



**OAKLAND  
COUNTY**  
MICHIGAN

*Together*

OAKLAND COUNTY EXECUTIVE  
**STATE OF THE COUNTY**  
2020 ANNUAL ADDRESS

presented by

**DAVID COULTER**  
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

WEDNESDAY  
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FLAGSTAR STRAND THEATRE  
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Pontiac, Michigan 48342

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# Oakland Together

## 2020 State of the County Address David Coulter, Oakland County Executive

Wednesday, February 12, 2020  
Flagstar Strand Theatre • Pontiac, Michigan

As Prepared for Delivery

### Introduction

Our State's Motto: "If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look about you."

These last months I've been privileged to look about Oakland County. What I knew before about the splendor of our county, has only been amplified. We have bustling downtowns, strong suburban neighborhoods, wide swaths of amazing lakes, peaceful rural areas. And quick access to tremendous regional assets.

It's not just the splendor of our places. It is the people that reside here. I have had the opportunity to get to many corners of the county in very informal community meetings. At first, I wanted to give people a chance to meet me, kick the tires a little bit, and be reassured during a time of transition. I found the listening and the learning essential to my work as county executive. The residents of Oakland County are interested, thoughtful, and generous with their opinions. I've also had the opportunity to visit businesses throughout the county. They are proud of their work, creative, and determined to help move the county forward.

The strength of our people is reinforced by Oakland County's strength economically, educationally and fiscally.

Consider this snapshot for 2019:

- \$1.5 million of new business investment was generated on average each day.
- 25 successful projects generated \$235 million in new Foreign Direct investment.
- Our county is second in the state in post-secondary education attainment.
- We have 1,450 lakes, 138 miles of trails, and 90,000 acres of parks.
- We also start with a \$260 million fund balance.

Is there any wonder why Brooks Patterson branded the county as a great place to live, work and play?

Brooks and his leadership team earned a reputation for a well-run county, devotion to serving the taxpayers and a high level of loyalty. When I started this job, I made it clear that I was not going to try and fill Brooks' shoes, instead I was going to try to be the best version of me.

And as many of you have heard me describe, I never hesitated to borrow some of his good ideas. At my first meeting as mayor of Ferndale, I directed city staff to begin developing a multi-year budget. We started at two years, and expanded to three, just like we practice at the county. It's not a silver bullet, but it encourages us to anticipate issues sooner and provides a framework to plan for the future.

I also formed the Mayor's CEO group, modeled after the county's Business Roundtable. It served as a forum to gather critical input, introduce city departments to businesses, and encourage networking among our business leaders.

And as I prepared for this year's State of the County, I remembered another Brooks story. I have been told – this goes back to when I was on the county commission – that I was the only Democrat that Brooks mentioned during one of these speeches. In 2004, Ferndale was kicked out of the Main Street Oakland County program over a fight that our then city manager was having with Brooks. It took me over a year working with then Deputy Executive Dennis Toffolo to get us back in the program and Brooks acknowledged my efforts at a State of the County. Years later when Ferndale was awarded a national Main Street award, Brooks and I hosted the reception together in Ferndale.

No one would deny that Brooks was a strong and proud Republican, yet he held the view: There are not Democratic ideas or Republican ideas, there are Oakland County ideas.

I want to talk to you tonight about some of my Oakland County ideas.

**I believe the fact that Oakland does well means we have an opportunity – indeed a responsibility – to do even better.**

We can leverage our strengths to tackle our challenges before they become problems. We can lead and innovate. We can be fiscally responsible with the taxpayer's money and forward thinking.

**To do that we must be Oakland Together.**

Together as public servants working for the public good, together with our residents and businesses, and together with our region.

We demonstrated this spirit three short weeks after my appointment. We came together and approved with a unanimous vote a three-year balanced budget that made key investments in our local roads and a \$15 minimum wage for our employees.

I deeply appreciate my colleagues on the board for their leadership. We may disagree along the way during the budget process but when it comes to the foundation of Oakland County's fiscal and economic strength, we stand united.

I believe this spirit will unite us around the pillars of Oakland Together.

## Competitiveness

We know we are competing not against ourselves, or our neighbors in the region, but as a region against other parts of the country. We are competing against Columbus, Louisville, and Minneapolis just to name a few. We are up against global competition. That is why I felt so strongly about joining the Detroit Regional Partnership. This 11-county partnership focuses exclusively on attracting businesses to the region.

Think of the duplication that exists in all our economic development departments when we are out there on our own. Let's work together and I am fully confident Oakland County will get its fair share of economic activity.

**Oakland County has a lot to offer the region, and the region has a lot to offer us.**

I want to recognize our regional partners:

- Wayne County Executive Warren Evans.
- Macomb County Executive Mark Hackel.
- Washtenaw County Board Chair Jason Morgan.
- Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan who was unable to join us this evening.

I have deeply appreciated their advice and support as I've taken on this job. They have been gracious with their time – at least they were when I made dinner for Warren, Mike and Mark. Mark brought Macomb County's best pies; Warren brought a great bottle of wine. And we all brought our appetites. How is that for regional cooperation?

We may be a little competitive with each other, a bit playful and sometimes even a little frustrated. Yet we have much in common.

We are all fiercely loyal to the citizens we represent and proud of the strengths that our individual areas bring to the region.

## A New Economic Development Strategy

For example, Oakland County continues to be the leader in the Michigan economy, producing nearly 30 percent of the jobs year to year. And creating the largest GDP of any county in the state.

**It is vital that we not become complacent.** If we are not moving forward, we are falling behind. At the pace the economy is changing around us we can't afford to stand still.

We have the potential to push further, plan for the next 10 years, position ourselves to lead the next innovations. **And make sure that we create economic opportunity for all our citizens in all parts of our county.**

That's why in my first 100 days, I visited and heard from dozens of business leaders, representing small and large companies, across Oakland County.

I directed my team to act with a sense of urgency to create an economic development strategy that serves as a roadmap for Oakland County's future.

My requirements for this plan were clear:

- Build a plan that diversifies our economy and provides jobs at all levels.
- Integrate with our local, regional and state partners.
- Encourage small business to prosper, value women and minority-owned businesses and promote entrepreneurship.

I am proud to say we kicked off our new economic development strategy in January and held three outreach sessions to gather input from workforce leaders, business leaders and local government officials.

**We will finalize the plan by the end of March, but I want to share with you one gap we will act to close immediately.**

Oakland County currently receives around \$300 million in defense contracts but there is so much more we can do together.

Working with the Michigan Defense Center and the Detroit Regional Partnership, Oakland County will do its part to ensure that the state, proudly home to the "Arsenal of Democracy," no longer falls behind other Midwest states in defense spending.

My colleague, Mark Hackel, has been proactive in recognizing the importance of this industry and now it is our time to strengthen our role.

At no time in our state's history have we been more fully represented in Washington on defense. We have an advocate in Senator Gary Peters who sits on the Senate Armed Services Committee. In the House, we have three members who sit on Armed Services, including our own Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin. And on Appropriations we have Congresswoman Brenda Lawrence.

We have legislative fire power, brain power with over 80,000 engineers in our region, and industrial power with over 6,000 manufacturing firms in our county.

**Tonight, I am announcing the willpower. Oakland County will launch a Defense and Aerospace Initiative to focus on growing the number of defense and aerospace contracts and jobs. Our goal is to achieve \$1 billion of investment by 2025 – three times higher than our current level.**

## **Pontiac**

We are also going to be a full partner with our county seat, the city of Pontiac. We are in this beautiful, historic theater in part to highlight the great things going on in Pontiac.

This video will give you a glimpse of recent progress. [Video plays]

Impressive.

And they are just getting started.

I am determined as county executive to make sure that county government is a full and active partner in Pontiac's future.

**Tonight, I am announcing that the county's Division of Community and Home Improvement and all its staff – will move into downtown Pontiac.**

## **Talent and Workforce Development**

Even the best economic strategy is only successful with talent and workforce development. We are blessed in Oakland County to have a strong fabric of Michigan Works! offices.

Six locations providing training and job search services and connecting our residents with employers. Last year, we served more than 46,000 individuals and 4,800 businesses. More than 7,000 residents found jobs with our help.

In 2019, we held two successful events to inspire the next generation of workers.

Students got to see manufacturing careers up close and personal on Manufacturing Day.

We also took the lead in hosting the second MICareerQuest Southeast.

More than 9,000 students from six counties came here and met with professionals in hundreds of jobs at an interactive career exploration event. I knew we were having some success when students were interacting with the careers and not on their phones.

In the coming year, we will amplify our efforts to provide increased opportunities for our students and young adults. This summer we will increase the number of students engaged in our summer youth program and help them find meaningful work experiences. In addition, our team is working with employers and labor partners to build new apprenticeship programs in health sciences, construction, and information technology, providing students and adults with the opportunity to learn and earn, gaining industry-recognized credentials while also earning a paycheck.

If we are going to fully close the talent gap, we must be intentional and aspirational about increasing the number of adults with a post-secondary degree or credential.

Governor Whitmer has set a statewide goal of having 60 percent of Michigan adults obtain a post-secondary degree or credential by 2030. I was quite frankly shocked to learn that Michigan was the only state in the Midwest and one of only nine in the country without such a goal.

Those states around us with a goal are seeing the results pay off. For example, Kentucky is growing at an education rate two times as fast as Michigan.

In Oakland County we are blessed with a strong K-12, higher education, and workforce system. We are strong in large part because we work well together.

I saw that collaboration firsthand when I met with education and workforce leaders to discuss the data for Oakland County. Many of these leaders are here with us tonight.

**The future of work and innovation is going to be seized by those who are not complacent.** This is not a local sport but a national one and counties in Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota, Washington, and Massachusetts are all ahead of us.

**Tonight, we are announcing Oakland80 and committing ourselves to ensuring that 80 percent of our adults have a post-secondary degree or credential by 2030.**

This will not happen on its own. We will need to bend the curve. We must ensure high school students obtain the financial assistance available to them, that our excellent Career Tech Education centers have what they need to provide even more credentials of value. Support systems so students who start at one of our colleges actually finish with a degree. Opportunities to gain credentials in partnership with the building trades. And business initiatives to allow employees to upgrade their skills or go back to school.

Importantly, we also have to ensure that no one is left behind. I am asking community leaders to drill down on the data and set additional goals for students of color, people with disabilities, refugees and the economically disadvantaged.

### **Regional Transportation**

Finally, no economic development strategy is complete without an honest conversation about regional transportation.

Since I first ran for office – as a commissioner and as mayor of Ferndale – I have long been an advocate of expanded regional transit. I understand why some may think this is easy coming from Ferndale.

As county executive, I now see this issue through the lens of the entire county.

The data is clear:

40 percent of the Oakland County workforce commutes from other counties.

Nearly 300,000 jobs in Oakland County are not currently served by fixed route transit including four major hospitals. And the 19,000 students that attend Oakland University.

And when we offer fast and reliable service, residents respond. The ridership on SMART's Woodward FAST service is up 87 percent in the last two years.

Our peer regions, like Denver, Indianapolis, and Columbus, have all made major investments in transit and mobility over the last decade. The average population growth rate in those

communities is 17 percent. Our region lost 6 percent of its population over the same amount of time.

**I believe that transit will make our region more competitive economically and attract younger people who want transit options.**

So, when I became county executive, I said that I wanted to take a fresh look at a transit plan that could add value for Oakland County.

I am not interested in dusting off the old 2016 plan that failed – albeit narrowly – in Oakland County – but in seeing if there is a new plan that could win the support of voters. It must address the economic development needs of our communities, provide frequent and reliable service for workers, seniors and the disabled, utilize new technology and create flexible mobility options for communities in all parts of Oakland County.

**I believe we can reach a transit solution that will benefit our county and the entire region.**

But as I said earlier, we need to get the plan right. For me that means we will maintain and strengthen the accountability provisions negotiated by the Patterson administration.

For those who are skeptical, I say give us a chance. Come to the table. Talk to us about the needs of your residents, talk to your businesses, consider recent innovations and help us craft a plan that works for our county.

## **Quality of Life**

The quality of life we enjoy in Oakland County is more than safe neighborhoods, good schools and beautiful lakes and parks.

**In all parts of our county this quality of life is built on the shared values of opportunity, fairness and community.**

**These values compel us to address any gaps that exist. We can't be complacent.**

### *Expanding Health Services*

**On Monday, I announced Oakland Health 360. This patient-centered approach will close a major gap in our county health system.** Through a partnership with Honor Community Health our clinics in Pontiac and Southfield will offer comprehensive, integrated health care. Within 90 days of board approval our services will include general primary care, family planning services and dental care. When complete, this partnership will include mental and behavioral health services and a partnership with Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency will ensure residents have important supportive services, including access to insurance coverage, Head Start and emergency services like energy, food and housing assistance.

**If you come in one of our doors to have your child immunized or receive a lead screening, I want you to be able to have a cancer or diabetes screening, talk to a mental health professional, get assistance with prescription drug costs, have a dental checkup and receive primary care.**

### Addressing Affordable Housing

We must also address the issue of affordable housing in Oakland County. The status quo is unacceptable.

A recent study done for Oakland County found that almost 27 percent of households have cost burdens. Among renters that number jumps to 41 percent. We simply must do more to provide affordable rental options. We also need to be honest about racial equity. Black households face housing problems at a rate of 42 percent and a mortgage denial rate twice that of white households.

We will use our HUD and HOME funds to correct these inequities and ensure all families the fairness and housing choice they deserve.

### Ending Homeless in Our County

We are also grateful to State Senator Rosemary Bayer and State Rep. Brenda Carter who secured money in the state budget and led the task to allow us to create a Blueprint to End Homelessness in Oakland County. When finished this strategy will coordinate the activities of our partners and identify gaps in services for us to fill.

### Ensuring Quality of Life for our parents

Quality of Life also extends to our parents. I lost my father in 2018, and I am grateful that his wife, along with my mom and stepdad are here with me tonight.

By 2045 Oakland County will see a 52 percent increase in residents between 65 and 85 years old and a 161 percent increase in those 85 and older.

Our seniors want independence and we must have transportation and other support services that allow them to enjoy their lives. We must also support children who are becoming care providers.

Oakland County's Senior Advisory Council made two recommendations that the county will support immediately.

We will make available a "Prepare to Care Resource Guide" to provide education and relevant resources to family members with senior parents. Let's be honest as children with aging parents, we are not always sensitive to what they are going through and the role we can play to respect and support their aging goals.

We will also educate all county front-line staff with new training to improve our customer service to this important population.

## Environment

I promise you that while we close these gaps in our quality of life, I remain focused on our environment.

As mayor of Ferndale we hired the first local sustainability planner in the county. Our master plan called for us to implement sustainability efforts – combining environment, social and financial interests under one umbrella. As part of this effort we provided seed money for a revolving fund. The city planner calculated the return on investment of a green project and the fund would provide the upfront costs. But 25 percent of all energy savings would flow back into the fund for the next project.

**I have asked Deputy Executive April Lynch – who served as my Ferndale city manager - to lead a similar effort at the county.**

We will also stay focused on the challenge of lead in our water. Last year five Oakland County communities faced actionable lead levels in their water. These local communities, our Health Division and our Water Resource Commissioner Jim Nash came together to educate the public on steps they can take to test their water and keep their families safe. Working with the Board of Commissioners our 2020 budget set aside money to ensure safe drinking stations in all our schools.

We know the permanent solution is to get all levels of government to act with a sense of urgency.

Address our failing infrastructure.

We can't afford to wait.

## **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

**For me, a key pillar of Oakland Together is diversity, equity and inclusion. It is central to my values as county executive to celebrate our diversity and make sure we are inclusive in all our efforts.**

I was proud to appoint the most diverse leadership team in county history

But friends, in a county of 1.2 million people, it is long overdue to have the first female chief deputy and first African American deputy executive.

Working with the Board of Commissioners, we established the position of chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer. When hired this person will lead both internal and external efforts to elevate inclusiveness and implement best practices related to this important priority.

I am also proud that we approved Commissioner Penny Lueb's resolution creating Oakland County's first comprehensive non-discrimination policy covering employment and contracts. This was the right thing to do morally and economically

Our businesses already understand the value of these policies in recruiting workers and serving their customers and we are catching up to the private sector.

It is also a fundamental value in our county that we condemn the growing level of hate speech in our nation. There is no place for language that is threatening, antisemitic, or bullying in any of our communities. Hate speech leads to hateful action.

We will also catch up to our neighbors in Wayne and Macomb as a welcoming county. “One Macomb” and “Wayne United” have served to elevate the role of new Americans in those counties, and Oakland Together will do the same here

Refugee entrepreneurs generated more than \$70 million in economic benefits for southeast Michigan. And in one year alone refugees paid \$130 million in state and local taxes.

In recent years Oakland County accepted the highest percentage of refugees in southeast Michigan. We are proud to do so. We recognize and appreciate the direct economic and social impact that refugees create in our community.

### **Honoring our Veterans**

Oakland County is also honored to be home to nearly 60,000 veterans who have served in our military during peacetime and war. Our Oakland County veterans raised their right hand and made a pledge to defend our Constitution and nation. These men and women deserve our recognition, and not just on Memorial Day and Veterans Day, but every day

We need to ensure that all our veterans and their dependents know the benefits that they are entitled to from their federal, state and local governments. Never should a Vietnam Vet exposed to agent orange be without. Never should a veteran who fought in Afghanistan or Iraq, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, be without. And every World War II veteran should receive a proper burial, the playing of taps, and the presentation of our nation’s flag when they pass

**My administration, under the leadership of Deputy Executive Sean Carlson, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, will use a recently received state grant to re-double our efforts to make veterans and their dependents aware of how our Veterans’ Service Division can help.**

This is just one video that recognizes our Oakland County veterans. [Video]

### **Honoring Law Enforcement**

We must also honor those who serve to protect us every day at home.

This past year we saw justice for the family of Oakland County Deputy Sheriff Eric Overall. On Thanksgiving morning 2017, Deputy Overall was tragically, intentionally and fatally struck by a driver while doing his job placing stop sticks on the road to stop a fleeing vehicle.

Deputy Overall was 50 years old and served in the Sheriff’s office for 22 years.

**I am proud to announce – working with Sheriff Mike Bouchard and the Board of Commissioners – that we will establish the Eric Overall Memorial Benefit to provide financial help to the families of employees who lose their lives performing their jobs.**

This is a small statement to preserve their memory and honor their sacrifice.

We are joined this evening by Eric's brother, Brett and his wife Jody who also manages our Children's Village. We are honored by your presence.

## **Good Government**

The underpinning of all these initiatives is good government. I believe strongly that process and active partnership matters.

**To my colleagues on the Board of Commissioners – Republicans and Democrats – you have my commitment to work collaboratively, listen to all ideas, and find ways to govern together.**

As a former commissioner I value the role of the board. My years on the commission helped shape my approach to public service. I am honored to be the first commissioner to serve as executive.

I also want to recognize the county directors and employees.

When Brooks passed away it was not an easy time for employees. I am grateful for the professionalism in which everyone approached their work in those early weeks. They welcomed me, shared with me their advice and experience, and kept doing their jobs.

**Tonight, I am presenting the inaugural Oakland County Lifetime Achievement Award to one of these employees - David VanderVeen, our Director of Central Services.**

Central is exactly what Dave is to Oakland County. To say he oversees our Oakland County International Airport that contributes \$1 billion to our regional economy, or that he represents the Executive on Parks and Recreation Board, and leads award-winning events like Fire and Ice, dramatically understates his role. Dave is dedicated, collaborative and joyful. After 56 years he continues to inspire each us every day and we are grateful for his leadership and friendship.

To all our hardworking employees, you have my commitment that we will work with the board to finalize the compensation study started by the Patterson administration and align our compensation with market rates.

## Fiscal Responsibility

Maintaining fiscal discipline and ensuring that as a county we are living within our means is a fundamental principle of good government. This includes:

- A competitive tax system in the county.
- Investments in critical infrastructure to protect our assets and encourage growth.
- And a structurally balanced budget that addresses long-term liabilities.

Oakland County has long followed these principles and it is one of the primary reasons for our AAA bond rating. **I am committed to ensuring that this strong fiscal foundation remains intact.**

## **2020**

2020 is a one-of-a-kind year for Oakland County, our state and our nation.

We have the census, our bicentennial and a presidential election.

**Under the leadership of Commissioners Janet Jackson, Shelley Taub and Angela Powell** – we have hired two staff members to help make sure everyone in Oakland is counted. This is vital to our representation and the return on the money we send to Washington.

**I also want to acknowledge the leadership of Oakland County Clerk Lisa Brown who is implementing new voter rights and keeping our elections secure.**

2020 is also Oakland County's bicentennial year. Oakland County was first organized on March 28, 1820 – 17 years before Michigan became a state.

We are 200 years old and we think that's a reason to celebrate.

Along with the county's Bicentennial Committee, led with passion and purpose in recent years by Circuit Judge Michael Warren, we are now coordinating activities, celebrations and interactive online presentations.

Oakland University's History Department is partnering with local museums across the county to create a digital, interactive display to give you Oakland County's history as you've never seen it before.

We're passing out 20,000 oak tree seedlings and every community will get an oak tree to plant to commemorate our birthday. I want to thank Commissioner Gwen Markham for her leadership in this area.

Gwen – as many of you know – is the daughter of our first County Executive, Dan Murphy. She is carrying on his tradition of being a good steward of our natural resources.

## Conclusion

After hundreds of conversation and thousands of miles – I can tell you with confidence that the State of Oakland County in 2020 is strong.

It's determined. And it's ready to celebrate and shine this year.

**But good is not good enough for the type of county we all deserve.** We're working hard to address our challenges and make the quality of life better for all our residents in all parts of our county.

**There is certainly no challenge we face in Oakland County that can't be fixed by all that is right with Oakland County.**

There's a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson that I think sums it up.

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."

**What lies within us will launch Oakland County – every part of it – beyond its strong foundation and into the future we all want for ourselves and our families.**

I'm honored to be a part of that effort.

Thank you for joining me tonight and being a part of building Oakland Together.