

Our Strength • Our Purpose • Our People

2024 State of the County Address
David Coulter, Oakland County Executive

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The Hawk Community Center • Farmington Hills, MI

Thank you very much. Thank you.

Please join me in thanking Farmington Hills Mayor Theresa Rich for serving as our emcee tonight.

Thank you also to those wonderful North Farmington High School singers — Avery, Camille, Aaron and Mitchell.

I also just met our new Oakland County 40 Under 40 Class, a group of talented individuals who are shining brightly in their careers and public service and I'm happy they are with me here tonight.

My partners on the Board of Commissioners are also here, led by Chairman Dave Woodward and Minority Leader Mike Spisz. I'd like to thank our distinguished countywide officials and our circuit and probate judges.

And, of course, a very special thanks to my partners in the region: Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, Wayne County Executive Warren Evans and Mark ... Mark ... what's his name ... oh yeah! Mark Hackel, Macomb County's Executive.

Thank you to all the state legislators who are here and the members of Congress who represent Oakland County.

On a personal note, I'd also like to thank my mom for being here tonight, as she always is.

And finally, I'd like to thank all of you for joining me tonight at The Hawk! And to those of you who are observing the holy month of Ramadan, Ramadan Kareem.

It wasn't that long ago that there were class bells ringing and students flooding the halls of this building. Farmington Hills has transformed this former Harrison High School into this fabulous community center. Open for fun, recreation, culture and education, it's a shining example of what's possible when we repurpose our gathering spots, turning them into assets that the entire community can use and appreciate.

It kind of reminds me of what we're doing in Oakland County: We are leveraging our strengths, not just to flex our muscles or claim bragging rights on Wall Street but creating real opportunities for our people to get decent-paying jobs, find affordable homes in a safe and livable neighborhood, care for their families and start or grow a business.

It's Our Strength. Our Purpose. Our People.

That's what I'd like to focus on tonight as we reflect on the past year and look forward to a brighter future.

Oakland County's strength lies in our ability to address issues head-on, find solutions to problems and provide excellent services to our residents, including those who were born and raised here and those who have chosen Oakland County from around the country and around the globe.

One of our greatest strengths is fiscal responsibility. We pride ourselves on being good stewards for the taxpayers of Oakland County. Every year, we've presented three-year balanced budgets with healthy reserves that help provide essential services that reflect our shared priorities and our values.

That careful and far-sighted fiscal planning has once again allowed us to earn our coveted AAA bond rating. Yet, for my administration, this is not the end or the ultimate goal. It's the foundation that allows us to execute our strategic plan — an intentional and thoughtful roadmap to deliver the initiatives and services to improve the lives of our people and create a promising future for the next generation.

Our purpose is defined by the way we step in to help our residents and each other. It has to do with providing support at every corner to ensure people are living their best lives here in Oakland County.

We've had remarkable success on a number of fronts in the past year, from transit to mental health care, affordable housing to sustainability, small business coaching to education and training. We were able to provide these innovative programs with the support from the Board of Commissioners, who have approved our initiatives in a bi-partisan manner, proving once again that, in Oakland County, working across the aisle is how we do business. And these programs have touched hundreds of thousands of people.

Let me give you a small, but exciting example. We opened a program - Oakland SAVES - one Monday morning in January, designed to provide grants to people who wanted to make energy efficiency improvements in their homes. The interest and need were so high that, by Friday of that same week, the entire \$5 million in funding was spoken for.

Bonnie Collum, of Waterford, is one of the 1,100 residents who received one of the grants. She had previously saved for three years to pay for a new roof on her home, so pulling the money together to replace her 60-year-old furnace seemed impossible on a fixed income — until she heard about Oakland SAVES. "It felt like a dream," she told us about receiving the funds to get her furnace replaced just few months ago.

That's what I call leveraging our strength. In this case, we recognized a need in the community and responded with a solution. We're helping to keep people safer and more comfortable in their homes, providing more energy efficiency, and keeping more money in their pockets as they save on their monthly utility bills.

We also know how important affordable housing is to attract and retain people who will help grow our population and fuel the county's economic future.

So, working with the Board of Commissioners and using federal American Rescue Plan money, we established a \$20 million Housing Trust Fund that is working with developers to provide more affordable housing options in the county through incentives and gap financing.

Projects have already been approved from these funds in Southfield, Royal Oak Township, Pontiac and Rochester Hills, filled with both market-rate and affordable homes that will create inclusive communities filled with the hard-working Michigianians who are looking for attractive and safe places to raise their families.

And we just closed last month on a project in Rochester Hills to provide desperately needed housing for adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. It's only the second such development in all of Michigan.

Here's one family who will benefit from this really remarkable program.

[VIDEO OF SHARMILLA]

That's a really powerful example of the impact we can have.

But helping our residents with their housing needs is just a first step. We also want them to find and flourish in their dream job and we can give them the tools to do just that.

Our Workforce Development department is doing phenomenal work connecting people with jobs, and employers with the skilled workforce they need to grow and thrive. More than 8,500 people have entered the workplace in recent years with the help of our six Oakland County Michigan Works offices and more than 6,300 businesses have benefitted from the services we offered, from matching them to interns and apprentices to learning the best ways to attract and retain employees.

Operating hand-in-hand with Workforce Development is our Oakland80 initiative, which you've heard me talk about in the past. Our goal is to get 80 percent of our adult population a college degree or certified training by 2030.

By the way, in just two years, we are getting closer, increasing educational attainment from 61 percent when we began, to 69 percent today.

And I have to give a shout-out to Governor Gretchen Whitmer for her record investments in education in Michigan.

My friends Pete Provenzano of Oakland Community College and Ora Pescovitz, of Oakland University — speaking of OU, let's celebrate those Golden Grizzlies! These leaders have often told me student enrollment is one thing, but keeping them there through graduation is the real challenge. Life just gets in the way for many people and sidetracks education and training.

The tuition support from the state allows us to concentrate our resources on providing the wraparound services that break these barriers to a college education or training. We are the bridge for expenses like books and fees, computers and transportation, childcare and even work clothing and equipment.

Take Breia Roberts, who on her way to exploring different career paths received career coaching, a childcare scholarship, a laptop and transportation support from our Oakland80 team. She went from being an underemployed customer service worker to receiving Machine Operator Training at OCC and getting a full-time machine tech job at Williams International, the engine manufacturer in Pontiac. And she's enrolled in an apprenticeship program at OCC that will lead to a degree. Breia is here tonight, so Breia, would you please stand so we can applaud your success?

But our people can't succeed if businesses don't have the support they need to prosper and grow. And that's where Oakland Thrive comes in. The non-profit agency that we launched to provide coaching and consulting resources for the county's small businesses has connected with more than 7,600 companies in just two years. By the way, that's 8 ½ times more entrepreneurs we're supporting than we had in the past.

For instance, when Design to Shine Salon owner Brenda Vorus needed support for her Madison Heights business, Oakland Thrive consultant Sairy Garcia provided help with everything from her business plan and social media to financial workshops and assistance with applications for business grants and loans. She even provided a recommendation for a valuable Women-owned Business Certification. Brenda told us that whenever she started to feel discouraged, she'd get a call or text from Sairy. "And in business," she told us, "that's priceless to have someone looking out for you."

Our small and mid-size manufacturers also need support in their efforts to compete in a global marketplace. We're on track to provide the resources for 3D printers to 40% of our small manufacturers through the Project DIAMOND initiative that is helping companies cut costs, increase production and become more flexible. This technology is also allowing our companies to keep manufacturing right here in Michigan and Oakland County — instead of having to outsource that production overseas.

Let me give you an example. Unique Short Tree Design, a furniture manufacturer and upholstery shop in Rochester Hills, was able to stay open and succeed during the pandemic, thanks in part to the 3D printer that they got from Oakland County. It would have taken the company up to a year to source the parts to make the patio chair for restaurants during the pandemic.

Owner Tammy Packard said the 3D printer allowed them to make the parts in a matter of days, or in some cases, hours.

Business attraction is also a big part of our mission, as we're always looking for avenues to grow our economy.

And that's why I recently went on a trip to Taiwan and South Korea with the governor and the Michigan Economic Development Corporation that is already paying dividends.

We were there to help open a new Michigan trade office in Taipei. And we're excited to welcome TYC, an automotive lighting supplier from Taiwan that is expanding its operations with a research and development facility in Wixom.

In fact, our Economic Development department has helped 20 companies either locate or expand in Oakland County during 2023. Their presence represents \$387 million in new investment and more than 3,300 new and retained jobs.

Let me give you a few other examples:

- Magna International's planned \$150 million expansion in Auburn Hills
- McLaren Hospital's \$35 million renovation in Oxford
- And Borg Warner's \$10 million Electric Vehicle expansion in Hazel Park and Auburn Hills

The business community both here and abroad recognizes that Oakland County is a prime location for their future, filled with a talented workforce and an attractive quality of life.

But attracting business also means helping their employees get to those jobs.

So we're building on the strength of voters, who, like us, were committed to creating a countywide public transit system. We're expanding into the job-rich centers of Novi, Wixom, Bloomfield Hills and Rochester Hills, which is happening with the help of the SMART bus system. And transit is on the move for the folks who live in the outer reaches of Oakland County, who may not have been sure that they would ever benefit from a public transportation system.

The local transit providers - North Oakland and Western Oakland Transportation systems, the Older Persons Commission and People's Express – are showing that attractive, accessible and affordable transit options are happening across Oakland County. And they're seeing double-digit increases in their ridership since expanding their routes and hours last year.

This service is having a real and positive impact on people's lives across Oakland County. Just let Theresa Rodgerson and Margaret Thomas tell you a little bit about how WOTA has opened up their horizons.

[TRANSIT VIDEO]

And by the way, Theresa and Margaret are watching our livestream tonight. So ladies, thank you for sharing your stories.

It's Our Strength. Our Purpose. Our People.

Supporting our people as they navigate daily life includes expanding access to affordable and quality physical and mental health care.

This still is one of our top priorities.

Did you know that medical debt is the number one cause of bankruptcy in the United States, even if you have insurance?

So, we've adopted a program that will wipe out the medical debt for up to 80,000 people for pennies on the dollar. This program will help individuals and families rehabilitate their credit scores and relieve the stress that comes from worrying about a medical condition and the financial burden that comes along with it.

We're also collaborating with Corktown Health to expand healthcare in the south part of the County and later this year, we are working with community partners to open up an Urgent Care Clinic in Pontiac, focusing on both physical and mental health care services.

We've also visited 11,000 homes of pregnant mothers or young families and provided special healthcare services for nearly 3,400 children. We provided more than 32,000 immunizations and answered more than 17,000 Nurse on Call queries from Oakland County residents.

And when the former President sought to eliminate family planning services, Oakland County stepped in. Family planning is women's healthcare and for the women of Oakland County, contraception, cancer screening and other preventative services are now available through our public health clinics. I trust women to make their own health care decisions, and I will stand against anyone who tries to turn the clock back on women's rights.

Another significant initiative we've adopted, and one that I'm particularly proud of, is our investment in expanding and improving access to mental health care in Oakland County. Through our partnership with the United Way of Southeastern Michigan, we've provided millions in grants to dozens of non-profits that have the expertise to positively impact and, in some cases, save the lives of tens of thousands of people across the county.

Take the case of one 8-year-old boy who had been suspended from his school nearly 30 times during the 2023 school year because of behavioral problems. His academic performance was slipping and he was struggling to make friends. The team at Training and Treatment Innovations in Oxford worked with him throughout last summer on social skills and how to manage his daily frustrations. Also working with the boy's school, a treatment plan was developed, and he is now thriving in second grade. He has a "bestest" friend and was recently elected as "student of the month" for being kind and helpful.

This treatment didn't just have a lasting impact for him but also for his family. The boy's mom has gone from getting daily calls about her son's behavior to only three this school year and two have been from teachers, praising him.

Another agency that I'm happy to support is Dutton Farm in Rochester Hills, which empowers and supports adults with disabilities to live a life of purpose and dignity. As you walk out of here tonight, make sure to stop by

the table in the hallway and pick out a candle that the Dutton Farm employees made just for you. It's a powerful symbol of their strength, purpose and people. And it's our gift to you.

Those are the types of inspiring stories that reveal how our strengths have created purpose and hope for our parents and children.

While it's important for us to reflect on our goals and achievements of the past few years, however, I'd also like to look at how these investments have positioned us for a strong and bright future.

Our Team – the thousands of employees of Oakland County — bring an enthusiasm and passion to their work for the benefit of our county's residents.

Take Beth Hella, a fantastic public health nurse who has worked in a variety of community nursing roles in the county for years. She is now one of the nurses who goes into the homes of more than 3,000 kids with severe special medical needs whose families need support managing their child's specialists, therapists, pharmacies and medical bills. Her knowledge of resources and health systems has been invaluable for families who are having problems navigating complicated bureaucracies.

Or Brooklyn Frontiera, our training and development coordinator for Workforce Development who is helping high school students explore career paths that match their passions and skills. She has taken a lead role in the highly successful MiCareerQuest, the Oakland County Manufacturing Day and the iamPontiac programs that together, have attracted tens of thousands of students to explore the careers that might become a part of their future.

Or Steve Rideout, the county's staff attorney for the Clean Slate program, who has helped nearly 650 residents get their non-violent records expunged, giving them a second chance at getting a good job or buying a house.

These and so many more Oakland County employees are our most valuable assets, and they care deeply about their role as true public servants. Let's give them a round of applause.

Now, on a sad note, since we last gathered, we lost three of the best way too soon.

Oakland County Sheriff Deputy Nicholas Dotson from Holly died in December after a battle with cancer. Sheriff Mike Bouchard said Nick had a special spark that led him to his job with the county because he wanted to make a real difference and he did during his 10 years of service with the Sheriff's Office. At the young age of 32, he leaves behind his wife Delaney and son Sullivan.

County Commissioner Gary McGillivray lost his battle with cancer late last year. He was a devoted public servant during his time as a councilman and mayor of Madison Heights and during his 15 years on the Board of Commissioners. He was also a champion for the Oakland Parks system as a member and chairman of the Parks and Rec Commission.

And we tragically lost Dr. Calandra Green, our county health officer, almost a year ago. Calandra was a passionate advocate for public health services across the country, especially in communities of color.

When I think of Our Strength. Our Purpose. Our People, Calandra comes to mind.

Her legacy of helping and connecting with people continues. I am proud to announce tonight that, working with Oakland University, we're creating a new scholarship fund in honor of Calandra that will be used to help nursing students at OU and I intend to be the first donor to that fund. If you'd like to learn more about this scholarship

named for such an extraordinary woman, scan the QR code here on the screen or in the lobby after the speech. Many of Calandra's family members are here with us tonight, including her parents, Robert and Gennie Hammond, and her daughter, Casey Anderson, as well as her wonderful siblings, and we extend our love and fond memories of her to you.

Always remember, Oakland County employees will comfort and provide resources to any and all who need the services we offer, regardless of their circumstances, where they live or their political persuasion.

It's why I so firmly believe that we must stay vigilant against the divisions and discord that plague our country and why we must remain committed to expanding economic opportunity for everyone.

I fundamentally believe that wage stagnation and vast income disparity have gotten to such an alarming level that it feeds the anxieties that exist on both sides of the political aisle.

It used to be that a person earning \$30,000 a year could buy a home and live a good life. But the American dream has slipped out of reach for too many people.

There is a thread here that I'd like to pull. When our businesses do well, it stands to reason that our people should flourish too. That's always been a part of the bargain. And while we work really hard to retain and attract companies to our county and to help them to succeed and grow, that should also translate into more good-paying jobs for our residents who can share in the success that has been created by their labor.

That's why I'm so passionate about so many of our programs that I've talked about here tonight. We're giving people the tools they need to move into the middle class and land good-paying jobs.

And for us, the focus starts with our young people. We're hiring 15 more Oakland80 navigators who will be placed in high schools across Oakland County. We're committed to starting much younger with our high school students so that no matter what their circumstances, they know there are options for success.

We've already started programs in Pontiac and Hazel Park to provide coaching and mentoring for students who frankly didn't think that college or advanced training was within reach. And now, in partnership with Oakland Schools, many from this new team are moving into more schools across the county later this year.

Here is a little bit more insight into our work with high school students:

[OAKLAND80 VIDEO]

One of the people who's been instrumental in the success of Oakland80 is Dr. Wanda Cook Robinson, Superintendent of the Oakland Schools. Earlier this week, she announced her plans to retire. She's here tonight, which gives us a chance to thank her for her friendship and her legacy of promoting student excellence.

Our efforts with Oakland80 sometimes take an unexpected and lucky turn. One of our Oakland80 navigators Nykol Baker encountered Victor Lyman of Waterford at one of the monthly resource fairs our Veteran's Department holds. Victor wondered what it would take to finish up his college degree. He had dropped out of Oakland Community College more than 40 years ago to raise and support his family just two classes shy of a degree.

Getting that close and not earning the degree was one of the biggest regrets in his life. And even at the age of 80, he dreamed of getting a diploma. With the help of our Oakland80 office, a counselor at OCC, and a Michigan Works! talent specialist, Victor got some great news. The team discovered that his military service would fill the

requirement for his missing courses and on May 18, he'll attend OCC's commencement ceremony and receive an associate degree.

Now, maybe it's the former mayor in me, but something else I'm passionate about is elevating our core communities, like Pontiac, our county seat.

The city has suffered through decades of disinvestment at the hands of government and industry and emergency managers.

That stops now.

I envision this historic downtown bustling with workers at lunchtime and socializing at new bars and restaurants after work. A redesigned Woodward loop will entice visitors to the Strand and the Crofoot and to a downtown green space that will be a magnet for culture and recreation.

Our plans to help revitalize the downtown, in collaboration with Mayor Tim Greimel and the city council, are taking shape. We'll demolish the deteriorating parking deck that you probably know as the Phoenix Center, refurbish a long-vacant building and move at least 500 county employees into the heart of the city.

We couldn't have embarked on this transformational project without the support of the Legislature, which shepherded a \$50 million investment in the project through the halls of the state Capitol. So many of our legislators were instrumental in this journey, but I'd like to single out state Sen. Jeremy Moss and Representative Brenda Carter for their commitment to this project.

And state Sen. Sarah Anthony, our appropriations chair who hails from Lansing, understood the importance of this effort and was a champion for it as well. I'm grateful for her support and for joining us here tonight.

Another investment in the city was \$2 million in ARPA funding for Micah 6, a community-based organization that is transforming the former Webster Elementary School into a center that will provide much-needed services and a community garden to the neighborhood.

These initiatives are a part of our pledge to promote sustainable and walkable neighborhoods that build on the abundance of natural beauty in this place we call home.

That's also why we are all in on helping our communities with more than \$14 million in grants to upgrade their water infrastructure. Because every person in Oakland County deserves access to clean and safe drinking water.

We're also expanding and improving the crown jewel of Oakland County — our amazing system of 14 parks, full of trails, lakes, golf courses, water features and recreational opportunities. A \$20 million investment is going toward creating new public spaces and making improvements to dozens of parks across the county.

We also know our future includes a growing population of older adults who are some of the most engaged and active residents of the county. They have given their time and talents to their communities over the years and it's time we give back by providing investments in the senior centers that have proven to be a lifeline for so many of them. That's why we've invested \$5 million into 29 senior centers across the county from Springfield Township to South Lyon, Novi to Clarkston.

But our communities and gathering spots aren't attractive if they're not safe. That's why we've delivered a \$61 million upgrade to our public radio safety system that allows our police, firefighters and EMTs to seamlessly —

and in real-time — connect with hundreds of agencies across the region and the state in times of crisis and improve our response times to emergencies.

It's Our Strength. Our Purpose. Our People.

Our strength is evident when we work together with a relentless focus on the future to solve problems rather than being at odds with each other.

Our purpose is to be the true public servant, offering resources and services that provide safety, unlock potential, and spotlight the pathways that will lead to enduring success.

Our people are as unique and diverse as our communities. Together, they help make Oakland County the best place to live, work and build your future.

It's our people who inspire us.

And our people who keep us All Ways, Moving Forward.

I am proud of the state of Oakland County and as employees, residents, local leaders and business owners, you can be proud of that too.

Thank you for attending tonight.