



# County of Tulare

## Board of Supervisors

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March 9, 2021

I'm quite honored to serve as Chair this year and to have the opportunity to give the State of the County address.

First, I would like to thank my colleagues on the dais, Pete, Eddie, Larry, and Dennis. It truly is a pleasure to serve with you. Thanks also to our Chief of Staff, Tammie, and Board Rep Alicia, who have to put up with and meet the desires of 5 different bosses, our CAO Jason Britt and his staff, my fellow County elected officials, our department heads, and of course our employees, whose hard work and dedication exemplify the core values of why we exist.

Well, 2020 didn't go as we had planned! Without a doubt it was an extraordinary year, as we faced unprecedented challenges with COVID-19 making its unwelcome arrival into Tulare County. In just two days we will mark one year since our first COVID-19 positive case.

**COVID-19 is still the County's immediate priority.** Our response began in January of 2020 when our public health staff implemented protocols and limited exhibitors from outside the United States coming to the World Ag Expo. Numerous sanitation stations were set up throughout the grounds, and fortunately there were no positive cases stemming from the Ag Expo.

Then it all changed. Immediately following the declaration of a local public health emergency due to COVID-19, our Departmental Operations Center coordinated a countywide response to the pandemic, working to prevent further spread throughout the community and safeguarding the health and wellness of the public.

**All departments rose to the task.** From securing and distributing highly limited PPE supplies to local health care facilities to providing direction to schools, health care partners, businesses, and community partners. A Joint Information Command center was created so messaging was concise and consistent. County employees stepped up in big ways to continue serving our residents. I want to direct my next statement directly to our over 5000 employees: I could not be prouder of your allegiance to the residents of Tulare County. Many of you placed the safety and well-being of the public over yourselves and your families. When things didn't go the way someone thought they should, you took the hits and criticism. Through it all you never lost sight of your mission. My heartfelt thank you just doesn't seem like enough.

The CAO, in partnership with department heads, immediately implemented "work from home" and redesigned business processes to continue County services. We also implemented Microsoft Office 365, a cloud-based subscription service that makes remote work easier and more effective.



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Our Clerk of the Board and her staff have put in place protocols that protect the public while maintaining transparency. One of those protocols I see as I look out into what would usually be a packed chamber, limiting the number of people allowed. While limiting attendance at our meetings has been implemented, the opportunity to participate and make public comments has expanded. Citizens can now call in public comments; I believe this provides more and easier access to this Board. Our new agenda management system, PrimeGov, improves efficiency and standardization, providing an intuitive public search portal. I hope that one day we will have the capability to offer livestream video of our meetings.

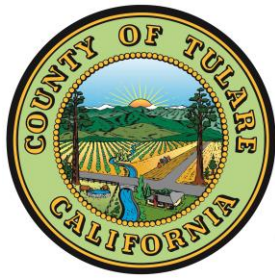
We allocated over \$48 million in CARES Act funds to invest in critical life-saving measures and economic support for Tulare County residents. This Board authorized \$5.2 million for over 1,000 small business grants that were administered through the Workforce Investment Board; \$8.6 million for public health response, COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, and financial assistance to local hospitals; \$1.1 million for rental and housing support; and \$3.4 million for food support programs.

COVID-19's impact has been significant: to date 48,399 total cases. Unfortunately, we mourn the 776 Tulare County citizens who lost their battle with COVID-19. Let us offer a moment of silence for them and their families. Thank you.

I'm hoping the worst is behind us. COVID cases are down, our hospitalizations have stabilized, and we are focusing on administering as much vaccine as we can get our hands on. The sooner we can get Tulare County citizens vaccinated, the sooner we can get back to our pre-COVID lives—which means our citizens get back to work, our businesses begin to prosper again, and our kids are fully back in school. The academic and emotional stress on our kids has been devastating.

To date we have vaccinated over 62,000 county residents. Our Points of Distribution have been well run and welcomed by the community. Through the efforts of this Board and our Central Valley colleagues, we called on the governor to increase the allocation of vaccine to the Central Valley. I'm happy to report our allocations have tripled over the last three weeks, and from the governor's visit to Tulare County yesterday, I believe he remains committed to making sure Tulare County gets our fair share.

As hopeful as we are about the vaccine returning us to some normalcy, now is not the time to become complacent. As our county begins to see improvement, we must remain steadfast in following CDC guidelines to prevent further spread. Mask up. Avoid high-risk situations. Social distance. Wash your hands!



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As if a global pandemic wasn't enough, 2020 also saw the largest wildfire in Tulare County history, the Sequoia Complex fire. The SQF burned more than 175,000 acres and destroyed 232 structures. Firefighters from throughout the United States, along with our own TCFD personnel, bravely and successfully defended the communities of Camp Nelson and Ponderosa. Thankfully, and miraculously, there were zero firefighter or civilian fatalities.

**Despite the effects of COVID-19 the county continued to function.** This Board continues its dedication to support public safety. We gathered, masked and socially distanced, as we cut the ribbon on Fire Station 1, the first fire station built in Tulare County since 1996. The new location will reduce response times, and its strategic location will provide backup for nearby Exeter, Visalia, and Tulare during mutual aid incidents. Station 1 will also see a 2-personnel staffing model. We have also committed \$1.8 million in funding for the purchase of a new ladder truck.

The Sheriff's air unit has two airplanes partnering with the Sheriff's Ag unit that have proven effective to combat Ag crimes in our county, significantly reducing the impacts of theft to our agricultural communities.

The gang and narcotics enforcement teams have had a very successful year, seizing hundreds of pounds of illegal drugs and seizing over a million dollars in drug trafficking organizations' finances.

Our Sheriff's Department remains focused on technology, such as body cameras worn by patrol and jail staff, and drones with night vision capabilities.

The Probation department has now consolidated our three Visalia locations into our new Headquarters in the former Kmart building on Noble Avenue.

Our District Attorney and his staff, after three years of investigations, filed 40 felony and 6 misdemeanor criminal counts against former HCCA CEO Benny Benzeevi. Benzeevi was taken into custody just four months later.

I would also like to highlight that the District Attorney was part of a six-county joint prosecution that resulted in a guilty plea from Golden State Killer Joseph DeAngelo. DeAngelo was responsible for a 13-year, multi-county crime spree that included a murder in Tulare County.

Agriculture is the driving force of Tulare County's economy. Our annual crop report was released in 2020, and we remain in the top three counties for the state, with a 4% increase in overall value from the previous year. The total comes to over \$7.5 billion. Overall, milk is still



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the leader at \$1.6 billion. With the onset of COVID, the AG Commissioner was able to work with CDFA/Cal OES as surgical masks, gloves, N95 masks, and sanitizers were distributed to our farm workers and their families. This was an effort never done before, and they were glad to play an important part in supplying and distributing the needed personal protective equipment. This effort continued with the Healthy Harvest program that found hotel rooms for COVID-19-positive farmworkers so they could isolate and keep their families safe. The Ag Commissioner also joined in with other County Departments as the Community Care Coalition was formed and joined by other area-wide organizations and state officials to meet the needs of the ag industry and those who work in it.

Our Resource Management Agency maintained operations throughout the COVID-19 environment. The permit center was staffed and operational for all but seven days total during the year (for COVID cleaning). Despite the remote or reduced staffing, they had one of their biggest construction and permitting years to date.

On the public works side there were over 53 miles of roadway rehabilitated countywide, along with major sidewalk projects in Earlimart, Ivanhoe, and Pixley. Many smaller communities throughout the county saw accessibility enhancement projects. Our Transit Operations Maintenance Facility was completed and will be the home for our TCaT buses, along with a CNG fueling station.

Last September a \$16 million grant was awarded from the Federal Department of Transportation to assist with the State Route 99 and Commercial Avenue interchange project. This federal grant will help to complete the \$53-million price tag for the project. This is a great example of how local, state, and federal agencies can come together for infrastructure needs.

May saw the first time in five years that the communities of Yetem and Seville could drink water from the tap without boiling it first, as the replacement water system in the works for over a decade was completed.

On the Economic Development front, we re-established issuance of Williamson Act Preserves and contracts, resulting in tax savings to property owners without diminishing our General Fund revenues.

The long-awaited Valley Fuel Travel Plaza project in Goshen was completed at the Highway 99/Betty Drive interchange. On-site there is a Chevron gas station, Starbucks coffee shop (the first in unincorporated Tulare County), Subway, and made-to-order Indian food that I can attest to as of this past Saturday night is delicious!



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2020 also saw the opening of the Darling Hotel in downtown Visalia. As you may recall, this historic building was formerly owned by Tulare County and had been vacant for more than a decade.

Ground has been broken for the Sequoia Gateway project at Caldwell and 99. This will be the site for a Valley Children's medical specialty clinic, Kaweah Delta surgery center, and various highway commercial businesses.

Even as COVID raged on, our Registrar of Voters processed a record high 148,677 votes, as well as providing four days of early voting during last year's general election.

During the COVID lockdown, the outdoors and open spaces became crucial to maintaining wellness. County parks received much attention during 2020. We partnered with CSET to install a new basketball court at Ledbetter Park. There is a new disc golf course at Pixley Park. Balch Park received major electrical upgrades, and the End of the Trail memorial at Mooney Grove Park received much-needed improvements. Lighting and fountain features now enhance the beauty of this renowned statue.

Animal Services has also continued to respond to calls for service from the public throughout the pandemic, with over 5,500 responses to animal-related calls while also providing care for over 3,500 animals. They provided critical evacuations of animals during the SQF fire by opening three evacuation centers for large and small animals, housing 280 animals. Their live release rate has steadily increased and is now at approximately 90%.

Our Library staff was busy in 2020, not only continuing to provide services through a modified pick-up system, but with the introduction "Pop Up Tulare County." This new bookmobile will expand not only library and literacy services but will also include opportunities for science, technology, engineering, art, and math throughout the county. The bookmobile was even put to work last week helping to deliver vaccines to Earlimart and Porterville

**Tulare County remains on solid fiscal ground.** 2020 saw the adoption of our largest budget to date: \$1.45 billion. As we heard last week from our auditor/controller/tax collector, Cass Cook, we are financially healthy according to the most recent Comprehensive Annual Financial Report, an independent audit.

I cannot go on without thanking our CAO Jason Britt and his exceptional staff for being mindful of this Board's desire to maintain conservative budget protocols.



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I appreciate my colleagues on the Board for their leadership, also. At times we may disagree on issues that come before us, but when it comes to the foundation of Tulare County's fiscal and economic strength, we stand united.

### Challenges

While it is important to reflect on and celebrate our accomplishments, we must not lose sight of threats and challenges that lie ahead.

The most recent Beacon Economic Report from the Tulare County Economic Development Corporation states, "Tulare County has not escaped the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic," and Governor Newsom's FY 21–22 budget predicts deficits over the next three years beginning in FY 22–23. This year already saw the effects that the state budget has on Tulare county when it reduced funding for local child support agencies. Unfortunately, the \$2.1 million reduction to our county necessitated the layoff of 28 positions and 65 vacancies. Thankfully, all displaced staff were offered positions in other departments of the County.

The full economic effects of the pandemic are still unknown. To maintain the County's strong financial position and enjoy balanced and stable budgets in future years, we must negotiate financially sustainable labor agreements, collaborate with the Tulare County Retirement Association to minimize significant retirement cost increases, and approach the impacts of the \$15 minimum wage increase in a manner that is financially sustainable.

**Homelessness:** Prior to COVID-19, homelessness was one of the biggest social issues we were dealing with, and it remains in the forefront today.

According to the last Point in Time survey, there are 992 people experiencing homelessness in Tulare County. I wouldn't doubt if there were actually twice that many.

While some may think that the pandemic would have squelched our efforts to provide housing, it actually opened up many new funding sources.

Project Roomkey was established in March 2020 as part of the state response to the pandemic. Project Roomkey gives people who are experiencing homelessness and are recovering from COVID-19 or have been exposed to COVID-19 a place to recuperate and properly quarantine outside of a hospital. It also provides a safe place for isolation for people who are experiencing homelessness and at high risk for medical complications should they to become infected.

Building on the success of Project Roomkey, Homekey was the next phase in the state's response to protecting Californians experiencing homelessness who are at high risk for serious illness and



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are impacted by COVID-19. Local governments within California were awarded funding to purchase and rehabilitate housing, including hotels, motels, vacant apartment buildings, and other buildings and convert them into interim or permanent, long-term housing. Tulare County was awarded \$5.2 million. Those funds were used to purchase the Sequoia Lodge motel in Visalia, and along with the acquisition of the 99 Palms at Tagus Ranch with the Housing Authority, we now have over 100 rooms that will be converted into permanent supportive housing. Our RMA staff is also working closely with the Salt and Light village that will provide even more supportive housing in Tulare County.

While we consider these victories, there are still many more people who remain unsheltered and who are coming into homelessness even as we speak. We will continue to seek solutions to mitigate this devastating social issue.

### **Looking to the Future**

As excited as I am about what we have accomplished over the last year, that excitement is magnified as I look to our future. It's been said that the most reliable way to predict the future is to *create it*, and we have a lot of things being created this year in Tulare County. I cannot, of course, name them all, but I would like to highlight just a few.

2021 will see the completion of our new, state-of-the-art, co-located dispatch center. Having Sheriff and Fire dispatch in the same location, rather than a basement and a trailer, will improve communication and efficiency. The new Motorola communication system will not only be the lighthouse for the West Coast but more importantly, it will assist in reducing response time and improve critical communications.

In 2019 we initiated a public art program with our inaugural installation at Government Plaza. COVID-19 may have paused it, but I'm excited to announce that we were able to renew this great relationship with the Arts Consortium that highlights local artists. This year, the walls of *this* building [Tulare county Administration Building Board Chambers] will be adorned with the works of Tulare County residents, along with a mural in this chamber depicting the history of Tulare County.

With the 2020 census completed comes the daunting task of redistricting. We are currently accepting applications for the Citizen Advisory Commission to assist in the process of designing new supervisorial district boundaries.

We look forward to watching the progress of the newly formed Tulare County Regional Transit Agency. This agency is a Joint Powers Authority made up of the County of Tulare and the cities



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of Exeter, Farmersville, Lindsay, Porterville, Tulare, and Woodlake. We are working collaboratively and in the interests of our residents. This JPA will be the trend for the future of transportation throughout Tulare County.

Work has begun on creating and opening a low-cost spay/neuter veterinary clinic on the shelter premises, which will increase humane care for animals in the shelter and provide affordable services to members of the community who may otherwise have no access to medical care for their pets.

This year we also started a special pet project—I mean that literally. We have introduced our “Pet of the Week.” We will be highlighting adoptable pets from our shelter, and they will make in-person, or I should say in-dog, appearances in our chambers.

There's much more I could talk about, since there are so many important issues the County touches. But it's time to continue doing the business of the County.

### **What is the state of Tulare County?**

I can say with confidence that the state of our County is strong. We are strong because of our over 5,000 employees who work daily to meet the needs of our residents. We are strong because of our caring community partners. We are strong because of our eight incorporated cities: Dinuba, Exeter, Farmersville, Lindsay, Porterville, Tulare, Visalia, and Woodlake. And we are strong because of our almost 500,000 residents and businesses who have invested in our county and who trust that that Tulare County is the best place to live, work, raise a family, and with the greatest national park in our back yard, to play.

Thank you, and stay safe!

Amy Shuklian, Chair  
Tulare County Board of Supervisors