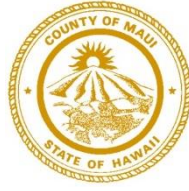


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TESTIMONY OF RICHARD T. BISSEN, JR., MAYOR, COUNTY OF MAUI  
BEFORE THE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE & FINANCE COMMITTEE  
INFORMATIONAL HEARING

January 21, 2024

Aloha mai kākou, Ways and Means Chair Dela Cruz and Vice Chair Moriwaki, Finance Chair Yamashita and Vice Chair Takenouchi, and esteemed committee members.

Mahalo for your invitation to be here with you today. We appreciate your continued support and aloha for Maui County.

Before I continue, I want to send our heartfelt aloha, compassion, and prayers to the people of California as they are faced with devastating wildfires and begin to confront the overwhelming journey of recovery and rebuilding. We stand in solidarity with the residents and first responders of Los Angeles County, just as they have stood by us.

Today, I'd like to provide an update on our recovery and enhanced emergency preparedness efforts; highlight Maui County's top priorities for 2025; and share a few key state legislative priorities we look forward to collaborating on with you this session.

**Reflections of 2024**

Reflecting back on 2024, it was a year of healing, resiliency, and new beginnings.

## **Fire & Impact Overview**

On August 8, 2023, Maui was struck by three wildfires that not only profoundly altered the lives of our people, but also affected everyone across our state, including you and your communities.

This disaster tragically took the lives of 102 people (2 still unaccounted for), displaced over 12,000 people, scorched roughly 6,600 acres, and impacted over 2,200 structures.

## **Transition to Recovery**

### *Establishment of Office of Recovery*

In 2024, we began the critical transition from emergency response to recovery by creating the Office of Recovery, which oversees the intermediate and long-term disaster recovery needs and coordinates all recovery efforts between county, state, federal, and private organizations.

We also opened the Office of Recovery resource center in Lahaina, centralizing critical services for easy accessibility for survivors.

### *Community Engagement*

Critical to the success of our efforts is ensuring this recovery is community-led, and government-supported. Likewise, community engagement has been at the forefront of every step we have taken.

To date, we have conducted 44 community meetings in Lahaina and Kula, bringing our team and partners almost weekly to share information and stay connected to the needs of our survivors.

Every meeting is live streamed, and at the height of our response, we hosted close to 700 in-person participants. Our most recent meeting, 2 weeks ago, hosted about 200 participants in person, and just under 9,000 views online.

### *Lahaina Long-Term Recovery Plan*

Another key undertaking in recovery efforts was the completion of the Lahaina Long-Term Recovery Plan, a dynamic document that will evolve with continued community input.

Over the last year 3,833 Lahaina residents and stakeholders participated in 11 different community engagement activities and events, serving as a key component to the completion of the plan, which will guide the rebuild and resiliency of Lahaina.

### *Prioritize the Well-Being of Our People*

The goal of recovery is driven by one core belief—rebuilding Lahaina means more than restoring structures; it means returning people to their homes—ensuring we recognize the faces of our neighbors, our kūpuna, our ‘ohana, and our keiki. Without them, we will have lost this battle.

### **Debris Removal**

Another incredible task we faced in 2024 was clearing 400,000 tons of fire-charred debris scattered over more than 5 square miles through the heart of Lahaina town.

If you can imagine, this is equivalent to nearly 5 football fields filled 50 feet or 5 stories high.

This immense volume of debris, estimated to require 40,000 truckloads to move, was transported from Lahaina to a newly constructed Temporary Disposal Site.

Debris removal was critical to expediting the arduous process of returning homeowners to their properties.

Late last year, we were able to negotiate acquisition of land and begin construction on our permanent disposal site 26 miles away from Lahaina, adjacent to the Central Maui Landfill. The acquisition will also provide additional landfilling capacity for years to come for Maui County’s municipal solid waste collections.

Last year, 100% of all residential lots were completely cleared representing a total of 1,390 properties.

To date, 99% of all commercial debris has been removed from 146 properties, with only 2 remaining.

### **Infrastructure**

The fire caused extensive damage to Lahaina’s water, sewer, roadways, and drainage systems.

Thanks to a collaboration with the EPA, the County was able to fully restore water service last August: 2-years ahead of projected completion.

Restoration to sewer service in Lahaina is at 67% and involves the task of assessing 90,000 lineal feet of sewer collection lines. The system is anticipated to be fully restored by next month.

Over 3,000 burned vehicles had to be removed from roadways, and major repairs have been made to roadways and drainage systems.

Closed since the fires, one of our major thoroughfares in Lahaina, Honoapiʻilani Highway, reopened on Aug 1st—thanks to collaborative efforts between the State Highways Division and the County.

Restrictions on roadways to various neighborhoods in Lahaina began to ease last September, and the final wildfire-related restrictions are expected to be lifted within the next month.

### **Permitting**

The County launched an expedited permitting system to assist residents in applying for Disaster Recovery Building Permits.

To date, 206 building permits have been issued, and 347 permits are in the queue being reviewed.

The first homes in Lahaina and Kula were completed just before the holidays last year, and over 150 single family homes are now under construction.

We also have a 200-unit multi-family complex that has already opened its first phase, nearing completion.

The County also funded another 89-unit multi-family structure that was destroyed in the fire. The project is well underway with rebuilding and slated to open this summer.

### **Temporary Housing**

At the height of emergency response, over 8,000 people were housed in non-congregate housing spanning over 42 Maui hotels.

Together, over the last year, the State, County, FEMA, Red Cross, Hawaiʻi Community Foundation, the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement, and other partners have completed the task of transitioning all survivors from emergency housing to various temporary and long-term housing options.

In 2024, over 500 temporary units were built, with another 583 set to be completed in 2025. These units span over 8 different projects in West Maui, Kihei, and Central Maui.

## **Enhanced Emergency Preparedness**

We have made significant strides in strengthening emergency response and fire mitigation efforts across Maui County.

As just a few examples, we have increased surge capacity for emergency and disaster response, adding 41 key first-responder positions across Maui County.

We increased education and community outreach around fire prevention.

We strengthened our county fire code.

We are also now utilizing the integration of advanced technology, including fire sensors and AI-based evacuation route planning, to improve situational awareness and operational coordination in responding to emergencies.

Our fire and police departments have completed After-Action Reports, and MEMA is slated to release their report next month.

These reports offer a thorough review of Maui's wildfire response efforts and include key recommendations. Of these, 75% have already been implemented or are in progress for Police, and 55% have been implemented or are in progress for Fire.

## **2025 County Priorities**

Moving into 2025, I've established 3 key priorities to steer the work of the County: Kama'āina Housing, Recovery & Well-Being, and Cultural & Natural Resources.

### **Kama'āina Housing**

#### *Building Permanent Homes*

Much like the rest of our state, housing remains our most critical need across Maui Nui.

We completed close to 420 permanent units in 2024, and we are committed to building over 1,400 permanent units across the county in 2025 through the work of various State, County, and private partners.

Notably, the County is also developing an affordable housing project on Lanai to better serve our residents in rural communities. We have collaborated with our Congressional delegates to secure federal funding

for this project and are allocating additional County funds in my Fiscal Year 2026 Budget to continue its progress.

In addition, several key infrastructure projects are underway to support housing, including improvements to roads, bridges, drainage, and water source development.

One of our largest individual CIP projects is the Central Maui Wastewater Reclamation Facility, for which we are grateful for the State's support thus far.

### **Recovery & Well-Being**

In 2025, we continue to remain committed to supporting Lahaina's healing, protecting the well-being of our people, and rebuilding a stronger, more resilient community.

The Lahaina Long-Term Recovery Plan, paired with various funding sources, will serve as a key foundation in moving our recovery forward.

The primary focus of our newly allocated CDBG-DR funding, as Senator Schatz has emphasized, will be "housing, housing, and housing." This includes the construction and reconstruction of affordable single-family and multifamily housing units.

We are equally committed to programs focused on revitalizing the economy. By collaborating with the Maui Economic Recovery Commission and other community partners, we aim to advance workforce development, career pathway programs, key infrastructure projects, and housing initiatives.

Utilizing federal CDBG-DR funds and pursuing additional support through the EDA, we plan to drive economic recovery and growth.

Other key projects include developing infrastructure for R-1 water initiatives, supported by over \$15 million in recently secured federal funding for recycled wastewater projects in Lahaina.

Additional priorities include advancing the West Maui Greenway, which also received over \$15 million in federal funding, expanding healthcare services, and restoring historic structures in Lahaina.

### **Recovery Funding**

As many of you know, the U.S. Congress has allocated approximately \$1.6 billion in disaster relief through the U.S. Department of Housing

and Urban Development (HUD) to support Maui's efforts to rebuild homes.

Additional funding has also been pursued and secured to support critical water and wastewater projects, enhance resiliency efforts, and drive economic revitalization.

These funds will work in parallel with our Lahaina Long-Term Recovery Plan and the CDBG-DR Action Plan to help keep our residents home.

Since CDBG-DR serves as a funding source of last resort, we are actively in discussion with the State administration regarding potential State funding requests and have provided additional information to ensure eligibility for various programs and funding sources to address gaps in State funding.

### **Cultural & Natural Resources**

Our third priority is to care for the land, from mauka to makai, by blending cultural traditions with modern science.

We understand that protecting and preserving Maui Nui means recognizing that the well-being of our people is intrinsically tied to the health of the land.

A key project we will prioritize this year is initiating the planning process to restore Moku'ula and Loko o Mokuhinia. These sacred and culturally significant sites hold profound importance not only for Maui but for all Hawai'i.

Our focus will also include expanding R-1 recycled water systems for agricultural use and re-vegetation, aiming to reduce the demand for potable water and decrease reliance on injection wells.

Additional priorities include watershed planning and water source development to increase water availability, as well as the re-vegetation and re-forestation of areas in Kula and Lahaina.

In tandem, we are looking to enhance workforce development opportunities in agriculture, conservation, and natural resource management. This will help to support agricultural planning and food security programs as alternative ways to stimulate economic growth and enhance our community's self-sufficiency.

We are also committed to preserving, revitalizing, and reconstructing historic and cultural sites.

## **State Legislative Priorities for 2025**

This year, we are anticipating various bills that will expedite rebuilding in disaster areas and enhance our ability to build affordable housing.

We look forward to working collaboratively to identify legislation in support of rebuilding in Lahaina and Kula and finding solutions to simplify the pathway to building affordable housing.

As key partner in reaching these goals, we are seeking support to increase the capacity of CWRM and SHPD to facilitate housing projects.

We are also seeking your support of DLNR's CIP funding request expedite the reopening of Lahaina Harbor.

And lastly, we are seeking \$20 million for the Waialae Road Extension project, which is slated to begin construction in fiscal year 2026.

## **Mahalo**

While the road ahead is long, the state has been an invaluable partner in helping our community to heal. I look forward to our continued discussions, and mahalo for your dedication in serving the people of Maui Nui as we navigate this next chapter together.