



The Senate

STATE CAPITOL
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96813

Senate President Ronald D. Kouchi
Opening Day Remarks
28th Legislature
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At this time, I'd like to offer a few remarks on this first day of the 2016 session. To all of our distinguished, honored guests: Welcome to your house. One of the nice things about being the President is, well, each and every one of our members are extremely grateful for the support and sacrifice that is made by each and every one of our families to allow us to participate in this role and be involved in public service. As the one who is making the remarks, I get to point out to my wife, Joy, and to thank her – Joy, if you'd please stand. I met her in 1984, two years into my Kaua'i County Council career, and last November, we celebrated our 28th anniversary. I appreciate the sacrifice that she has made, the job that she has done in helping raise our two sons, and the support she has given me to continue to do this job. And she is like each and every one of the family members who stand behind the other 24 senators who are here.

If you look, as you came into the gallery, you've been handed a small sheet, if you wanted to take it, and on that sheet is the statement from the Majority of the Senate. If you were up early like I was and saw the Majority Leader on Hawaii News Now, he explained clearly that we were asked to give overarching goals and themes, and so this is a general statement of where we'd like to go. We are still in the process of having bills introduced, and the specifics as to how we are going to achieve these goals will be forthcoming in the next few days.

And I guess what I need to say so that we can get the focus back on the work at hand: When you heard Pastor Higa ask for some prayers for Senator Kahele – if you're wondering why he's excused today, he checked in on Monday to Queen's Hospital, where he's been undergoing some tests. He was optimistic that he'd be here with us this morning, but they have asked him to stay there so they can continue to conduct some tests. We just issued, before the opening gavel, a statement from his family, where they thank you for your kind thoughts and prayers, but also at this time, that you respect the family's privacy. So until we have any further information from the family, that's the comment we have. I can tell you that I spoke to him yesterday and I spoke to him this morning; he is in good spirits, and he, as an ex-Marine, is a fighter and ready to go, and I feel sorry for the doctor who's trying to keep him in the hospital.

We celebrate on Kaua'i, and I believe statewide, during the month of December, Rizal Day. One of the famous quotes from Dr. Rizal is, 'If we do not know where we came from, how can we know where we're going?' And with that, I'd like to acknowledge the work of Senate President

Emeritus, Senator Kim, and her leadership for the past three sessions as President and where she has gotten the Senate and has set us on a great course. And now it is our job to continue to make progress and better the work that has been done, so I'd like to extend my thanks to Senate President Emeritus Donna Kim.

I know that the local media has done some polling about what the people of Hawai'i believe are the top issues that are facing us, and before I get to that, I wanted to say, along the lines of Pastor Matt Higa, seeing heart to heart. It has been troubling to me that, in the public meetings that have been occurring from Kaua'i to the Big Island, the public discourse has not been civil and we've not been communicating heart to heart. And people seem to think that we need to yell and scream louder than the other person, that by name-calling and putting someone down, we can be successful.

As I thought about what to say this morning, I looked at Senator Harimoto, and, quite frankly, when I first met him, he impressed me as the kind of guy I would've taken lunch money from when we were in high school. Then, he told us in the summer he was diagnosed with cancer and what he was going to have to undergo, and when you see the quiet dignity, the strength, and the courage that he has exhibited given the conditions that he has been faced with, I found out just how strong he is, and realized I never would've gotten his lunch money from him. But it also tells me – and I hope it tells the rest of us – that if we can conduct ourselves with the dignity, the humility, and the strength that has been exhibited by Senator Harimoto as he has been fighting his battle with cancer, then we can achieve the kind of heart-to-heart and civil discourse that we all aspire to in how we run the people's business here in Hawai'i.

The function of the democracy is to embrace dissent and minority opinion, to ensure that someone who has a differing opinion is not afraid to come forward and express those points of view. But at the end of the day, the primary function of the democracy is that the majority must carry the day and move forward, and so let us hope, as we go forward in the 2016 session, we will be able to achieve those goals.

I didn't see on the top three priorities in the polling about healthcare, and I would be remiss representing the neighbor islands if I didn't say one of the most important issues facing us is how we will continue to deliver quality healthcare to the rural communities that we serve in an affordable way, and so I would add that.

And I would now simply go through the list that I saw in the press. The third priority, rail: The Senate is not anticipating taking up any other rail bill other than to make sure that the opportunities that present itself through the transit-oriented development ensure that we have affordable housing for residents and all ranges of our residents, that the opportunities are there – not only for economic development and high-end housing and opportunities – but for each and every one of our citizens.

They talk about economy and the cost of living and jobs. We have committed funds to diversify the economy, to support high technology and reinvestment there, but with the news of Maui closing HC&S – and to deal with the loss of over 600, almost 700, jobs on Maui – what will

really be our measure is how do we see the opportunities that are presented to us. We've been working for several years with Jimmy Nakatani and the Agribusiness Development Corporation in trying to get a biodigester sited; it would have biofuels and, with the correct additives, he had hoped to produce hog feed at 50 percent of the cost that we are now paying for hog feed and support our local farmers. We've got a great opportunity to look at those kinds of crops to go into the fields in Maui. The biodigestors create energy; they create natural gas that can fuel vehicles, and it can go a long way toward helping us realize the 100 percent sustainable goal that we have. And so these are the kinds of things that are important for us as far as looking for the opportunities that we have, not being stymied by what we think are disasters, and being able to push forward with positive results.

Clearly, in the last six months, the homelessness issue has dominated the media. But more importantly, I know Chair Tokuda is going to be coming out soon with a comprehensive package, because homelessness is also about the delivery of social services and those who are impacted and getting the correct help so that you're not in a homeless situation. It also entails having the shelters, but more importantly, once we have the shelters and transitional programs, there has to be somewhere for them to go, and so we need to develop the affordable rental units and the affordable sale units and we're going to work to make sure we identify projects on each and every island. The problem isn't just here on O'ahu; the problem is statewide, and we need to look at it in that particular fashion if we're going to wind up addressing it.

The biggest problem that I have with homelessness is that they say, 'But we don't want those kinds of people here with us.' My family never owned a home as I was growing up; we were renters. My parents divorced, and the summer before my junior year in high school, my mother, as a single mother with three children, bought our first house. Nine hundred sixty square feet, nothing fancy, but it was ours. And I still remember to this day the feeling that I had when we walked in that home. And it was a federal program, so the mortgage was based on the salary that my mother made, so that we could afford to have a home. And then she put, eventually, a chain-link fence around it, extended a patio, put way too many plants – in my opinion – in her yard, and certainly created a home. And with her love and support and the support of my father, myself, my brother, and my sister were able to go to college, to achieve the things that we have had today. When I've looked at President Emeritus' story that she has been telling us, the same humble beginnings from Kalihi, I realize that the majority of the body here were those kinds of people. And those kinds of people are really good, really smart. Those people are people who care tremendously about this great state, and if given the opportunity, given the support, they will make Hawai'i the greatest place on earth.

And so it's with that commitment that I say: Let's get started. I look forward to working with each and every one of you to achieve success for the Senate and for the State of Hawai'i. Thank you.