

Mayor Derek S.K. Kawakami's 2026 State of the County Address

Good morning and thank you for not joining us for our eighth and final State of the County address. As you can probably hear outside, mother nature had other plans for us today. In true Kaua'i fashion, she showed up, settled in, and made herself quite comfortable.

Out of an abundance of caution, we made the decision not to gather in person today, and I'll begin with something you do not hear very often at public events - Mahalo to all of you for not coming. Thank you for staying home, staying dry, and helping keep our roads safe during this weather.

I would still like to recognize and extend a warm mahalo to our distinguished partners across the State and our island community: Governor Josh Green, Lieutenant Governor Sylvia Luke, Senate President Ron Kouchi, Mayor Rick Blangiardi, Mayor Richard Bissen, Mayor Kimo Alameda, and all our Councilmembers. Your partnership and guidance throughout this journey have been invaluable.

As this is our final State of the County, I would also like to take a moment to thank those who have worked tirelessly to get us here.

To the Mayor's Office Team: your patience, loyalty, dedication, and tremendous level of effort are unmatched. For the past seven years, you have sacrificed so much. You have been there through both the good and the challenging times, and you have embodied the definition of public service. Monica and I are deeply grateful for all that you have done for this island, and for what you mean to us personally.

To our department heads and our entire County of Kaua'i team: you make me so proud. You truly live by the mantra of service above self. Our island and our people depend on you and, time and time again, you answer the call by showing up, standing tall, and delivering excellence in all you do. Thank you.

To our Budget Team: over the past eight budget cycles you have carried the tremendous responsibility of shaping the financial roadmap for our county, ensuring that every dollar reflects our island's priorities.

To our Employee Council: thank you for creating a work environment that is caring, inclusive, and fun. You have helped create many memories that Monica and I will always hold in our hearts.

To our commissioners and board members: you have volunteered countless hours, endured public scrutiny, and made tough decisions to move our island forward. Thank you for your selfless service.

To our Federal Delegation, State Legislators, County Council, and Council Services team: thank you for keeping us vigilant and focused. Your dedication to our island and her people is unwavering and steadfast.

To my family, mentors, and friends: thank you so very much for believing in me, encouraging me, and supporting me every step of the way.

To my mom, dad, and my big brother Doug: there is not a day that goes by that I do not miss you and wish you were here with me on this crazy adventure. I know you would have loved this ride. Mom, I am still that kid in the story *Where the Wild Things Are*. I will never let the curious and carefree kid in me fade away.

To Hailee and Christopher: I love you both dearly. I hope I have shown you that we can be flawed, vulnerable, and scared. At times, life's claws may leave us scarred, but those scars are reminders of our grit, determination, and resilience. If we dig deep to find our voice and our courage, we will push through.

To my wife and best friend: Monica, what a love story we have written. I have fallen in love with you a million times since I was 19, and I cannot imagine a world without you in it. You are forever my first lady. I do not know exactly what lies ahead, but I know as long as I'm with you, wherever we are, I am home.

During my first few months in office, I visited my hometown of Hilo and met with the Honorable Mayor Harry Kim. He told me that people will not remember me by the roads we pave or the houses we build, but by the way we made people feel and if they could trust us.

It's no secret that one of my favorite things to do is surf. Surfing is a waiting game. During a two-hour session, you might only spend five minutes riding waves. The rest of the time, surfers sit quietly on their boards, looking toward the horizon, watching the water - thinking, and trying to read what's coming next.

Leading a county can feel a lot like that. You prepare for challenges before they arrive, and when the right opportunities appear, you must be ready.

Today, I want to talk about the waves our county has faced, the ones we have been riding together, and the opportunities we see on the horizon.

When we stood in front of you years ago, we identified six keys to success.

Our Mobility.

Our Home.

Our Connections.

Our Money.

Our Freedom.

Our Heart.

These six keys became our compass, guiding every decision, project, and initiative over the past seven years. Each key represents a focus area where we could make the biggest difference for our people. While individually distinct, each of these key concepts are interconnected - like the currents that shape our shores, each one flows into the next.

Our Home.

On a big swell day, you do not sprint into the lineup. You watch, time your entry, and help each other get past the break. Mobility on Kaua'i works the same way. We need planning that helps everyone move safely.

From day one, we focused on infrastructure. Our goal was to repair those roads that had been long neglected. As we toured our base yards, we saw crews working with outdated equipment that made communication between teams difficult.

I remember patching potholes with our Hanapēpē crew on Kōloa Road and having to drive a truck back and forth to flatten the asphalt because we did not have a roller, as the crew had long requested but were denied.

From that day, we made a vow that decisions would be made from the field crews up, not from the administration down. We listened to the crews working in our base yards across the island and trusted the experience of the men and women who do this work every day. Their knowledge helped guide our focus.

When you listen to the people closest to the work, you make better decisions for the entire community.

During our administration, we backed ground-up leadership with real investment. We have already invested more than \$67 million, with an additional \$19 million already under contract behind that. We reestablished routine maintenance cycles for many of the roads that had fallen into poor and critical condition are now returning to a routine maintenance cycle. The County has resurfaced 255 lane miles of roadway, with another 40 lane miles already scheduled, meaning nearly half of our County roadway network has been improved.

But mobility, however, is not just about fixing roads. It's also about how we move people.

We focused on making public transportation more efficient and more appealing by upgrading our fleet and modernizing our technology. Thanks to the work of our Transportation team, we added Wi Fi, voice announcements voiced by the late Kumu Hula Leinā'ala Pavao-Jardin, an app, and a payment system aligned with modern expectations.

At the same time, we recognize that public transportation is not one-size-fits-all.

At Hā'ena State Park, we have seen the success of the partnership between the State Department of Land and Natural Resources, Hui Maka'āinana o Makana, the Waipā Foundation, and The Hanalei Initiative. Their managed system provides transit for visitors while preserving space and access for our local people.

That success inspired the Office of Economic Development's East Kaua'i Mobility Plan, which is rethinking transportation along the Eastside corridor and moving forward with collaboration with the non-profit Makaiwa Initiative.

We're also helping to keep traffic flowing with roundabouts. Our Kawaihau Road roundabout transformed a complicated and dangerous five-way intersection serving three schools into a safer, easier space to navigate. We are pleased to announce that additional roundabouts on Po'ipū Road, Kīlauea Road, and more are on the way.

When mobility improves, quality of life improves. Our people should spend less time in traffic and more time with family.

Our Home.

A wave may look beautiful on the surface, but the unseen reef below is what gives it shape. In the same way, providing adequate housing and welcoming public spaces require a firm foundation built on thoughtful planning and infrastructure.

Our administration has delivered hundreds of homes for seniors, working families, and those experiencing houselessness, while planning thousands more for the years ahead, making the County the largest developer of affordable housing on Kaua'i.

Affordable housing was a top priority for our residents when we took office, but the truth is, everyone wants affordable housing until we build it next to them.

Let us be clear: we are in a housing crisis. Local families are being priced out, and our young people are wondering if they can build their futures here. To them we say: do not give up. To our leaders we say: money and incentives alone will not work. We MUST have the courage to push past opposition to build homes for our local families.

In addition to building houses, we are diversifying housing options. In 'Ele'ele we built three-bedroom fee simple single-family homes for teachers, firefighters, and working professionals which sold for less than \$500,000.

These homes serve families who earn too much to be eligible for subsidized housing but too little to compete in the existing market. Expanding middle-market housing is essential to keeping working families on Kaua'i.

Success breeds success. Phase I at Lima Ola proved Kaua'i can deliver large scale housing on time and on budget. That track record helped us secure over \$27 million in federal funding for affordable housing over the past five years and we mahalo our federal delegation for their continued support in helping make these investments possible.

Housing progress is possible, but it requires many different approaches – many different ideas.

Early in our term, we visited Kahauiki Village in Honolulu, a community created by our friend Duane Kurisu for families who needed a helping hand after displacement.

From that visit, Ke Alaula was born.

With the support of Governor Ige, Governor Green and DLNR, we took a state park that had become haven to a community of houseless individuals in the heart of Lihue, and we created a full-service supportive housing community. To date, Ke Alaula has been home to almost one hundred families.

Ke Alaula Phase II is nearly complete, and Ke Alaula at Lima Ola is fully occupied. And we won't stop until there's a Ke Alaula in every district across our island.

I'd like to recognize our visitor industry, including vacation rentals, for helping make this possible through their annual contributions of between \$15 and \$20 million in taxes. This revenue makes you the single largest contributor to our Housing Development Fund.

We support legally operating vacation rentals that pay their fair share of taxes, but illegal operators outside visitor destination areas will not be tolerated. Kaua'i was the first municipality to enter voluntary compliance agreements with major booking platforms to improve transparency and enforcement. As a result, illegal vacation rentals have dropped by more than 96 percent islandwide.

Here on Kaua'i, we believe in a visitor industry that supports our community and we are incredibly grateful to have a champion in Sue Kanoho.

Sue dedicated nearly three decades of leadership at the Kaua'i Visitors Bureau, helping guide a thoughtful approach to tourism that always put our community, culture, and natural resources first. Thank you, Sue.

Taking care of our home also means responsibly managing what we leave behind. That includes finding a long-term solution for our island's waste.

Today, I am proud to share that we are advancing plans to site a new landfill outside of West Kaua'i on Agribusiness Development Corporation land in Māalo. This is an important and necessary step to ensure we can continue to care for our island responsibly for generations to come.

Through collaboration and a shared commitment to doing what is right for Kaua'i's future, we are working closely with Hawai'i Department of Transportation Director Ed Sniffen, with the support of Earthjustice, a nationally respected advocate for environmental stewardship.

This work shows what is possible when partners connect for a common purpose.

Our Connections.

No one thing controls the tide. Our economy, environment, and communities are like currents beneath the surface—connected, powerful, and always moving together.

One of our first priorities was reexamining how our DMV operates.

Thanks to our Finance Department and DMV team, we eliminated long lines, created a comfortable lobby, and modernized the system with scheduled appointments and a dedicated kūpuna hour. We also expanded self-service kiosks across the island and have received overwhelming positive feedback with the opening of the Kapa'a Satellite DMV.

Connection means understanding the work of our employees.

To do that, I worked alongside the DMV team, spent time as a park caretaker, filled potholes, drove a landfill compactor, shadowed inspectors, assisted clerks with building permits, joined our Elderly Affairs team on home visits, tried to answer emergency calls with our dispatchers, and even drove the bus.

Connection means investing in people. Strong leadership drives strong organizations, and builds leadership through training, practice, and commitment.

I want to thank our Human Resources team for creating opportunities that foster a culture of growth and self-improvement. Leadership development strengthens our organization from the inside out.

These programs provide tools employees can use in their daily lives. They do not just build better leaders. They help create better parents, spouses, neighbors, and community members.

Connection also means building trust with the next generation.

Through the Kauaʻi Police Activities League, the Kauaʻi Police Department is strengthening relationships with our island’s youth. Last year, KPAL programs reached more than 1,100 young people through sports, mentorship, and positive activities that build character and healthy lifestyles. That commitment continues with the KPAL Sports Complex and Piʻikoi Youth Center opening this summer.

For me, this youth center project is also deeply personal. The Piʻikoi site was once home to one of our family’s Big Save stores. Watching it being transformed into a youth center feels like a full circle moment. Seeing keiki fill that space again will give it new life, and I know my family would be proud to see it continue serving as a place where children learn, grow, and belong.

And belonging matters.

Early in my time as Mayor, I remember walking back to my office when I saw a group of moms gathered by the railing, waiting patiently to meet with me. They were desperate to share their struggles of taking their children to the playground, explaining to me that while our playground equipment worked well for many kids, it created barriers that made others feel left out.

As a dad, I could sympathize. But when I shared the story with my wife, Monica, it became clear that sympathy was not enough. We needed to do something.

Our Parks and Recreation team made these moms part of their team, bringing in all their ideas, and together we built our first inclusive playground at Kamalani. We witnessed something very special there. Children of all abilities, all backgrounds, and all walks of life playing together, learning from one another, and simply being kids.

It reminded me that when we create spaces where everyone belongs, we strengthen the connections that hold our community together.

We may not always see eye to eye, but as Pastor Matt once said, we can still see heart to heart.

That is the Kauaʻi I know. That is the Kauaʻi we must protect.

Our Money.

Summer waves may roll gently along the North Shore, but every surfer knows big swells are coming. Sound fiscal policy is like reading the ocean. We prepare during calm periods, so we are ready for larger waves.

Rather than relying primarily on residents, we rebalanced our tax structure to ensure hotel and resort properties, vacation rentals, and higher-tier investment properties contributed a larger share of revenues. Owner-occupied residences remain the lowest taxed properties, creating a more progressive and economically aligned system.

That is structural reform, not just rate increases, and it reflects a tax system built around Kaua'i's values.

That protects our residents.

Over the past eight years, the County took on zero dollars of new debt.

We paid off the loan for the Lima Ola housing project early, saving taxpayers \$6.4 million in interest. Because this loan came from the State's Dwelling Unit Revolving Fund, paying it off ahead of schedule also frees up those dollars for housing projects across Hawai'i, allowing the state to reinvest the funds in communities anywhere from Hilo to Hanalei.

Our long-term retiree obligations improved as well. Instead of kicking the can down the road for future administrations, we acted. We reduced our Other Post Employment Benefits liability by \$119 million, easing the burden on future administrations and strengthening our County's financial foundation. The decisions we make today should leave a stronger Kaua'i for the next generation.

In 2021, we also faced the sudden loss of the Transient Accommodations Tax revenue that Hawai'i's counties had relied on for years. Working with other counties and the State, we created a path forward that allowed counties to enact and collect our own TAT.

Mahalo to the State Legislature and our County Council for making that possible.

When our investments create safe streets, cared-for parks, and prepared first responders, we are doing more than managing budgets - we are protecting the quality of life that makes Kaua'i home.

Our Freedom.

Safety creates freedom.

Our safety depends on the brave hearts who protect our communities every day. Our first responders and law enforcement put themselves on the line so others can live with peace of mind.

That includes our Dispatchers, who guide people through moments of fear and crisis. During one of my dispatch shifts, I was overwhelmed with the work dispatchers must juggle. They gather information, pass it to the right responders, all while providing comfort and clear instructions to people who are often scared or panicked, all with incredible empathy and patience. Our dispatchers truly are extraordinary, and I ask for a big round of applause for their service.

Over the years, our community has faced storms, flooding, landslides, brushfires, tsunami threats, and aviation incidents. Just two years ago, our first responders faced a difficult brushfire season that culminated with the Hanapēpē and Kaumakani fire. Because of their courage and coordination, our community came together and protected Kaumakani.

Even during active periods of disaster, we strengthened emergency management systems by improving communications, expanding backup capabilities, updating hazard plans, and strengthening partnerships to keep Kauaʻi better prepared for future emergencies.

Planning for the future means preparing for climate and wildfire threats. Following the tragedy in Lāhainā, Kauaʻi adopted the state’s first Wildfire Wildland Urban Interface ordinance, strengthening protections in fire-prone areas and reducing risk to our west side communities. Lāhainā, California, Kaumakani: wildfire is not a one-off event. It has become a new constant as changing climate threats put our homes and our lives at risk. To that end, I pledge these three key initiatives:

Our planning department will be tasked with ensuring that new construction include low-cost, high-return protective wildfire measures.

Starting August 1st, an interagency task force of certified structural ignition potential specialists shall make wildfire home assessments available to any homeowner on Kauaʻi that wants one.

Our newly established wildfire specialist shall coordinate directly with the insurance industry to adjust the County’s policies and programs. Multi-family homeowners’ insurance retention is not just about climate resiliency; it is equally, if not more importantly, necessary concerning the cost of housing and the cost of living here in Hawaiʻi.

When we talk about protecting our community, we cannot overlook Kauaʻi’s response to Covid-19. Through strong local leadership, community cooperation, and federal support, our island achieved one of the lowest case and fatality rates in the nation. Because our island family worked together, Kauaʻi became one of the safest places in the world during that difficult time and gained experience that will help us weather the next storm.

We have many people to thank for that statistic, but at the top of that list is our very own District Health Officer Aunty Dr. B, who will be heading into retirement this April. Thank you Dr. Berreman for your lifetime of service to public health and for your dedication to keep Kauaʻi safe.

Our Heart.

That tireless effort to work together and care for each other is what creates the heart of Kauaʻi.

Today, I want to recognize a story of heart and aloha from one of our own.

That is the story of Chance Swanson, an Ocean Safety Officer who survived a shark attack last year. Chance represents resilience, courage, and aloha. I also honor the entire response chain that supported him. Chance, the road ahead may be long, but you are not walking it alone. Your courage, your service, and your aloha make our island stronger. We are with you every step of the way.

Some days, the current is strong and the paddle out feels long. But when you look around and see your neighbors still paddling beside you, that is our heart. That is resilience rooted in community.

That heart is also found in the people who carry forward the traditions and spirit of our islands. Last year, Kaua'i said goodbye to one of those cherished souls, Kumu Hula Leinā'ala Pavao-Jardin. A beloved daughter of our island, Leinā'ala dedicated her life to sharing the beauty and meaning of hula. As the guiding spirit of Hālau Ka Lei Mokihana O Leinā'ala, she nurtured generations of dancers with grace, discipline, and deep cultural knowledge, ensuring the traditions of our kūpuna live on with pride.

Her presence was a light in our community. Through her mele, her hula, and the aloha she shared so freely, she reminded us who we are and where we come from. Though we mourn her passing, her legacy continues in the dancers she trained, the families she inspired, and the cultural heartbeat she helped keep strong across our island.

That same spirit of caring for one another must also be reflected in how we support our people every day.

We strengthened security for employees and their families by implementing free medical coverage for our workforce. Individual enrollment has grown by approximately 62% and family coverage increased by about 66%.

These numbers represent real Kaua'i families gaining peace of mind.

Mental and emotional well-being is as important as physical health. The Life's Choices Kaua'i grant program awarded \$1,000,000 to local nonprofits supporting youth mental health, substance abuse prevention, and other support programs.

Our heart beats strongest when we care for every generation, from keiki to kūpuna. Like a heart that keeps a steady rhythm, our community stays strong when we protect our keiki and honor our kūpuna.

Our Parks and Recreation Department has strengthened the spaces that define island life. We've upgraded more than 70 parks, rebuilt courts and playgrounds, improved pools and stadiums, opened two fully inclusive playgrounds, and expanded ADA access so every resident has a welcoming place to gather, play, and stay connected.

We are pleased to report the public opening of the Vidinha Stadium Improvements Project later this year. Just this past Saturday, the KIF track meet brought our island's student athletes together at Vidinha, a reminder of how important this facility is for our keiki. These improvements will help transform our island's premier athletic venue, putting Kaua'i on par with high schools across the state and giving our student athletes access to quality facilities and opportunities right here at home.

We support our kūpuna with programs like EnhanceFitness to keep them active, the Falls Prevention Program for home safety and wellness, and digital literacy and Elder Abuse Task Force efforts to protect seniors and promote independence.

At the end of the day, government is only a structure. What gives it life are the people. People from different backgrounds and experiences coming together behind a shared purpose: One Kaua'i.

As I bring this final State of the County to a close, I find myself thinking about the last wave of the day.

Every surfer knows that feeling. The sun is beginning to set, the wind softens, and the ocean turns glassy. You sit quietly on your board, looking back at the shoreline. You think about the waves you caught, the ones that got away, and the people who were out there with you. The ones who cheered you on, the ones who paddled beside you when the current got strong.

That is how this moment feels to me.

For the past seven years, we have been out there together in the lineup. Some days, the waves were small and easy. Other days, the ocean tested us in ways we could have never imagined. We faced floods, a global pandemic, economic uncertainty, and challenges that pushed us further than we ever thought we could go.

But through it all, this island showed the world who we are.

There is something, though, that is much harder to measure and more important than any single project or program. That is knowing that we stood together. That we believed in each other. That we never stopped caring for this place and the people who call it home.

You see, Mayor Harry Kim was right. People may not remember every road we paved or every house we built. But I hope they remember how they felt about how we tried to lead. With humility. With courage. And always with aloha.

This island raised me. It shaped me. It gave me my family, my values, and a sense of responsibility to give back to the place that gave me everything.

While this may be my final State of the County, my love for this island does not end here. Kaua'i is not just where we live. It is where we learn who we are.

It is the sound of the ocean in the morning, the laughter of kids playing in the park, the quiet strength of our kūpuna, and the promise we make to the next generation that this place will always be their home too.

So as I paddle in from this incredible ride, I do so with a heart that is full. Full of gratitude for the opportunity to serve. Full of pride in what we accomplished together. Full of love for the people of Kaua'i.

And full of faith in knowing that the best waves for this island are still out there on the horizon.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for trusting me, for believing in our team, and for allowing Monica and me to be part of your lives.

It has been the honor of a lifetime.