our values of courtesy, respect and understanding keep us together. Maui County is also a hard-working, productive and successful community.

When 2019 came to an end, we had just closed a financially lucrative year. More than 3 million tourists had visited Maui and our unemployment rate was at a record low. All economic indicators pointed to even greater financial prosperity in 2020.

Then we got unexpected news from Wuhan, China that would change the whole world. It's impossible to fully appreciate the personal and community loss that coronavirus brought to Maui County. COVID-19 prematurely took the lives of 33 of our Maui Nui 'ohana. It wiped out jobs, devastated businesses, separated families, and interrupted our kids' education and sports. There was no map to navigate such a sudden global health crisis.

But as the saying goes, hindsight is 20/20, so let's look back on the trials and triumphs of the year 2020.

Crisis has a way of clarifying priorities. Immediately I knew my first priority had to be the health and well-being of our residents. Health and well-being cannot be separated. The economy cannot function without healthy people and residents cannot be healthy without a functioning economy. My greatest challenge during this pandemic is finding the right balance between both.

When I think back to one year ago, it's shocking how quickly life changed.

On March 6, we heard about the first presumptive case of COVID-19 in Hawaii. A Honolulu resident who came back from a cruise had the virus. Within two weeks, Governor Ige mandated a 14-day quarantine for all arrivals to Hawaii and I issued an emergency stay-at-home order for Maui County.

Knowing our people are our greatest strength, I turned to community leaders to serve on task forces for public health, commerce, safety, and social needs. We took immediate action to get emergency appropriations to help fill the needs of our community.

Before March ended, Pukalani Superette, Sysco Hawaii and Maui County partnered to distribute 300 bags of food to Upcountry residents who had lost their jobs. Pukalani would be

the first of many food distribution events that would feed thousands of our residents with even more support from local businesses.

The sudden halt of tourism meant that crops intended for resorts and restaurants would rot in the fields. To prevent farmers from having to plow their fields under, the County quickly committed 30,000 dollars a week to buy local produce for community distribution. The Maui County Farm Bureau and Hawaii Farmers Union United coordinated purchasing and distribution. Soon after, ranchers and pig farmers stepped up to provide our community with healthy sources of protein, using Maui County funds.

Within a matter of weeks, Maui's unemployment rate had gone from nation's lowest at 2.1 percent to the nation's highest at 36 percent. Within a matter of weeks, more than a third of our workforce had lost their jobs and needed help to support their families. By April, we had allocated 3 million dollars in general funds to establish the Hawaii Emergency Laulima Partnership (HELP).

We partnered with experienced agencies, like Maui Economic Opportunity, that could hit the ground running and quickly administer these funds. Money went to homes needing help with food, utilities, medical needs, and other essentials.

The Maui Chamber of Commerce was given nearly 2 million dollars. Those funds went for interest-free micro-loans for small businesses.

Later that month, the state of Hawaii received over a billion dollars in federal CARES Act funds. Governor Ige and the state legislature allocated 67 million dollars to Maui County. We immediately put that money to work by growing the HELP program fund to 9.5 million dollars to establish a financial lifeline for nearly 13,000 households.

We pulled together more than 30 business and community leaders in the Mayor's Economic Recovery and Resiliency Task Force to advise us on the best way to use the CARES Act funds. We embraced their advice and directed most of the relief to farmers, ranchers, restaurants, small businesses, charities, and our families.

Six local federal credit unions came together in the *Kokua Maui County Small Business Recovery & Relief Fund*. That 8 million dollar fund helped to support 1,000 small businesses throughout Maui County.

Hale Makua stepped up to organize a new *HEALTH CARES HUI*. Eight different organizations came together to create new jobs, expand food deliveries, and connected the needy with medical services.

Our Office of Economic Development supported the popular and successful *Pop-up Makeke* online marketplace for locally made products. We found out later that 40 percent of vendor sales came from outside of Hawaii, including Japan.

We also sponsored *E Kūpaʻa Kākou* virtual Hawaiian music series honoring the artists of our community. Maui County was the first to showcase our homegrown talent on a virtual platform to share the aloha and hope of cultural expression.

To encourage local commerce, we also organized the *Kamaʻaina First Program*. Residents received discounts at Maui Nui restaurants, hotels, stores, activities and services from local businesses.

Maui Memorial Medical Center, Kula, and Lanai Community Hospitals received nearly 4 million dollars. That money helped to create a new unit to separate COVID patients from others. It also helped to subsidize PPE, childcare and temporary housing costs for essential health care workers who needed it right away

Maui County also quickly responded to COVID-19 clusters throughout the County, including the remote areas of Hana, Molokai, and Lanai. In most cases, we issued regional stay at home orders immediately. We thoroughly disinfected all public areas and worked with the Department of Health on rapid testing and contact tracing to contain additional spread.

When Lanai had its outbreak, Maui County was the first to embrace the Aloha Safe Alert app. More than 3,000 Lanaians downloaded this app to help with contact tracing. And since then, more than 350,000 downloads have been made statewide. I also want to thank Larry Ellison and Pūlama Lanaʻi for paying most of his employees four and a half months of full wages and benefits, at the height of the crisis.

Our County also took the lead in offering free COVID-19 testing to anyone who wanted it.

Our first Pukalani food drive would grow into a massive effort to prevent hunger in Maui County. By the end of the year, more than 8 million pounds of food had been distributed throughout Maui Nui. The Maui Food Bank, Feed My Sheep, community nonprofits, churches, businesses, social service agencies and countless volunteers made it happen.

This is the kind of partnership I talk about.

We deeply appreciate everyone who pitched in with their generous gifts of food, money, time and talent. More than a million acts of aloha were shared on Maui, Lanai and Molokai without any fanfare or expectation of return.

Our people are indeed our greatest strength.

Yet, even during a global pandemic, we still had a County to run. In my second State of the County address, I committed to building a more service-oriented government. I pledged to upgrade roads and infrastructure, develop more housing—especially affordable rentals. And to better manage tourism and the environment.

I am proud to say Maui County never closed or stopped serving our citizens throughout the past year. Many of those you saw working at food giveaways, COVID-19 testing sites, or even at the airport when visitors returned, were County employees. In addition to their jobs, they volunteered to help out whenever it was needed.

To keep our employees and customers safe, County departments quickly adapted their operations. We offered work-from-home options, modified work-spaces and required everyone to wear face masks and follow all health guidelines. To limit personal interactions, we moved business activities to phone and online service and even waived convenience fees.

Essential county services were never interrupted, even during Stay-At-Home-Orders. That is a testament to the commitment of your County employees during these tough times.

I would love to say that tough times are behind us, but they are not. Not yet. As we wait for our community to be fully vaccinated, our best protection is to continue following all public health guidelines.

Last year was challenging. However, COVID's dark clouds still had a silver lining...With tourism suspended, and most residents sheltering in place, we took advantage of low traffic to accelerate infrastructure projects.

Our Department of Public Works resurfaced more than 12 miles of roadway, replaced 3,611 linear feet of drain-line and built culverts. County-wide, we installed new speed bumps, and built new rock protection in Keanae. We also completed the new Highways Division base-yard on Molokai. We finished the Maui Lani roundabout five months ahead of schedule, allowing us to ease congestion at that previously busy intersection.

We made progress on the housing front as well. Our Department of Housing and Human Concerns responded with an emergency rental housing program for tenants using funds from County, state and federal sources. The County also oversaw the renovation of the former UH Maui College dorms in Kahului. Very soon, these 12 units will become long-term affordable rentals for homeless families.

We also built 23 temporary emergency "pallet shelters" in Waiale Park to house those displaced by the impacts of COVID-19. It was a collaborative effort among the Hawaii National Guard, our Department of Public Works, Maui Fire Department and our Parks and Recreation Department that made it happen.

I'm especially proud to say that 290 low-cost rental units were added to the County's housing inventory last year. Many County departments worked closely with agencies, developers and contractors to expedite completion of rentals that tenants can afford.

In December, our Departments of Management and Finance completed construction on our new Maui County Service Center in Kahului. Our citizens can now conduct County business at a convenient, centrally-located site with ample parking. Taxpayers will benefit from savings on lease rent and the County will own an important asset for the future.

Our Department of Finance also successfully completed a 74 million dollar bond float last year. In September, three major bond rating agencies assigned high ratings to bond float, including AA+, the second highest rating. This qualified us for the lowest interest rate at 1.99 percent. Bond proceeds will fund capital improvement projects and refinance outstanding bonds at a lower interest rate. This will save County taxpayers close to 2 million dollars.

The Department of Finance also helped the County to close on the purchase of three properties last year:

We bought the Hawaiian Telcom Building in Wailuku for nearly 4 million dollars. It's a major step forward in moving County offices out of rented space to save your tax dollars.

We invested 1.7 million dollars to buy nearly 60 acres to expand the Central Maui Landfill. This will allow us to resume composting, debris management and plan for long term solid waste disposal needs.

We also invested \$600,000 for 5 acres in Honokawai near the Lahaina Wastewater Reclamation Facility. A solar farm on-site will generate lease income to the County. A reservoir will store treated water that will expand our recycled water distribution system. This water will irrigate agriculture, golf courses, landscaping and planned greenways that can be used as fire breaks.

Speaking of West Maui water treatment, our Wastewater Reclamation Division finished 45 million dollars in upgrades to the Lahaina facility as well.

Meanwhile, our Department of Planning is looking into Maui's future by kicking off the Kaahumanu Community Corridor Master Plan project. With support from the state, our community will help to create a new vision for this important central corridor. Our Planning Department is also using state CIP planning funds for a transit-oriented development master plan for West Maui.

Now I come to our front-line heroes. I want to thank and acknowledge all the men and women who work as refuse collectors, landfill operators, park caretakers, water and sewer workers, who have kept our County running.

We also thank our Maui Police and Fire Departments, who have kept us safe. Our officers and firefighters had front row seats to COVID-19. Last year, our Fire Department responded to nearly 8,000 medical calls. To the best of my knowledge, none of them contracted COVID-19, even after helping infected people. We also welcomed 15 new firefighters and 3 new fire engines last year.

Our Maui Police Department received more than 120,000 calls for service during 2020. They also established the Maui COVID-19 task force to respond to violations. It generated over 50,000 follow up calls and 278 arrests.

And even though COVID-19 suspended jury trials last year, the Department of the Prosecuting Attorney still helped victims of crime by prosecuting offenders. We were honored to appoint Andrew Martin as our new Prosecuting Attorney.

Our County Department of Transportation reported our Maui Bus system had nearly 1.4 million boardings last year. We broke ground for our new Central Maui Transit Hub in Kahului to connect pedestrians and cyclists with public transit in one convenient location. When it opens, it will replace the bus terminal at Queen Kaahumanu Center. We are also looking forward to the delivery of 10 new ADA para-transit buses during this fiscal year.

Last month, we also broke ground on the long-awaited Wailuku Parking Structure. It will upgrade infrastructure and double the number of parking stalls in Wailuku Town. Local businesses will benefit from ample parking and it will set the stage for a growing arts and heritage district to revitalize Wailuku Town.

With sports on hold, our Parks & Recreation Department could finally repave the 51-year-old War Memorial Stadium parking lot. We also added parking stalls, raised sidewalks and improved traffic flow.

For our younger citizens, our Department of Parks and Recreation opened new playgrounds at Kula Park and Wailuku Heights to encourage outdoor fun and exercise for families. For dogs and their owners, we opened two new dog parks at Kenolio in South Maui and at the Lahaina Recreation Complex. We also recently re-opened the War Memorial Stadium Track for limited use by runners and walkers. Our Parks & Recreation staff members have been vital in supporting COVID-19 testing sites, community food distributions and keeping our parks safe and clean.

Our Maui County Office on Aging helped our elders to endure the challenges of COVID-19. They started new feeding programs that delivered up to 220 meals a day, seven days a week, to our seniors. Kaunoha Senior Services visited elders for safety-checks Monday through Friday.

And they delivered thousands of meals to home-bound kupuna through their Meals on Wheels program.

Our Energy Office and Environmental Program set the foundation for a cleaner and greener future. International travelers regularly rank Maui as the world's best island, but sea level rise and environmental damage are taking their toll. Rising ocean levels are shrinking our beaches, threatening shoreline properties, and in some locations like Puamana, exposing Hawaiian burials.

Fighting climate change requires a global effort, but there is plenty we can still do right here. In October, Maui County filed a lawsuit against 20 fossil fuel companies to recover rising costs of climate change. We want Maui citizens to benefit from their substantial profits.

We've joined the Climate Mayor's Network and added Maui County's commitment to advance a Green and Equitable Recovery. We also launched the Maui County Aloha Plus Challenge to learn how to reduce both energy bills and environmental impacts. The county is also researching land purchases to preserve open spaces and to support traditional cultural practices.

This was a long, but incomplete list. Maui County's accomplishments this past year would have been remarkable, even in the best of times.

I am very grateful for the hard work and dedication of our County employees. And we are grateful to all of you, for your personal sacrifices, and for coming together to care for one another in the aloha spirit. We did accomplish a lot. But there is much more to be done.

COVID-19 has brought us to this crucial point. We can all agree that life will never go back to "normal." But together we can build a *new* normal.

Now can be our Great Reset.

Even before the pandemic, many Maui County families were barely making ends meet. We can change this with long term investments to power our local economy.

COVID-19 has taught us that locally owned businesses are the foundation of a strong, resilient economy. Local transactions keep money right here in Maui County where it can circulate and grow. That's why it's important to invest in homegrown companies and local talent to build an economy that works for all. So, moving forward, I want the County of Maui to use more carrot and less stick to move more quickly in the direction we need to go.

I've talked a lot...maybe too much. So now it's time to hear from people who are working on Maui County's new normal right now.

Here is Leslie Wilkins and Kawai Kuluhiwa from the Maui Economic Development Board to talk about the role of STEM in our future:

Remarks from MEDB

COVID-19 taught us we are too dependent on faraway places for our food. With thousands of acres of productive farm and ranch lands, Maui County can become the breadbasket of Hawaii.

Here are Shan Tsutsui of Mahi Pono and Bobby Pahia of Hoaloha Farms to talk to you about the future of agriculture.

Remarks from farmers

Like many of you, I grew up during a simpler time in Hawaii. Working on plantations didn't give us many choices, but the community was more resilient back then. Over the years, tourism brought us more prosperity and possibilities. Overall, I believe tourism has been a good thing, BUT it can become too much of a good thing.

Here is Kawika Freitas to tell us about the new Maui Nui Destination Action Management Plan and the future of our hospitality industry.

Remarks from Kawika Freitas

These local business and community leaders have given us just a taste of what our new normal can be. The vision for our future is big and bold---and achievable. Our biggest challenge will be balancing our short term needs with our long term goals.

It won't be easy.

Many will claim it's too hard to change.

Some will even say "No Can"

But the naysayers can learn from my dear friend Billy Kenoi.

In January, Billy, who was a former mayor of Hawaii County, left us much too soon, but his values live on through his favorite saying:

"There is no such thing as no can.

Always can. The only question is how can."

Our people are our greatest strength. This is how can.

And finally to all of you...

Mahalo. Aloha. A hui hou.