



2022 State of Lane County Address

January 10, 2022

Commissioner Joe Berney

Good morning Commissioners, good morning County staff, good morning to all who are viewing or listening.

Today it is my honor to discuss what Lane County government has been up to during these incredibly challenging times, where we are, and where we are going.

We were looking forward to celebrating together today. In person. We literally waited until the last possible moment to look at the data, which tells us another variant of this virus has hit hard. Like everyone else, we struggled through disappointment to try to do the right thing. So as much as we want and planned to be together, virtual is the only responsible path to take as we are the County's public health agency. Under these circumstances, my heartfelt appreciation to this year's chair Commissioner Farr, Vice-Chair Trieger and Commissioner Buch for joining me today in paying our respect to all County residents.

We're not out of the woods, but last year was fundamentally different than 2020. It provided tangible cause for hope as we move into 2022.

The County went from being caught in an unanticipated global pandemic to delivering. Delivering vaccines to those choosing them, providing support to businesses and renters and landlords, and seeing re-openings across the board from schools to businesses to sporting and entertainment venues to places of worship to gyms and health clubs.

Lane County staffed Incident Commands for both the pandemic and wildfire rebuilding. We moved from having been hit without warning by twin crises to solidly moving into recovery mode. And big investments are being made on key fronts.

First, thank you to my friends and neighbors in Springfield for the opportunity of public service these last few years. And thanks to my fellow commissioners for the honor of unanimously electing me your chair last year. I am humbled to be here.

These have been strange, difficult, exhausting and trying times. For all of us. We have seen the best in us, selfless acts of compassion by countless people and groups helping our families, friends and neighbors. Sadly, we have also seen frustration fuel incivility and anger by a vocal minority, misdirected towards those just trying their hardest to do their best under difficult circumstances.

Make no mistake. No matter one's political views, we are all Covid-fatigued and sick and tired of feeling sick and tired. On the other hand, the essence of character and determination, on a personal and even governmental level, is to never give up, to work hard and find hope and opportunity in difficult and uncharted waters.

So, this State of the County is not just about County government. It's not just about how we've coped during this past year of "perfect storm"-like challenges. It is also about the fiber, grit and perseverance, victories and hope of those who call Springfield, and all of Lane County, home. Finally, I'm speaking from the heart. Literally the day after I was elected Chair, one year ago on last January 6, the *peaceful* transition of power at our nation's capital, historically the hallmark of our democracy, did not occur.

The year that followed demonstrated the fragility of this great experiment of the people's self-rule that we call democracy. We have seen opportunists from different political extremes use the anxiousness all of us have felt to fuel their own, often divisive, agendas. Meanwhile we've had children to raise, businesses to run and keep afloat, the vulnerable among us to support, families to care for and life to resume. This has required a special combination of individual responsibility and organizational transformation supported with direct services from our County government.

The job of non-partisan government is not to be distracted by noise, which there's been plenty of, but to focus on solutions. On results that make life better for as many of us as possible. Throughout, I've been constantly reminded of the wartime quote by Winston Churchill:

"If you're going through hell, keep on going."

That is exactly what this board of commissioners and this County staff have done. Which reminds me of another quote, which seems timely given the college football championship game tonight, from Alabama football coach Nick Saban:

"One thing about championship teams is they're resilient. No matter what is thrown at them, no matter how deep the hole. They find a way to bounce back and overcome adversity."

I have been witness to our County *team* doing just that--working with coalitions and individuals putting actions and healing over words and divisiveness. And now, we're able to move from being overwhelmed and reacting to crises to getting ahead of them, preventing or mitigating them and controlling our destiny. And by so doing creating personal and economic stability and opportunity. This is the essence of my remarks this morning, but I can't discuss how we've gotten here without expressing gratitude.

Thank you to the front-line health care workers who, despite having their own families to care for, work long and beyond exhausting hours to keep us safe. To the County workers in our clinics and treatment centers, working with unhoused people who have been sick, to the nurses and doctors and paraprofessionals at McKenzie Willamette and Peace Health hospitals and the many private medical groups, clinics and pharmacies, we thank you.

Thank you Lane County Human Service workers who prevented 4,500 County households from eviction by helping with their rent and keeping their landlords whole this year!

Thank you County behavioral service workers for making 51,000 visits, many virtual, since Covid began.

Thank you County workforce workers for helping 4,000 of our neighbors get work or stay working through Covid.

Thank you youth service workers for maintaining Covid safety protocols with zero outbreaks in our detention facilities.

Thank you County parole and probation officers who dealt with an influx of prison commutation releases to Lane County and 100 additional parolee releases.

Thank you County sheriff and jail workers, for providing almost 8,000 Covid tests and 450 vaccines to adults in custody, incentivizing vaccines for eligible inmates, and all the other ways you kept us safe no matter what.

And thank you Covid-19 County incident command, for delivering over 200,000 vaccinations with the assistance of a tremendous group of volunteers!

All the while providing housing for homeless with Covid, groceries and meds to low-income families in isolation and quarantine, and treating everyone, especially those historically excluded, with respect and dignity.

This included hundreds of mobile clinics, pop-up clinics, and clinics in partnership with the Eugene-Springfield NAACP, El Centro Latino Americano, area schools and others.

I have received nothing but praise from users of County vax sites about the customer service and professionalism of the entire operation.

And finally, to the unsung heroes who have worked every day to keep our communities functioning: retail clerks and store managers, service workers and truck drivers who help us stay stocked with critical medicine, food and goods. Those who keep facilities clean and operational. Those who kept their businesses open while following Covid safety protocols. And, we simply can't forget, the educators who have tirelessly worked under the most difficult of circumstances to keep our children—who are our future--connected and engaged. The list goes on and on and on. You all deserve and have our heartfelt gratitude and appreciation.

Here's a short video that tells a bit more of the County's story this last year:

VIDEO PLAYS

County government played a role in almost all our lives last year. There is no way to underscore that. Whether facilitating over \$8M for business relief, \$33M in federal and state dollars in rent relief keeping families and landlords whole, \$22M for our partners rebuilding after the fires, and more.

Think about this: Dollars County government secures from outside the County, not born by increasing one penny of local taxes, both responds to need and also re-circulates dollars through our economy, helping capitalize all of us one way or another.

Another example. The Patrician manufactured home park in Springfield. With Homes for Good we intervened and saved the 86 families living there from potentially being kicked to the streets due to a sale and redevelopment of the property. This enabled residents time to buy the park for themselves, and create a cooperative bringing millions into our economy. They now own and operate the Filbert Gove Co-op and never have to worry about potential homelessness again. There are 108 manufactured home communities in Lane County alone, and I will be working with commissioners, Homes for Good and state legislators to make sure all residents of all these parks have the option of self-ownership when their parks come for sale. This is huge.

Businesses have reopened and are reopening. New business is locating here, developments are breaking ground, the UO has a record-breaking new freshman class. It's impossible not to notice the growth and building taking place.

We see smart action by this County to decrease the carbon footprint of County government while creating jobs and committing to a more full employment, carbon neutral Lane County by 2040. Let me give you a feel for what this actually means.

Imagine Lane County putting water and sewer infrastructure from Springfield to Short Mountain, the County landfill. No more tankers on our roads hauling leachate from the landfill for treatment. Less gas, less congestion, greater safety. Transforming Short Mountain, County government's greatest carbon emitter, from just a landfill to a recycling and waste-to-energy hub. As I speak we are developing partnerships with local businesses to do just that. They are looking at investing tens of millions of private dollars to create hundreds of jobs to install and operate machinery and processes separating metals, plastics, paper, organics, etc. that now go into the landfill, and re-routing them into markets for recycling. And investment in digesters that create clean energy out of organics. Private investment, long-term good paying local jobs, decreasing carbon emissions, generating clean energy. That's just one example of what's on the drawing board now, and it's not more than a few years away.

We are committed to broadband for every part of the County, and increased telehealth options even as we increase the number of community health clinics the County operates. Affordable, accessible broadband and affordable, accessible health care are big deals.

We are transforming the role of government, not by talking but by doing.

I introduced and the board passed a Community Benefits Bidding Program. It works. This County now prioritizes and moves money to local contractors and businesses who pay living wages, hire locally, commit to workforce equity, provide full family health coverage, are enrolled in registered apprentice training, and buy their supplies and equipment locally.

The Community Benefits program adds renewable energy, energy efficiency, and storage to these jobs. All this without raising one extra dollar in taxes.

Now bi-partisan legislation has passed and SB420 makes this procurement option available to every city, County, school district and state agency in Oregon, all thanks to Lane County and it's partnership with building trades and contractors.

To sum up, we're determined to confront problems head on, adapt to new realities and move forward in 2022 and beyond.

So let's all take heart and re-commit to each other, united not divided, focusing on mutual respect, responsibility and results, not ideology or rhetoric. In the words of Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa and Nobel Peace Prize winner:

"Our human compassion binds us the one to the other - not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learned how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future."

As we advance from crisis into opportunity, let us move with the will to succeed, with tolerance and with goodwill.

Happy New Year everyone!

Thank you.