

## 2026 State of the County Address David Coulter, Oakland County Executive

(As prepared for delivery)

Wednesday, March 5, 2026, at 7 p.m.  
The Oakland Center at Oakland University in Rochester, MI

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Good evening, everyone. We're almost through one of the coldest, snowiest winters in recent memory. Spring is around the corner, but Oakland County is heating up.

Thanks for being here tonight or for watching us on the livestream. For those of you who are observing this holy month, Ramadan Mubarak.

I want to thank all of you, who've taken time from your own important work to celebrate our county's good fortune and pitch in to tackle the challenges we face in the year ahead. A special thank you to my colleagues Prosecuting Attorney Karen McDonald; Clerk Lisa Brown; Sheriff Mike Bouchard; Treasurer Robert Wittenberg; and Water Resources Commissioner Jim Nash.

Welcome to my governing partners, Oakland County Commission Chair Dave Woodward; Minority Leader Mike Spisz; and their hardworking colleagues on the county Board of Commissioners.

We're also joined by Chief of the Circuit Court, Judge Jeffery Matis, Chief of the Probate Court, Judge Jennifer Callaghan and Chief of the 52<sup>nd</sup> District Court, Judge Travis Reeds. I'm also really happy to welcome and thank my executive leadership team as well as our 5,000-person strong workforce. They provide outstanding service to our residents every day. Let's give them a round of applause.

I'm also grateful that my partners in the region have joined us tonight. Help me welcome Macomb County Executive Mark Hackel, and Wayne County Executive Warren Evans. We're so much stronger when we work together as a team for the good of our region and Michigan.

And finally, several of our state and federal leaders, including Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, Attorney General Nessel and several members of our state legislative delegation are here. Thank you for your friendship, your service and your support.

I want to thank Oakland University Board Chairman Brian Calley for that very warm introduction. And thanks to him and OU President Ora Pescovitz for hosting us here tonight on their beautiful campus. And no one could be a better partner in our county's efforts to make college more affordable and accessible. We're proud to collaborate with OU in the scholarship program honoring former Oakland County Health Officer Dr. Calandra Green.

I also want to share Oakland University's grief over the loss of one of its most visionary leaders, Dr. Glenn McIntosh, who passed away this past September after serving the university in a myriad of roles for three decades.

Glenn was a beacon to me throughout my career, and this is the first time I've delivered a State of the County address without him here to cheer me on. He exemplified what it means to be a public servant, and I can think of no better standard to live up to as a leader, a man, and a friend. I'm so glad his wife and my friend Lia could be with us here tonight.

Glenn's example of passion, purpose and patience is exactly what we need right now: Passion to know what's right, purpose to get it done, and patience with one another and our shared humanity.

In so many ways, Oakland County is among the most enviable places in the world to raise a family, make a living, and build a prosperous business. With that comes an immense responsibility not to take it for granted, but to pay it forward.

We're the most prosperous county in Michigan, with a per capita income in the top 3% of all U.S. counties. Our gross domestic product is larger than those of 10 states.

We employ more engineers, attract more foreign investment, and boast a higher percentage of workers with advanced degrees than any other county in Michigan. Our neighborhoods are some of the safest and most attractive in the United States.

Our public initiatives to spur investment and innovation are being copied by municipalities throughout Michigan. And Forbes magazine recently named the county government I'm privileged to lead, one of the top 10 employers in our state, public or private.

We have an abundance of fresh water, and we rarely witness the natural disasters that plague so many other communities. Our residents enjoy conveniences and public amenities their grandparents could scarcely have imagined.

And yet...

Even the most optimistic of us wonder how durable these blessings are. We worry about the future, and especially our children's future. We know that, in many ways, we're becoming a country of haves and have-nots. It used to be hard work, education, and a little bit of luck led to prosperity. Now it feels like you have to beat the odds to succeed.

Confidence in our civic institutions is at an all-time low, stoked in part by irresponsible elected leaders and social media influencers who tell us that the educators who oversee our schools, the scientists who preside over our health care system, and the state and local officials who administer our elections are untrustworthy.

Leaders of both parties argue that the next election will determine not just whose policies will prevail, but whether our country will survive.

People have reacted to these challenges in a variety of ways.

Some applaud what they see as an overdue course correction, even as they worry about the growing polarization in their communities, workplaces and even their families.

Others raise their voices in protest, speaking out on social media and participating in public demonstrations. Many have simply hidden from the chaos, boycotting the news, avoiding social media, and withdrawing from participation in political debate or public life.

I and my colleagues on both sides of the aisle in Oakland County have chosen a different path: the power of example.

While critics contend that government is either too intrusive or too ineffective to improve the lives of those it is supposed to serve, we're demonstrating the opposite.

In a state where even the most innocuous legislative initiatives too often succeed or fail on strict party-line votes, Oakland County's elected leaders collaborate and compromise, adopting annual budgets by unanimous, bipartisan votes.

To skeptics who claim local government can only get in the way of opportunity, we say: See for yourselves what we are doing in Oakland County.

We continue to believe that our county government can improve the lives of all our residents – and we’re proving it every day.

## II.

Whether you read it in the daily paper, see it online, or hear it from your neighbors at the local coffee shop, it’s clear that affordability is one of the biggest concerns of people across the political spectrum, and particularly of young adults. Workers in their 20s, 30s and 40s are especially worried about the rising cost of health care, housing and education.

So, we in Oakland County are working to make sure these three vital commodities remain within their reach, and the reach of the generations that follow.

Here as elsewhere, thousands of hard-working families are blindsided every year by unexpected illness or accidents. The resulting medical bills can wipe out the savings of even the most prudent household, pushing homeowners into foreclosure and forcing sick or injured patients to defer critical medical treatment.

So, Oakland County has partnered with Undue Medical Debt, a non-profit organization that buys uncollected debt from local healthcare providers for pennies on the dollar, to relieve eligible debtors of crushing hospital bills that might otherwise force them to declare bankruptcy.

We’ve invested \$2 million in this innovative program. And last year, using just a small percentage of that money, we helped 14,000 Oakland families wipe out \$9 million in medical debt. In fact, next week, we’ll send letters alerting an additional 6,300 residents that their health care bills – representing another \$6 million in debt – have been settled. I’d like to personally thank the folks at Undue Medical Debt, who are here with us tonight. I appreciate your commitment to helping us address one of the biggest stressors for so many residents – health scares and the bills that accompany life-saving treatments.

Another initiative we’ve undertaken with the Board of Commissioners leverages a small investment to achieve big savings for workers struggling to pay off their student loans decades after they graduated. So far, more than 3,200 residents have taken advantage of the SAVI Student Loan Support Program to reduce their debt burden by an average of \$46,000 each – netting them an extra \$142 in purchasing power every month.

You know, when you serve in elected office, you get calls and emails from constituents about all kinds of issues. And you can often tell from the subject line of an email whether the writer is going to thank you or give you a piece of their mind. So, when I saw a message in my inbox last December with the subject line “Delete SAVI account,” let’s just say I didn’t think it was going to be one of the happy emails. Boy, was I wrong! The note was from Jeff Polkowski, sharing that SAVI helped him eliminate more than \$70,000 in student loan debt he incurred getting an undergraduate and master’s degrees. With no debt remaining, he no longer needed his SAVI account. I want our young people to stay in Oakland County and Michigan when they graduate from college and programs like this are helping keep people like Jeff, who’s working for Waterford Township, right here at home.

Finally, on the housing front, we’re using the Housing Trust Fund our county commission seeded with \$20 million in federal funds to attack the shortage of affordable housing that has forced so many young families to defer their dreams of home ownership – which is the gateway to financial security for generations of workers before them.

In coordination with other public and private funding sources, the Housing Trust Fund has sparked the development of more than 1,100 affordable residential units in Rochester Hills, Pontiac, Hazel Park, Southfield, Auburn Hills and Ferndale.

The latest beneficiary is Royal Oak Township, where nearly a dozen families have moved into the first of 28 new single-family rental homes built on vacant land that has been cleared for safe, affordable housing.

I'll always remember the sense of pride and accomplishment I felt when I got my first home, a modest bungalow on a friendly block of Channing Street in Ferndale. And I want that same sense of security and community for any person who wants to stay in or move to Oakland County.

### III.

Take Pontiac, where our affordable housing initiatives are just one facet of a transformation taking place. I believe this transformation will be every bit as profound as the public-private collaboration that has remade the city of Detroit in recent years.

Detroit and Pontiac share proud histories. But over the last half-century, each has contended with abandoned buildings, stagnant population growth, and decaying infrastructure. In both cities, the state charged emergency managers with the onerous task of slashing expenditures, divesting assets, and revising labor and pension agreements.

But we know that fiscal discipline alone can't restore a city's mojo. The heavier lift requires vision, private investors with the confidence to risk their own capital, and elected leaders willing to incentivize and support initiatives that can change a city's trajectory.

That magic formula gelled in Detroit in recent years and today, Michigan's largest city looks astonishingly different – more densely populated, more brightly lit, filled with young residents and businesses of every kind – than the Detroit that emerged from bankruptcy a decade ago.

But if you've visited downtown Pontiac lately, you can see something similar taking shape.

The transformation was ignited by investors who are changing every corner of the city with job-creating developments and recreational opportunities. Last year, we made space for a revitalized Pontiac to breathe when we completed demolition of the Phoenix Center, whose skeleton had haunted Pontiac's skyline much like the abandoned Michigan Central train station once did in Detroit. This year, we're taking the next steps in our plans to relocate 700 county employees – including me and my executive staff – to the old General Motors Building.

It's all part of an ambitious revitalization project in which the state of Michigan has invested \$50 million, thanks to the support of Governor Whitmer, State Senator Jeremy Moss, and State Representative Brenda Carter. I'm also so grateful that Pontiac's new Mayor Mike McGuinness and members of the city council are here with us tonight and I look forward to working with them as we finish this project.

By 2027, we anticipate that Pontiac's once-deserted sidewalks will be crowded with workers and residents on lunchtime errands.

But don't just take my word for it. There are dozens of other projects taking shape in Pontiac. Here are just a few of the exciting stories that are brewing in the historic downtown of our county seat.

**[VIDEO: PONTIAC]**

### IV.

Once upon a time, Oakland County residents could count on state and federal support to see them through emergencies that left them without housing, food and medical care. Now, with those resources more uncertain than ever, Oakland County is stepping up to help our neighbors in need.

During the federal government shutdown last fall, we convened a meeting of organizations in our county that provide food assistance to our neighbors in need to find ways to collaborate in an uncertain time. One of the things we learned is that organizations like Forgotten Harvest had food available, but needed help getting it to distribution sites in our communities. So, our Facilities team found trucks and drivers and helped get much-needed food from the warehouse to locations in Southfield and Oak Park. Our employees donated their time and resources to giving and distributing food. And through educational materials, our website and social media, we made sure our residents knew where all the food resources were in Oakland County.

We didn't just lean in during the SNAP benefit crisis. We'll continue to help meet the nutritional needs of our residents across Oakland County. Through monthly Veterans Resource fairs, food distributions at the Oakland County Farmers Market and the South Oakland Health Clinic, we are partnering with organizations to provide food for those in need.

The vital services that our county and partners provide are most effective when we make them easy for our residents to navigate. We launched our Oakland Connects initiative to do just that.

Our growing team of Community Health Workers are the backbone of Oakland Connects. These are highly trained professionals who help residents access the benefits and resources they need in times of crisis and continue to provide support even after the crisis has passed.

Formerly known as the Nurse-on-Call Hotline, the Oakland Connects helpline is our holistic approach to the overall well-being of our residents. We point families and caregivers to precisely the help they need, whether it's specialists to treat a medical problem or one of the agencies that we have enlisted as partners in our mission to address root causes of illness like hunger, unemployment and homelessness.

Speaking of homelessness that's one of the areas in which Oakland Connects is making a real impact.

On any given day, hundreds of people in Oakland County are homeless, and 43 percent of our residents are housing insecure, which means that one or two missed paychecks could land them on the streets.

That is not acceptable. So, working with the Board of Commissioners, we have been laser-focused on helping vulnerable residents find safe, housing. We created a housing counselor position to deal one-on-one with people who need shelter. We're operating "Wellness Wednesdays" in Pontiac and "Friendship Fridays" in Royal Oak to create a safe place for residents to find basics like a shower, a place to wash their clothes, or a hot meal.

We're partnering with the New Birth International Church to provide emergency shelter for nearly 60 people. And I have to give a shout-out to the Qazi Family Foundation, which so generously donated the money needed to replace the furnace and roof at this emergency shelter. And the Oakland County Sheriff's Office also pitched in to furnish the new shelter with a washer and dryer.

These efforts are making a difference. After reaching a high point of just over 1,000 people in 2008, the number of homeless people has been steadily declining in Oakland County. The number is still too high, but in 2025, the count was down to 357 people. That represents a 22 percent decline in just the last five years.

As you can see, Oakland Connects is providing a lifeline that's helping some of the most vulnerable in our communities get through crisis situations and setting them up to break the cycle of poverty once and for all.

With an assist from the Oakland County Animal Shelter and Pet Adoption Center, they're even making sure that people who would choose to live in a car or on the streets, rather than give up their pets, are getting the help they need without losing their beloved furry friend.

Here's a little of their story.

### **[VIDEO: OAKLAND CONNECTS]**

While Oakland Connects works with families across the county, it's expanding its reach into the Southfield and Hazel Park schools next year with the help of a \$4.6 million grant from the Ballmer Group, led by Steve and Connie Ballmer, philanthropists who never forgot their roots in Oakland County. It's not the first time the Ballmers have stepped up to help our residents either. One of the really impactful parts of their foundation's mission is to provide the support students need to succeed in school beyond books and equipment. And a few years ago, they helped kick start similar programs in Ferndale, Madison Heights, Oak Park and Pontiac and funded a summer job training program that helped hundreds of students get their first taste of work.

This partnership is about meeting families where they are and removing the barriers that can stand in the way of a child's success – and we couldn't do this vital work without their support.

And by the way, this work is possible because of our first ever Office of Strategic Partnerships, led by Sara Gold, who works with non-profits to help expand and improve access to county services and programs.

### **V.**

Oakland County employees are the not-so-secret ingredient in our recipe for success, going above and beyond to help our residents. Let me give you one example from our Veterans Services Department, whose staff serves the 53,000 veterans who live in our county. Every day, they help heroes navigate an often-complicated benefits' system that frustrates as much as it rewards. They're committed and dedicated, and they take the extra steps needed to ensure the veterans who have served our nation in times of war and peace get the benefits and help they've earned.

Three years ago, after Congress passed legislation providing expanded benefits for combat veterans exposed to Agent Orange, our counselors remembered a widow named Terri. She had been denied Agent Orange benefits several times in the past, but they thought she might be eligible under the new rules. So, they sent her a letter - and when their letter was returned as undeliverable, they took the extra step and went to the Register of Deed's office to see if they could find an updated address. They did, and within weeks Terri was provided with benefits dating back to 2007, when her husband died of cancer.

Taking that extra step wasn't a "big deal" to Lauren, Boban and Courtney. Just another day on the job for the benefits counselors in the Veterans Services Department. But I'll let them tell you.

### **[VIDEO: VETERANS SERVICES DEPARTMENT]**

Terri told us "They could have thrown this into an inactive file, but they kept looking for me. It doesn't make it any better that I lost my husband, but after losing my daughter last year and helping out with her family, this ended up being such a blessing."

In addition to guiding veterans and their families to the benefits they're owed, we inaugurated a new program providing free public transportation, giving veterans a lifeline to doctor's appointments, grocery shopping and recreation. In its first year, our Veterans Ride Free initiative provided more than 16,000 public transit rides to veterans and their caregivers.

### **VI.**

Now, let's be clear. None of these initiatives would be possible without a solid fiscal foundation. That's why my administration and our board of commissioners have worked together to balance our budgets, shore up our rainy-day fund, and preserve the AAA bond rating that makes investment in Oakland County so attractive.

In 2025, that reputation for stability and fiscal responsibility continued to draw new employers, jobs and residents to our county. In fact, did you know that for the first time in decades, every single community in Oakland County grew its population.

Many of those new residents came here from other countries. Since I took office in 2019, our Welcome Oakland program has hosted two naturalization ceremonies for new citizens from dozens of countries.

Without these new neighbors and friends, the populations of Oakland County and Michigan might well be shrinking instead of growing. They came here to reunite with family, gain a college education or escape war-torn countries. Now, they are running businesses that provide jobs, volunteering in our schools, and contributing tax revenues that support county services for all of us. The naturalization ceremonies we sponsor make it official, but these immigrants have been part of this county's fabric and soul from the moment they arrived.

I also want to recognize that the 800 foreign-owned companies operating here represent not a threat to our identity or our security, but a vote of confidence in the quality of our communities and the competence of our workforce – not to mention good-paying jobs for our residents and a stronger economy for all of us.

Last year, that confidence continued to attract new employers like Astemo Americas, whose parent company is investing \$95 million in a new regional headquarters and tech center that will add 375 auto industry jobs in Wixom. I met the company's leaders during a trade trip to Japan last year.

Also, American Rheinmetall, which is expanding its military vehicle production business in Auburn Hills. Our economic development team helped ink that deal during a trade trip to Germany.

And Teradyne, an advanced robotics company that decided to establish a U.S. operations hub in Wixom, adding another 200 jobs.

Another advantage of maintaining our enviable economic foundation is that it gives our county itself the capacity to invest – thoughtfully, strategically, and sustainably – in the things that will expand opportunities for all Oakland County residents.

That's the mission that continues to excite me and my colleagues every day.

It begins with our youngest residents – students, recent graduates looking for their first jobs, and young adults looking to augment their skills or change their career paths.

Our Workforce Development team's mission is to match those ambitious workers with employers eager to find them. So, when General Motors needed to staff up the assembly plant it's renovating in Orion Township, they knew who to call for help. Our team mounted a recruitment campaign, sponsored a job fair, and helped GM screen candidates for 100 new good-paying jobs like toolmakers, pipefitters, millwrights and electricians.

That's just one example of our dedication to nurturing and maintaining the best-educated workforce in Michigan.

Nearly 70 percent of our residents already have post-secondary degrees or certified training. The ambitious mission of our Oakland 80 initiative is to boost that percentage to 80 percent by the end of this decade.

In the three short years of its existence, Oakland 80 navigators have helped more than 42,000 residents complete applications for college, apprenticeships, or certified training programs. Navigators now embedded in

18 high schools throughout the county work with students to match their passions and skills to the right educational opportunities.

But Oakland 80 offers more than academic and career counseling. Sometimes what's needed most urgently is practical support – help with car repairs and childcare, or book or uniform purchases. Last year, we helped 1,300 Oakland County adults overcome such obstacles to their continuing education.

## **VII.**

We also know that having good health makes it easier to take advantage of all the opportunities the county has to offer. At a time when the cost of health care coverage is rising even faster than the price of other necessities, we're expanding both the range of medical services available and the ease with which residents can access them.

We are lucky to have more health care systems than most counties. Last year, with the help of yet another generous donation by Roger Penske, we opened the Oakland 360, an innovative clinic that provides integrated physical and mental health services in one location. We opened another community health clinic in Hazel Park. And, we provided matching funds to the Rx Kids program started by Dr. Mona Hanna, who has been such an inspiration to me and a generation of kids. The program is providing vital cash assistance – more than \$2 million dollars already - to hundreds of pregnant moms and their newborns in Pontiac, Hazel Park and Royal Oak Township to make sure they get a healthy start in life.

Something else residents have made very clear is their desire that we invest in public transit. Even those who rely on their own cars or trucks recognize the need for transportation options that make it possible for workers to reach the businesses and services county residents rely on. Did you know that more than 400,000 workers come to work here from neighboring counties every day.

Although the transit millage passed easily, not everyone in the county was convinced it was necessary. But instead of leaving them behind, we reached out to those skeptics, exploring how expanded transit options could be tailored to the needs of all our communities.

This collaborative approach continues to bear fruit. Now in its fourth year of operation, the number of riders benefiting from these transit options continues to grow.

Last year the North Oakland and Western Oakland transportation authorities each exceeded 100,000 riders for the first time ever. That's a double-digit increase in both regions from the previous year.

SMART buses carried more than 7 million riders on their regularly scheduled routes, and another quarter million on-demand trips.

As the cost of new and used to vehicles increases, reliable transit isn't just an amenity, it's a necessity for workers and employers alike. And here, I'd like to give a shout out to one of our representatives in Congress, Haley Stevens, who was able to secure \$2 million in federal funding to expand our transit fleet by 16 buses that will translate into 100,000 more rides a year.

## **VIII.**

Accessibility – connecting the residents to the services we provide – is also the focus of our efforts to help entrepreneurs launch their own businesses and build the infrastructure to grow and sustain them.

We have a long history of providing assistance to small businesses. Now, Oakland Thrive provides one-stop shopping for entrepreneurs who want help with everything from building a website and finding local suppliers to securing financing and navigating regulations.

In the last couple of years, we've fielded a team of consultants ready to go wherever small businesspeople need them. Today, instead of assisting a few hundred entrepreneurs a year on our county campus, we served nearly 9,000 small businesses with on-site help last year alone.

At Castleberry Global, a business consulting firm in Auburn Hills, Oakland Thrive's consultants connected CEO Princess Castleberry with lawyers who advised her on how to protect and market her intellectual property and branding. The collaboration has boosted her company's revenues 25 percent – and now, she's one of those Oakland Thrive coaches who is helping other businesses succeed and grow.

As I acknowledged at the outset of my remarks tonight, all too many of us are living in uncertain times, and often anxious ones.

But the next time someone tells you that our democratic way of life is doomed – that our communities and political parties are too polarized to work together effectively, that our governments agencies are too inefficient, or overwhelmed or indifferent to the voters who elected them, or that we've lost the capacity to overcome our differences in pursuit of our collective well-being – don't argue with them.

Just bring them to Oakland County, where hard-working, dedicated public servants get up every day determined to preserve and expand the extraordinary opportunities our county provides.

Thank you all very much for joining us this evening.