

**STATE OF THE COUNTY  
MARCH 2, 2021**



Delivered by Chairman of the Board, Vito Chiesa

Good Morning my fellow members of the Board of Supervisors, CEO Hayes, County Counsel Boze, those who are in the chambers today and those who might be watching on television or over the internet. It is a privilege to present the State of the County Address for 2021.

And what a humbling experience this is, during one of the most historic times in the history of our nation and the world.

I want to offer thanks to our immediate past chair, former Supervisor Kristin Olsen. Her commitment left us a tremendous example of how to lead. I am also especially thankful for my time having served alongside Supervisor Jim DeMartini. Supervisor DeMartini, served the County selflessly year after year. He was a tireless, committed, and reliable leader with conviction.

Supervisor Withrow...Terry, we have sat here together for years and every week I look forward to hearing your passion come through. Your drive to serve people in need - especially those with mental health or homelessness struggles - inspires me.

And to the three new Supervisors serving the County, Supervisors Mani Grewal, Channce Condit, and Buck Condit, each of you comes to us with a history of public service and a passion for the community. Thank you for your commitment to the people we serve. I feel honored to serve alongside each of you.

This past year saw a tremendous loss with the passing of Supervisor Tom Berryhill. Even if you did not know Tom personally, he was a friend to this community, defending and fighting for our region his entire career. He will be missed. My heart also grieves for those who lost their life as a result of the devastating COVID-19 virus. As we see the numbers of deaths continuing to rise in our County, it underscores the reality that we are not out of this crisis, we must remain vigilant.

This virus has shaken us to our very core. It's not an enemy that can be seen; and, it's an enemy that takes no prisoners. It goes to the emotional trauma suffered by every single person in our community, in some way, as a result of COVID-19. It goes to the economic damage that will take years to overcome. And it goes to the very real disparities in our community that continue to be made evident by the impact of the virus.

Each of us has had to look very deeply into our own heart as a result of this. And the truth is that each of us has looked at this crisis differently, as we are all different people. Each of us has been challenged with how we respond to an unprecedented shaking of our reality.

As a County, as much as you try and prepare, there was no way to be fully prepared for something like this. All the plans you make, drills you run and scenarios you build, never fully match the reality you face.

Throughout the past year, the county has done a lot of remarkable work. Even amid a pandemic, we have continued to provide essential services to the community and developed new efficiencies that allow us to work smarter. There have been new and unforeseen challenges in providing services, and we have met those challenges.

For each employee of Stanislaus County, I am more amazed and more thankful every day for you, for how you do your work, and for how deeply you care for our community. You inspire me every day and from the deepest part of my heart, I thank you. Extraordinary things can come from ordinary people in the most challenging times. This is the story of each of us. And this is the story of our community.

I would be remiss if I did not call out specifically, the hard work of the Sheriff's Department and Office of Emergency Services, along with our amazing Public Health staff and truly all the dedicated staff who have supported this effort under the leadership of our fearless CEO, Jody Hayes.

We simply could not overcome the challenges of COVID-19 as a County without the extraordinary efforts of the employees that make up the County organization. Employees like Lynda Perino, a Public Health Nurse and Claudia Cruz, a Community Health Worker, who have worked tirelessly to meet this unique challenge head-on. Lynda has provided guidance to COVID positive community members to calm their anxieties and protect others from becoming infected. Claudia has traced hundreds of COVID-19 cases, helping to prevent the spread of the disease, while also working with our business community on prevention strategies and outbreak mitigation. These two dedicated employees have also gone above and beyond, working evenings to support outbreak testing at shelters and food processing plants. Ladies, thank you very much for your remarkable service during this past year and the 23 and 26 years of County Service you have provided. There are nearly 1,100 County Employees with 15 or more years of Service. We are extremely proud to have an organization that retains individuals, as it is our employees that ultimately drive the quality of services and outcomes our community deserves.

COVID-19 dominated the activities of the County's Health Services Agency during 2020. While many County departments have played important roles in the COVID-19 emergency response, the Public Health division of HSA has been at the core, performing and or coordinating outreach and education for the entirety of our population.

They have performed case investigation and contact tracing to provide guidance to individuals to contain the spread of COVID-19. They have worked closely with businesses, hospitals, schools, and other community partners. They developed systems to analyze data and communicate massive amounts of information on the pandemic locally, daily and in real time.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, under their leadership we have now launched the challenging vaccination initiative which will hopefully bring this pandemic to an end during 2021. Stanislaus County was one of the very first in the state to vaccinate residents in January. We are very proud of these efforts as well as the leadership of that department.

Our Public Health Officer, Dr. Vaishampayan (affectionately known as Dr. V) continues to expertly guide the County through this pandemic. Public Health staff, supported by many other County employees, have provided services 7 days a week since Spring 2020. Early on in our conversations, there was a lot of skepticism about this new Coronavirus. I did not take it as seriously as I should have and remember Dr. V saying, “and it is going to have a profound impact on our lives until we have a vaccine.” I did not believe her. She was right. I have read many accolades and criticisms of Dr. V over this last year as she was placed at the center of our most important issues of public policy, along with responsibility to communicate and explain unpopular issues to elected officials and the public. I think it’s important for everyone listening today to know that our community is extremely fortunate to have had Dr. V guide us through this pandemic. I can say this with confidence because I have had a front row seat into her work and the value system she displayed each day in the most difficult of circumstances. While leadership in many communities fractured under the pressure of COVID-19, our team only grew stronger with each passing day. Dr. V deserves much of this credit and my personal feelings of gratitude for all that she has done.

Staff continues to work tirelessly to keep our community healthy and safe. We have mental health challenges that are pressing in our County. Demand for adult residential mental health services and in-patient psychiatric hospitalization remains high. We have also seen an increase in our gravely disabled individuals who are conserved. Program costs and expenses are continually increasing while revenue streams dedicated to these important services remain static or are declining. Behavioral Health and Recovery Services is reexamining and recommitting to its core mission, prioritizing individuals, and helping fellow community members in need.

Part of the mental health solution is continued efforts by our Community Services Agency, where there is a relentless push to reduce homelessness and stabilize families, 1,850 individuals and families received rental assistance and intensive case management services through their housing programs in 2020. I am extremely proud of the County’s Homelessness and Housing efforts. Supervisor Withrow has worked hard in this area, helping pave the way for transitional housing projects like the Kansas House.

The Access Center and Emergency Shelter completed its first full year of operation through a contract with the Salvation Army. The Shelter opened on November 2019, providing shelter for 204 individuals. In addition, the Access Center opened for service at the same site in February 2020, and has served over 6,000 individuals experiencing homelessness, at risk of becoming homeless or those seeking housing assistance and service.

The Family Housing facility opened in November 2019, also recently completing its first year of operations. This site has 21 units available for families. During the first year over 46 families were served and 57% were placed in permanent housing. Families are provided case management services and eligible to remain for up to 12 months.

In December, the Empire Cold Weather Family Shelter began its third year of operation, serving 24 families. The County works in a collaborative partnership with Community Housing and Shelter Services (CHSS) and Stanislaus County Affordable Housing Corporation (STANCO) for these temporary placements of families through the coldest winter months.

Stanislaus County is also aggressively seeking new housing options for our region. Our Planning department, for example, just this year developed a template for building permit plans addressing accessory dwelling units. This partnership, along with six Stanislaus County cities will allow property owners to develop plans for Accessory Dwelling Units, free of charge. These ADU's will be a critical tool allowing additional housing in the unincorporated area.

We also recently launched the Emergency Rental Assistance Program. With funding from the Federal government, in partnership with the Stanislaus Housing Authority, several local banking institutions, and the City of Modesto, this program aims to help those in our community struggling financially to stay in their homes resulting from loss of income during the past year. This new program will support renters and landlords and we know there is a huge need in the community due to the current public health emergency.

On top of everything else in 2020, you might not remember that we had the largest wildfire in Stanislaus County history.

The SCU Lightning Complex fire that raged through the Diablo Range and spanned across five counties eventually consumed more than 396,000 acres of land in total. It took lives and property and burned for one-and a-half months. Again, County agencies and departments didn't miss a beat with more than 5,000 calls being made to Adult Protective Services and In-Home Supportive Services clients to ensure their safety. The coordination across so many agencies and institutions was vital to responding to this disaster. The service of so many people during this time will not be forgotten.

The response to this wildfire is just one more shining example of how our community comes together to respond to challenges and to care for one another in times of great need. It is an example that continues to show how extraordinary things can take place when we reach deep inside ourselves.

We are doing innovative things. But our community will need to take advantage of any internal and external resources at our disposal to focus on the hard work of economic recovery as soon as possible. As we have entered the new year with optimism, we are not naïve. We anticipate great challenges for the recovery of both businesses and job seekers alike. New efforts in workforce development and employment opportunities are top of mind.

Since 2004, Stanislaus County has envisioned the reuse of the former Crows Landing Air Facility, a former military airfield that was strategically important to our nation's security for more than 50 years.

While the County greatly values its agricultural heritage, County leadership understands the need to build a more diverse and resilient economy. The Crows Landing Industrial Business Park, now coined the Landing at Crows, offers a unique reuse project that will pave the way for regionally significant economic development. With the Environmental Impact Report and the Enhanced Infrastructure Finance District complete we are seeking a Master Developer, for Phase I, who will create a regional employment center on 1,528 acres of prime property with dedicated funds for infrastructure investment. This business park envisions up to 14,000 new sustainable wage jobs at full build out. We are currently seeking federal and state funding to complete a potable water system that will ultimately provide fresh water for both the business park and the underserved Crows Landing Community as well.

Workforce Development plays an important role in supporting businesses and job seekers moving through the stages of reopening following COVID-19 related closures. With the County, they administered an \$18.4 million business grant relief program, followed by a \$2 million innovative countywide gift card program. The RAD card program is an alliance with the Downtown Modesto Partnership, it aims to enhance consumer spending and directly supports local businesses. The County also allocated \$15 million to our nine incorporated cities, who in turn were able to administer similar business support programs.

Another department that has been very busy in Stanislaus County is Public Works. The Measure L road tax allowed several important road infrastructure projects to take shape. The County chip seal program is up and running again, providing funds for this critical pavement preservation. In 2020 over 152 miles were paved including over 100 County rural road miles. We have also completed The Urban Pavement Preservation Projects in Salida, Empire, Hickman, Denair, Del Rio and Cowan Tracts, East Oakdale and Riverbank.

Our Public Works Department were successful on two Active Transportation Project grants which will improve access for the Airport Neighborhood to Orville Wright Elementary School. This construction will start late this year or early next year. In addition, a Bret Harte Active Transportation Project will improve neighborhood connectivity to Bret Harte Elementary School and Evelyn Hanshaw Middle School. This

project will be under construction in 2022. Both projects feature bike / pedestrian paths that will improve bike and pedestrian safety.

The North County Corridor, an 18-mile Expressway that runs from Modesto to East Oakdale, has met a big milestone. In 2018, the County received a \$20M Federal grant for this project and in 2020 the County received a \$20M State grant for the same project. With Measure L, Public Facilities Fees and the State and Federal help, Phase 1 of the project is on schedule to start construction in 2023.

The County just completed a \$14M 3-lane bridge Santa Fe Avenue over the Tuolumne River, along with two \$20M construction projects happening simultaneously; Hickman Road Bridge over the Tuolumne River and Crows Landing Road Bridge over the San Joaquin River.

Efforts to clean up the County over the past year or so have been significant as well. The County's illegal dumping initiative to clean up our alleys and eradicate roadside dumps has been working. In the first two weeks of this year, crews collected 54,020 lbs. of trash, plus over 30 tires and a dozen or more mattresses.

This is where I must pause and implore residents to respect our community and please do not dump your unwanted things in alleys or orchards. Please call your garbage service provider and schedule a large item pickup. Take advantage of the tire amnesty program when it is free to dump your old tires. There are a lot of ways to discard your unwanted trash but please do not do it on the side of the road. Let's take pride in our communities.

We have seen new partnerships emerge that we cannot even begin to express our gratitude for. Through the new challenges of providing service, the generosity of our community has shined in the past year.

For example, in Stanislaus County we operate one of the largest pet shelters in the Central Valley with an average of 400-500 pets to care for at the shelter, seven days a week. In March of last year, the Animal Services Agency was forced to close its doors to the public, leaving hundreds of pets without much hope for adoption.

In response, the agency implemented an Emergency Foster Program. An online application was created on our website and we made a plea for foster families that led to a tremendous outpouring of community support. Animal Services miraculously cleared the shelter in just three days last March. What a remarkable achievement that was. The community should be aware though that there are pets who need homes....like this little guy (adopt-a-pet moment here).

In addition to caring for the fur babies of our community, our human babies received much needed support and attention as well. First Five Stanislaus, formerly the Children and Families Commission, made significant impacts in several areas in 2020, serving more than 26,000 children, parents and providers through partner organizations,

distribution of more than 88,000 diapers, 1200 containers of baby wipes, thousands of masks and books just to name a few.

The bookend population, our seniors, are always an important priority as well. Despite the COVID-19 closing of dine-in congregate meal sites, creative efforts allowed more seniors to be served under the leadership of our Area Agency on Aging. CARES funding and a unique partnership with Lyfted Farms for large freezer storage, enabled weekly frozen boxed meal distribution at 10 different locations throughout the County. Prior to COVID-19, the Congregate lunch program served 1 meal to approximately 350 Seniors weekly. The number of Seniors soared to a height of 1,534/week. 1 weekly meal turned into 5 with each senior receiving a pack of 5 boxed, frozen, meals per week. This program continues to serve approximately 1,000 Seniors/week.

The Home Delivered Meals program for homebound seniors also saw a significant increase during COVID-19. For example, in December 2019, 7,217 meals were served in a month, jumping to 9,807 meals served in December 2020. These numbers continue to rise.

We need to acknowledge our important partnership with Healthy Aging Association and our volunteers who continue to serve clients during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past year volunteers conducted phone appointments to assist with Medicare enrollment and Friendly Visitor volunteers continued to contact their isolated seniors by phone, providing much needed emotional support during these difficult times.

Construction on the Library's long-awaited building projects has been moving forward. The new Empire Library is scheduled to open in early 2021. Located adjacent to the Empire Community Pool and Park, the new 4,720-square-foot facility is more than twice the size of the current library. It will feature spaces for children, teens, and adults, with a community room that opens to a covered outdoor patio for library programs and community events.

Construction also continues on the expanded Turlock Library, scheduled to open this Spring. The renovated Turlock Library will incorporate approximately 16,000 square feet of interior space, a 60% increase in size. New features in the Turlock Library include a community multipurpose room, expanded children's and teen rooms, a Maker Space, Friends of the Library bookstore, and study rooms. Special thanks to Pat Portwood and Friends of the Turlock Library for raising more than \$1M to furnish and improve learning opportunities.

We are also constructing a new Maker Space in the Modesto library. This addition is designed to provide flexible, contained space for a variety of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) programs.

We have exciting Park renovations underway. COVID has not stopped the ambitious Parks team from their Oregon Park renovation which will include new playground equipment, tot-lot play equipment, adult exercise equipment, solar light poles, security

cameras, benches, picnic tables, BBQ's, trash receptacles, drinking fountains, splash pad renovation, basketball court resurfacing, and irrigation.

In addition, a Burbank-Paradise Park renovation will include new playground equipment, tot-lot play equipment, adult exercise equipment, splash pad, restroom, solar light poles, security cameras, benches, picnic tables, BBQ's, trash receptacles, drinking fountains, and new irrigation.

The County has our eyes toward the future. And one important area of focus is farming – a practice that transcends time. We are a powerful farming community with a farm gate value of \$3.6 billion (in 2019 numbers) and a ripple effect on the economy of \$7 billion. And we need to be looking at sustainability efforts.

Two important departments supporting agriculture. First, UC Cooperative Extension Farm Advisors who are conducting more than 35 research projects in Stanislaus County. Their critical work as trusted independent research experts have benefited farmers and the agriculture industry immensely. **And they also oversee a top-notch 4-H program.**

Our agriculture worker community is critical to our region's survival. And our Agricultural Commissioner's office has stepped in to help protect this workforce. As of January, the Agricultural Commissioner's office has distributed over 740,000 pieces of free COVID-19 personal protection equipment to the agricultural community (surgical masks, cloth face coverings, N95 respirators, vinyl gloves and bottles of hand sanitizer).

Members of the agricultural community who received PPE include farm workers, migrant laborers, community-based organizations, labor contractors, growers, ag processors, dairies, ranchers. Irrigation districts, commercial nurseries, and agricultural exporters.

The single greatest threat to our economic well-being is water. We will continue to vehemently oppose the State Water Board's short-sighted unimpaired flow regime. We stand with our irrigation districts and we are committed to working with our Federal and State partners in finding common sense solutions.

We are also working on efficiencies for connecting with the County. We have a new streamlined interface that makes it much easier to find what you need or make a service request online. We are also working on a new application to replace our current GoRequest app. The new user-friendly application will give users the ability to get information, alert the County of an issue, make repair requests, or even connect with your supervisors. Look for it in the Apple and Google Play stores around this spring.

In addition to new efficiencies I am confident that we have the financial strength to make it through the pandemic and to continue to support our Community.

Make no mistake, the COVID impact to local finances has been severe, last fiscal year the actual County General Fund revenues were within \$1 million of the total expenses. That sounds like a lot of money, but when you are managing a \$1.6 billion organization, that's really close! And it's significant, several of our departments are challenged with lack of growth in key revenue streams and we haven't been so close to being even/short in the General fund since just after the Great Recession in 2010-2011.

COVID has set us back and it could be several years before we recover the growth trend that is essential to long-term sustainable operations. As of midyear, discretionary revenue is forecast to be nearly equal to prior year receipts, but we have lost a whole year of growth, and that will take us another full year to regain.

We have received Federal/State emergency relief funds of approximately \$108 million that has provided nearly equal support for county department costs in response to the pandemic and investment in local economic business revitalization. Additional relief funds may come available and we are dedicated to programming them to assist those most harmed during this crisis.

Going forward, sustainable funding for County programs and services remains a challenge but also a focus. We are up to this challenge as long as we remain cautious in spending. We have the benefit of the General Fund "savings account", the result of long-standing, prudent budget practices that provided for funds to be set-aside in good years to support operations in the "bad" economic times. That time is now.

We are hopeful and we are resilient.

In times like these, our mission of Striving to be the Best continues to be a beacon that directs our steps as County employees. It's a beacon that illuminates the challenges and the pain that faces our community. It's a beacon that inspires us to bring our very best every day. And it's a beacon that reveals a tremendous hope for a better future.

And as County employees, this beacon drives us to reach deep inside to find extraordinary things.

Extraordinary things can come from ordinary people in the most challenging times.

This is the story of each of us. And this is the story of our community.