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CAPITOL CONNECTION

NOVEMBER 2021

From the governor: ‘Cautious optimism’ for the road ahead

“Cautiously optimistic” — that’s how Governor Ige, the mayors and health officials (along with the rest of us) are describing how we’re feeling right now about the pandemic. It’s a dramatic change from a few weeks ago when Hawai‘i saw soaring COVID-19 case counts because of the Delta variant. Hawai‘i is in a much better place now, but we’re not out of the woods yet. It’s up to all of us to still take precautions with the holidays coming and the threat of the virus still out there.

Q. If COVID-19 case counts keep dropping, what can we expect in the next few weeks?

A. We’re definitely looking at how we can **calibrate a “new normal”** as we learn to live with COVID. Our goal is to get to a lower baseline in cases, so we can open up activities steadily and gradually instead of a rollercoaster of openings and restrictions. We’re focusing on resuming activities in a smart way that doesn’t put our community in jeopardy. We’ve been meeting with businesses and event planners to identify best practices that reduce risk and allow them to operate safely.

Q. Is that the strategy behind opening up UH sports to fans and other events?

A. Yes, the mayors and I just don’t want to relax restrictions too soon and end up with another spike in COVID cases. We know that the more people we allow to gather, the higher the risk. That’s why, under Safe Access O‘ahu for UH games, we started with limited attendees and precautions. We’re still a very isolated community for health care. That’s why we need to keep our hospitals from being overwhelmed, and we continue to urge people to get vaccinated. Every person has a role to play in the fight against COVID.

Q. Are we in a better place to welcome visitors, especially if it helps create more jobs? What is the economic outlook?



A. Yes, our COVID case counts are down and our vaccination rates keep growing. We also have the promise of boosters and shots for children, ages 5 to 11. But we continue to urge people to take precautions so we can open up more activity. We want to welcome fully vaccinated travelers, and we’ve been working with the airlines and hotels to reemphasize that we expect our visitors to wear their masks as well as be respectful of our island environment and culture. **The state is actually ahead of projections for an economic rebound.** We also just sold a record \$1.88 billion in general obligation bonds to fund new and existing projects and support the state’s economy.

Q. What’s your response to critics who say you’re either being too cautious or not cautious enough?

A. There’s no playbook for COVID. We’re facing most of these issues for the first time. When you’re a governor or mayor, you know every decision will be second-guessed. I can tell you, when the case counts exploded, I found it hard to sleep. We were way over anything anybody had anticipated, and the hospitals were saying, “You’ve got to do something. We’re on the verge of rationing care.” That was a really, really difficult time. We had to make it a priority to save lives.

Q. Looking back on the past year and a half, what are you most thankful for?

A. I’m so proud and thankful to be the governor of Hawai‘i because our residents have been willing to sacrifice personal interests for the good of the community. The results are clear. **Hawai‘i has done better than virtually all other states in managing the pandemic.** Our community understands kuleana and what it means to be part of the solution instead of adding to the problem. People have stepped up to help each other and take personal responsibility to keep our community safe. **I know it hasn’t been easy, but I believe our sacrifices have saved lives — the lives of friends, neighbors and people we’ll never meet.**



New O'ahu COVID rules and more fans in the stands

On Oct. 8, some good news arrived for UH sports fans, wedding and event planners and others looking forward to the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. New **Safe O'ahu Response Plan** guidelines were announced by **Governor Ige and Mayor Rick Blangiardi** that attempted to balance public health and leisure activities for a "new normal" life in Hawai'i. At both indoor and outdoor seated events, all attendees will have to be fully vaccinated. They will also be required to wear masks, and no food or beverages will be served.

On Oct. 27, Mayor Blangiardi went a step further in announcing a plan that had **state approval for seated and interactive outdoor events, but not for full capacity indoor events**. The plan includes 100% capacity at outdoor seated entertainment events, such as UH football games at the 9,200-seat Ching Stadium. For details, go to <https://www.oneoahu.org/safe-oahu-response-plan>. The governor and the Department of Health are continuing to work with Mayor Blangiardi to mitigate COVID-19 transmission at full capacity indoor events (especially interactive activities) since they pose the highest risk for virus transmission because of mingling, eating and drinking for prolonged periods in spaces with limited ventilation.

The governor and the mayor are continuing to discuss the risks and the city's responsibilities in responding to a surge in COVID-19 cases if one occurs following this easing of restrictions. As for allowing restaurants to go to 100% capacity, the governor is working with all the mayors and the restaurant association to find a way to reduce restrictions and still protect the community.

Outdoor Seated Entertainment

- 100% venue capacity
- Water only
- Mitigation plan required
- All attendees must be vaccinated; no testing exemptions
- Masking required



Starting November 3

Some rules have been eased under the Safe O'ahu Response Plan.

At Kona airport, Gov. Ige gives OK for vaccinated travelers



Hawai'i island Mayor Mitch Roth and Governor Ige.

Governor Ige took advantage of a milestone at the **Ellison Onizuka Kona International Airport (KOA)** to give the greenlight to non-essential travel for fully vaccinated residents and visitors. The occasion was the opening of the **permanent Federal Inspection Services (FIS) facility**, which provides a second international entry point in addition to the Daniel K. Inouye International Airport. The governor pointed to the economic benefits international travelers bring to Hawaii. "One daily flight from Japan can generate over \$100 million in visitor spending and support 1,200 jobs on Hawai'i island," he said.

"I think we are all encouraged by what we've seen over the last several weeks with the lower case counts," said the governor. "Our hospitals are doing better, and we have fewer COVID patients in them. Because of this, it is now safe for fully vaccinated residents and visitors to resume non-essential travel to and within the State of Hawai'i." The state continues to seek information from the federal government about new protocols beginning Nov. 8 for fully vaccinated international travelers.

The governor is continuing to work with the mayors and representatives from the visitor industry to shape a clear message for prospective visitors.



New U.S. customs area at the Kona International Airport.

In the schools: COVID testing, vax planning for ages 5-11



A staff member tests a student for COVID-19.

All K-12 schools statewide — public, private and charter — are eligible to enroll in the **Operation Expanded Testing (OET) program**, in partnership with the state Department of Health. The school-based program provides COVID-19 testing at no cost to students. Tests are administered by school staff, and parents are provided with a link to the test results, which are available approximately 48 hours later. To see which schools have registered to be trained or are already administering the program, go to <https://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/ConnectWithUs/MediaRoom/PressReleases/Pages/COVID-screening-testing.aspx>. Some neighbor island schools are also enrolled in an Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC) test program administered by a healthcare provider.

Vaccines for children - The state is planning for Food and Drug Administration and Centers for Disease Control authorization for Pfizer vaccinations for children ages 5-11. The Department of Health is "working with our partners to make vaccination available in many different venues, including schools, pods, pharmacies and in health care providers' offices," said spokesman Brooks Baehr.

Governor taking Hawai'i's climate message to COP26

How do you get the nations of the world to agree on ways to fight global warming? One major answer is the **United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26)** Oct. 31- Nov.12 in Glasgow, Scotland. World leaders, such as **U.S. President Joe Biden**, will be there, along with governors from the **U.S. Climate Alliance** — including **Governor Ige**. As the head of an island state, the governor has joined with other state and national leaders in fighting climate change, even when the previous administration withdrew the U.S. from the Paris climate accord.

“Our state has been at the forefront of advocating aggressive action to curb global warming,” said the governor, noting that Hawai'i was first in the nation in 2017 to enact legislation committing to the UN Paris Agreement. “We know that climate change is real because we see firsthand the effects of coral bleaching, sea level rise and wildfires.” The governor will lead a COP26 delegation that includes **Suzanne Case, director of the Department of Land and Natural Resources, Scott Glenn, head of the Hawai'i State Energy Office and other environmental advocates**. “We have to keep global warming at or below 1.5 degrees Celsius or the damage will be irreversible,” said Governor Ige. “Our state's **Sustainable Hawai'i Initiative** and the **2050 Sustainability Plan** commit us to reducing greenhouse gases, promoting clean energy and protecting our natural resources.”



Why does limiting temperature rise to 1.5 degrees matter? According to COP26, “At 2 degrees Celsius of global warming, there would be widespread and severe impacts on people and nature. Almost all warm water coral reefs would be destroyed (with) several meters of sea level rise over centuries to come. At 1.5 degrees C. the impacts would be serious but less severe. There would be lower risks of food and water shortages, lower risks to economic growth and fewer species at risk of extinction. That is why every fraction of a degree matters.”

‘NFT for Good’ to benefit local artists, community

The state's **Digital Currency Innovation Lab (DCIL)** is bringing together art and technology in a unique collaboration using NFTs or non-fungible tokens. NFTs are becoming a popular way to buy and sell digital assets like art, music, game items and videos. They are “non-fungible” in the sense they are one-of-a-kind tokens that show ownership of authentic digital creations, as opposed to cryptocurrency tokens that are “fungible” and can be exchanged for equal value, in the same denomination or another currency, such as dollars.



The project involves Worldwide Walls Hawai'i (formerly POW! WOW!) hosting its first NFT-based gallery on MakersPlace, a rare digital art marketplace. The “**NFT for Good**” initiative will feature limited digital works for sale from five Hawai'i artists. Worldwide Walls will receive a donation of up to 10% from the proceeds and will fund a community beautification project in underserved neighborhoods. **The five artists — Jasper Wong, Shar Tuiasoa, Woes, Lucky Olelo, and Wooden Wave** — will also be donating to the project. The gallery is set to go live on Dec.



(Clockwise from top left) Artists Tuiasoa, Wong, Woes, the Ortizes (Wooden Wave) and Olelo.

1, 2021 and interested collectors can sign up for updates on the Hawai'i Technology Development Corporation (HTDC) website at <https://www.htdc.org/dcil-nft-for-good/>. HTDC's Ellen Ng, who helped spearhead the project, sees it as a way to “open the door to other local artists in the digital marketplace for positive community benefit.” Wong added, “This is a fantastic opportunity to elevate promising artists in Hawai'i and showcase their creations to a global audience.”

The DCIL is a two-year program forged through a partnership between the Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs, Division of Financial Institutions and HTDC, attached to the Department of Business and Economic Development and Tourism. For more on the DCIL pilot program, go to www.htdc.org/digital-currency-innovation-lab.

Record \$1.88 billion in bond sales for projects statewide



More infrastructure projects will be funded statewide.

Confidence in the state's economy was reaffirmed by a **record bond sale and favorable outlooks** by three national credit rating agencies, Fitch, Moody's and Standard & Poor's. Money from the sale will be used to fund new and existing projects statewide, which in turn support Hawai'i's economy. “These are critical state construction projects, including schools, highways, airports and harbors,” said Governor Ige. “These investments improve services and create jobs in our community and contribute to the state's economic recovery.”

As a result of the governor and the state's finance team presentation to the three primary credit rating agencies, Moody's revised the outlook for the state to “positive,” which reflects “a significant turnaround in the state's economic and financial position,” according to Moody's report. Last month, the governor announced release of \$602 million for public infrastructure projects.

Nurturing a green legacy for Washington Place

If you want a chicken-skin moment and a glimpse of history, check out the new Washington Place website at <https://washingtonplace.hawaii.gov/>. Under the “Tours and Gardens” section, you’ll see a handwritten list by **Queen Liliu’okalani** of the trees and plants at the residence — a reflection of the home she loved. To revitalize the gardens and contribute to the state’s pledge (see related story), Governor and Mrs. Ige worked alongside cabinet members last month to plant several species of Native Hawaiian trees and plants, especially those favored by the queen.



Governor and Mrs. Ige dig in for tree planting.

“We tried to pick some of the plants from her list, based on the environment and their survivability,” Mrs. Ige explained. “We included two yellow ‘ōhi’a and a kukui nut tree, which is our official state tree.” The project was a joint effort of several state departments, including Public Safety, Land and Natural Resources and the UH College of Tropical Agriculture, which helped create Washington Place’s first aquaponic garden. “The cabinet members worked really hard to clear several areas,” said Mrs. Ige.



Cabinet members and the First Lady after weed pulling.

This Thanksgiving, the First Lady said she and the governor are looking forward to a quiet dinner with a small group of family members. “I’m hoping for a cautious easing of restrictions to celebrate the holidays,” she said. “We’re grateful to everyone who has worked so hard to help us heal as a community during this pandemic.”

State commits to worldwide One Trillion Trees pledge



Restoring native trees is a priority.

The state has pledged to conserve, restore, and grow 100 million trees in Hawai’i by the year 2030. It’s part of a worldwide effort called the **One Trillion Trees movement** to achieve net-negative carbon goals and combat global warming. Hawai’i will get this done by protecting existing forests, conserving private land through legal protections, planting trees to restore and reclaim forest lands, advancing agroforestry, planting in urban areas, and facilitating natural regeneration.

The state’s pledge will be carried out by the **Department of Land and Natural Resources, the Department of Transportation and the Department of Defense**, working with private and federal partners. **DLNR director Suzanne Case** explained, “Forest carbon projects capture carbon dioxide (CO₂), the greenhouse gas largely responsible for climate change. In 2017, Hawai’i forests sequestered 2.69 metric tons of CO₂. Our pledge is to increase this by 2030.” Governor Ige, along with other leaders worldwide, has emphasized the urgency of these efforts. “Our islands are a microcosm of our planet,” said the governor. “When we announced the **Sustainable Hawai’i Initiative** in 2016, I knew our community stood behind our commitments to capture more greenhouse gases than we emit. Everyone can do something to reach these goals and support programs of reforestation, watersheds and marine environment.”

Senior affordable rental breaks ground

Governor Ige’s priority of building more affordable rental housing advanced last month with the groundbreaking of **Hale Makana O Moili’ili**. The mid-rise will include 80 studio and 25 one-bedroom units for na kūpuna 55 and older who earn 30 to 60% of area median income. Monthly rents will range from \$553 to \$1,243. The project is slated to be completed in February 2023.

The governor and Denise Iseri-Matsubara, executive director of the Hawaii Housing Finance and Development Corp., joined the development team of Ho’okahua Development LLC at the project site on Algaroba Street, across from the McCully-Moili’ili Library. “Because of the high cost of land in the islands, affordable housing is nearly impossible for the government to do by itself,” said the governor. “It’s public-private partnerships involving federal, state and county governments that enable projects like this to be done.”



Governor Ige and community partners join forces.

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