



HAWAII HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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**OPENING DAY REMARKS
2016 LEGISLATIVE SESSION
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SPEAKER
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVE
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Fellow House members, welcome to the 2016 Regular Session of the Hawaii State Legislature. To say that I have seen my share of opening days at the Legislature would be, at my age, a bit of an understatement. Twenty-five or even ten years ago, who would have thought that we would be looking at medical marijuana in the way that we regard it today?

Who would have imagined the number of houses powered by solar panels that are on our roofs today?

Who would have foreseen the Internet or the impact of social media?

Times have changed and so has Hawaii.

Fundamental Needs

What has not changed are the fundamental issues that we grapple with every day here in this building: The economy and jobs, affordable housing and homelessness, the education of our children, the stewardship of our environment, and the protection of our basic rights — these needs never change.

What does change is our approach to them.

It wasn't so long ago that we were all wondering whether we would ever see single digit interest rates again. But we have—and then some.

It wasn't so long ago that we were all wondering whether we would ever see the end to the “Great Recession.” But we have, with a record number of visitors coming to the state in the last few years.

The economic cycle is pointing up and our local economy is on a roll. We have momentum on our side—not just economic momentum but a legislative one as well.

It's About Momentum

Last year, this body took major steps to move us toward energy self-sufficiency.

We gave patients throughout the state access to medical marijuana with the creation of state supervised dispensaries.

We moved to resolve the longstanding financial crisis of Maui's public hospitals.

We shored up our long-term financial stability by strengthening the Rainy Day Fund and Hurricane Relief Fund, as well as by addressing our unfunded liabilities.

These are not only very difficult and complex issues, but longstanding ones as well. Thank you for having the courage to tackle these and other tough issues over the last several sessions.

I believe we are on a roll, with momentum on our side. And that is not a small thing.

A few weeks ago, I watched the Alamo Bowl, where TCU found itself trailing at the start of the second half, by 31 points! I don't know what the coach told them at halftime, but clearly, they came out in the second half, intent on fighting back. Momentum dramatically shifted and after

three hard fought-overtime periods, they finally secured victory.

Ask any athlete, momentum can be such a powerful force in competition. I believe it can also be a powerful force in life as well. But what are we going to do with it?

Moving forward still takes hard work, boldness and determination. But imagine the good we can do if we leverage our momentum.

Affordable Housing and Homelessness

Homelessness seems as entrenched as any issue we've faced in recent times. However, the City and State have been working with many agencies and nonprofit organizations to shape a multipronged approach to assisting these individuals.

We need to support those efforts—not timidly but emphatically with sufficient funds to meet those needs.

And the same should go for the creation of more affordable homes and rentals.

We should refocus all of the state agencies who have a hand in developing affordable housing to leverage what is currently being done. We should start looking at how we can build affordable housing on state owned parcels along Oahu's rail system.

And we should partner with the private sector so that more can be developed—and developed sooner rather than later.

Providing an adequate supply of affordable housing is the correct long-term solution so that families don't fall into homelessness and despair.

Fine tuning the clinics

In 2000, we were the first state to legalize medical marijuana. Last year, we provided safe and reliable access for those who require it for health reasons.

As we move closer to implementation, let's make sure that they're done right and serve our people in the way they were intended.

Hawaii Health Systems Corporation

The action we took last year to shore up Maui's public hospitals was groundbreaking. That formula may provide us with an answer to broader issues with other facilities in our statewide public hospital system.

That's something we should explore.

Investing in Hawaii's Long-Term Future

In looking to our long-term future, we need to continue to scrutinize ways to keep us on a sound fiscal footing. Ways that include making sure that we can sustain ongoing state initiatives, whether it's the Cancer Center, the Enterprise Technology Services, or any other recent endeavor.

We must continue paying down our unfunded liabilities, specifically our obligations to the public employees' retirement fund.

Building our budgetary reserves now, puts us in a better position to weather any future economic slowdown, which is sure to come our way.

Our Kupuna

We need to help our kupuna by passing the bill introduced last session that will help family members care for their seniors after they come home from the hospital. Testimony on the measure supported the bill three to one.

More importantly, it will provide the kind of medical training for caregivers that is so essential to keeping our kupuna healthy.

In addition, I will be introducing a bill that will require all doctors practicing in Hawaii to treat

Medicare and Medicaid patients. That too will help our kupuna, as well as those who must seek medical care but cannot afford it.

Help for the Counties

And we need to help our counties who help us support our number one industry, tourism. We can do that by raising the counties' share of the tourism tax and building on earlier increases to the counties. That's taking advantage of our momentum.

In addition, we need to help the workers on Maui affected by the closure of sugar operations at Hawaii Commercial and Sugar Company. And our actions have to be more than just creating another Hamakua Task Force.

The closure of those sugar lands on our last large-scale plantation marks the end of a remarkable, proud and historic era in Hawaii. Our grandparents, parents and all of us have been shaped by life around the plantations and the lessons learned on them. It reminds us of our history and where we came from, so that we can better plot the direction in which we want to go.

We will be working closely with A&B and the Administration to ensure that real help will be available. The end of an era cannot be the end of those workers' dreams for a better life.

Our Keiki

Finally, you cannot talk about a long-term scenario without talking about the investment we make in our children. We need to repair and modernize our education infrastructure so that we give our keiki the best chance to learn and to prepare themselves for their future.

And we need to give them the best opportunity to secure good paying jobs so that they can support their families and create a better life for themselves. We can do that by ensuring that small businesses, the backbone of our economy, remain vibrant and strong.

Right now small business is having a tough time because of one primary reason: their lease rent have gone through the roof, increasing in some places by more than a thousand percent in a very short span of time.

Consequently, we've seen a string of locally owned shops and stores shut down in recent years. And it will not stop any time soon, driving more and more of them out of business. Unless we do something about it. And we can, if we have the determination and will.

We can level the playing field and change for the better the business landscape across the state—if we are willing to reinvent the rules that govern commercial leasehold lands.

Hawaii has done it before with lands supporting single-family and multi-family homes. Those historic actions gave the ordinary working person new opportunities for true homeownership, rejuvenated the local housing market and leveled the playing field for home buyers.

It's time for us to think about the converting commercial leasehold lands in Hawaii to fee simple.

The Power of Momentum

Momentum—as powerful as it is—has no value if we don't use it or leverage it.

Political pundits have noted that this is an election year. In other words, a year in which politicians seeking reelection do nothing to upset voters.

I am not asking you to upset voters, but to be bold in this election year and do what needs to be done for the greater good. We cannot lose the momentum we have built up. We must use it to keep us moving forward. I look forward to joining you in these endeavors and working with you on behalf of the people of Hawaii.

Thank you and aloha.