

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED IN KĪHEI

The Storms, the Failures, and the Families Who Paid the Price

A FACT-CHECKED ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT

Mayor La Costa 2026 | mayorlacosta2026.com

WHAT THIS REPORT DOCUMENTS

On March 13, 2026, a Kona low storm struck South Maui. A 16-unit condominium building collapsed. Roads caved in. Eleven people were rescued. Within days, a second storm followed.

This report documents four things the public record establishes:

1. The human cost — in the words of named Maui residents who lost their homes, their security, and in some cases everything they owned.
2. What the county knew — drainage plans commissioned and completed, solutions identified, implementation deferred for years before the storms.
3. The money question — a \$1.616 billion proposed budget, a \$12 million emergency cap, and ~\$100 million in reserves already drawn for storm response.
4. The culpability finding — in the words of the affected community, not the campaign.

Every fact in this report is sourced to verified public reporting. Every person named is sourced to news coverage. No claims are made beyond what the documented record supports.

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Susan Hungerford's family bought Unit 2 at Kīhei Kai Oceanfront Condominiums in 1974. The oceanfront complex on South Kīhei Road was among the first built in South Maui, and for four decades it never flooded. Hungerford still could not sleep all night after the January 2025 storm, when she woke to fast-moving water at body height (Maui Now, April 5, 2026). The condo association spent nearly \$1 million on emergency repairs and applied to the county for a permanent foundation permit. The county denied it, mandating a Special Management Area major process requiring a year or more (Maui Now, April 5, 2026).

They did not have a year.

On March 13, 2026, another Kona low struck South Maui. The entire sixteen-unit A Building at Kīhei Kai collapsed. Hungerford was not on the island when it happened. She had left the previous Tuesday, not knowing it would be the last time.

“This time I left on Tuesday and it started raining on Thursday. So I’m so glad that I didn’t know it was the last time I would say goodbye to those people. Most of them we’ll never see again.”

— Susan Hungerford, Kīhei Kai owner since 1974 | Maui Now, April 5, 2026

Her story was not an accident of weather. It was the result of decisions made — and not made — long before the first raindrop fell.

What Happened

Michael Casey was the resident manager at Kīhei Kai. This was not his first disaster. His previous home had been destroyed in the August 2023 Lahaina wildfire. When floodwaters reached the top of the nearby Waiakoa bridge on the night of March 13, he evacuated the building. By early Saturday morning, the back three-quarters of the structure had dropped approximately ten feet, triggering a ripple effect across the entire building (Hawaii News Now, March 17, 2026).

“This is my third evacuation and second complete disaster. Loss of everything.”

— Michael Casey, Kīhei Kai resident manager | Hawaii News Now, March 17, 2026

The Kona low that took Casey's home and Hungerford's family legacy stalled northwest of Hawai‘i from March 13 through 16. The National Weather Service documented more than 46 inches of rain on parts of Maui and recorded an all-time daily rainfall record at Kahului of 7.40 inches in a single day. At Kīhei Kai, approximately 100,000 cubic yards of earth washed into the

ocean. Sixteen units were destroyed — an estimated loss of \$11.2 million to \$16 million based on tax assessments (Maui Now, April 5, 2026; Honolulu Star-Advertiser, March 25, 2026).

On South Kīhei Road, a massive sinkhole opened in front of Kamaole Beach Park II, swallowing a pedestrian crossing sign, exposing pipes, and toppling a utility pole. Broken sewer and water lines left approximately 200 residences without service (Maui Now, March 16, 2026). The Maui Emergency Management Agency deputy administrator described the response capacity in six words:

“We are taxed... at the end of our staffing limits right now.”

— MEMA Deputy Administrator Kono Davis | Hawaii News Now, March 15, 2026

Across the county, the fire department responded to 58 storm-related calls during the first storm, including ten swift-water rescues that saved 27 people (Maui Now, March 16, 2026). A second Kona low followed from March 19 through 22, compounding the damage and requiring eleven additional rescues across Maui County (Honolulu Star-Advertiser, March 25, 2026). Statewide damage estimates ultimately exceeded \$1 billion.

"It's just total chaos," said Daniel Baralt, a South Maui resident of more than twenty years, who watched a 40-foot storage container move through floodwaters like a toy. "There was so much force that it just took the cars and just played with them like toys" (Maui Now, March 15, 2026).

Robert and Kathleen Beason had lived on Maui for sixteen years. They had never experienced anything like what they saw — roads turned to streams, a traffic island submerged a foot under water (The Maui News, March 19, 2026).

What the County Knew — and When

In December 2025, Paula Westfal emailed the county about a drainage problem near her Kīhei home. Without a curb to redirect it, she warned, rainwater would cross the road and flood her house. A county inspector came out. She received no substantive response. "I told them if there was heavy rain, all of this goes into my house and my neighbor's house," she said (The Maui News, April 2, 2026). Three months later, her house flooded.

What did the county know about South Maui's drainage risks — and for how long?

The answer is documented in the county's own records, spanning more than a decade.

The 2016 Drainage Master Plan

In November 2016, the Department of Public Works completed the Kīhei Drainage Master Plan — a comprehensive engineering study identifying \$133 million in needed drainage infrastructure across South Maui (SaveKihei.org, 2022; The Maui News, January 2022). The plan proposed fourteen detention basins and identified undersized culverts along South Kīhei Road that could produce flood elevations of four to six feet above road level during major storms.

The plan was presented to the community and rejected. The Kīhei Community Association objected to its reliance on concrete hardening — engineered channels and basins. County officials did not proceed with the plan due to community objections, according to KCA president Mike Moran (Honolulu Civil Beat, February 2022). The county instead commissioned an ecological alternatives analysis.

The Suppressed Report

Dr. Amanda Cording of EcoSolutions completed the Ecological Alternatives Analysis in September 2020 — identifying nature-based flood mitigation options at a fraction of the original plan's cost — and delivered it to Public Works. Then the report disappeared.

For more than a year, the Kīhei Community Association could not obtain it. "Repeated attempts to learn the whereabouts and status of the report have been fruitless," KCA president Moran wrote in October 2021 (GoKihei.org). It took legal action by environmental scientist Robin Knox to compel the county to release the document — in November 2021, more than fourteen months after it was delivered. "We still are not aware why the DPW refused to release the plan until they were forced to do so," the KCA stated publicly (GoKihei.org, November 27, 2021).

The Implementation Gap

A finalized drainage master plan followed in December 2022. As of March 2026 — nearly a decade after the original plan was completed — Public Works Director Jordan Molina told reporters the county was conducting "ongoing engineering studies" and "exploring potential mauka-side drainage basin locations" (Maui Now, March 22, 2026). The Southwest Maui Watershed Plan, a state-hosted planning document, acknowledged the implementation reality directly: the fourteen proposed detention basins were "very expensive" and implementation might require "large funding sources or future development before becoming real."

SaveKihei.org documented that above Waipuilani Gulch, a large detention structure had been "constructed but never fully connected or put into service" (SaveKihei.org, March 2026).

“Those plans exist. The solutions are known. What has not followed is implementation at the scale required.”

The Money Question

Ludeane Bonner is 83 years old. She had lived in her North Kihei home for more than 25 years. When the March storms hit, floodwaters reached three feet inside her house and lingered for days. She was staying with family when reporters found her. "This is one of those moments where you just have to stand and say, 'Where do I start?'" she said (Honolulu Star-Advertiser, March 25, 2026).

Her grandson Joe Wood watched the water consume her home. "There was nothing you could've done," he said. "Nobody could have done anything to even try and prevent this" (Honolulu Star-Advertiser, March 25, 2026).

The evidence suggests there were things that could have been done. And the resources to do them existed.

The Budget and the Emergency

Nine days after the first storm, on March 25, 2026, Mayor Bissen presented his proposed fiscal year 2027 budget: \$1.616 billion in county funds — a 3.7 percent increase over the current \$1.56 billion budget and the largest proposed county budget in Maui history. Budget Director Lesley Milner acknowledged the proposal "was finalized before the storms" and contained no funding to address the March damage (Honolulu Civil Beat, March 2026).

Before that budget presentation, the mayor had asked the county council for \$15 million in emergency funds, stating that departments "do not have the ability to absorb the additional costs within their operating budgets through the end of the fiscal year" (Maui Now, March 17, 2026). The request was amended to \$12 million — because the county charter restricts emergency appropriations to no more than 1 percent of the fiscal year's operating appropriations (Honolulu Civil Beat, March 2026). The council approved \$12 million on an emergency 8-0 vote.

To cover immediate storm needs beyond what the emergency appropriation allowed, the county planned to draw on approximately \$100 million in emergency reserves — because the FY2027 budget had been finalized before the storms struck (Honolulu Civil Beat, March 2026).

Managing Director Josiah Nishita disclosed that initial damage estimates from the first storm alone exceeded \$16 million — roughly \$11 million for Public Works, \$3 million for police, and \$500,000 for fire and public safety — and anticipated the figure would go "significantly higher" after the second storm (Maui Now, March 20, 2026). Statewide road damage alone was estimated

at "at least \$40 million" with residential impacts expected to reach "tens of millions" (Honolulu Star-Advertiser, March 25, 2026).

BY THE NUMBERS
The fiscal picture in three lines:

Item	Amount	Context
Emergency funding approved	\$12 million	Amended from \$15M request to comply with county charter cap of ≤1% of operating appropriations
Emergency funding sought	\$15 million	Presented as needed for emergency repairs and rising operational costs including overtime
Emergency reserves drawn	~\$100 million	County planned to fund immediate storm needs from emergency reserves because FY2027 budget was finalized before storms struck
FY2027 proposed county budget	\$1.616 billion	Largest proposed county budget in Maui history — a 3.7% increase over the current \$1.56 billion budget, presented March 25, 2026

The county charter legally capped emergency appropriations at \$12 million regardless of need. The \$133 million Kīhei Drainage Master Plan — identified in 2016, refined through 2022 — represents roughly 8.2 percent of a single year's proposed budget. As of March 2026, that plan remained largely in the engineering study phase.

The Culpability Finding

Josh Berlien of Berlien & Co. spent months engineering the emergency repairs at Kīhei Kai after the January 2025 flood — raker shoring, vertical shoring towers, what he described as "an engineering feat" (Maui Now, April 5, 2026). The association applied for a permanent foundation permit. The county mandated a Special Management Area major process requiring a public comment period and taking a year or longer. The association proposed splitting the work — an SMA minor permit for the foundation alone, a major for cosmetic repairs. The county refused. "All they wanted to do was put back what was destroyed by a flood event caused by a bridge and neighbor diversion," Berlien said. "And the county still would not let us proceed" (Maui Now, April 5, 2026).

When the March 2026 storms arrived, the building was still in its emergency-repaired state. The repairs held in the January 2025 storm. They did not hold in March 2026.

Mike Conners, president of the Kīhei Kai owners association, stated the conclusion in a single sentence:

“The county is culpable in this mess.”

— Mike Conners, Kīhei Kai Owners Association President | Maui Now, April 5, 2026

Conners identified three specific documented failures (Maui Now, April 5, 2026):

One: The county denied a timely permit for permanent foundation repairs after issuing an emergency repair permit, leaving the building exposed through another storm season.

Two: The county failed to address the design of the reconstructed Waiakoa Gulch bridge. Board member Hungerford described it as "literally a dam" — a structure with just two culverts that trap debris and divert water along the coastal road rather than allowing it to flow to the ocean. County Council Member Tom Cook agreed the structure is "way too small to address the volume of water" (Maui Now, March 22, 2026).

Three: The county failed to act on a formal SeeClickFix complaint documenting that a neighboring resort had constructed unpermitted concrete perimeter walls and floodgates diverting water onto Kīhei Kai's property (Maui Now, April 5, 2026).

When reporters sought responses from county departments, the county communications office declined to make anyone in Planning or Public Works available, directing reporters to submit a Uniform Information Practices Act request due to "potential litigation" (Maui Now, April 5, 2026).

What the Mayor Said

On March 31, 2026, more than 150 Kīhei and South Maui residents filed into the Kīhei Community Center for the South Maui storm recovery meeting (The Maui News, April 2, 2026). Paula Westfal was there — the homeowner who had warned the county in December. Kym Ferrari was there — her parking lot had flooded after the county failed to clear a nearby drainage ditch. Others came with photographs of their damaged homes and documented emails that had gone unanswered.

Mayor Bissen addressed the room. He said his administration was "willing to take the blame for all the things that people pointed out were the administration's fault."

Then he offered perspective.

“But let’s just give some credit to Mother Nature, doing whatever she’s going to do. She’s always going to win. I just want to put that out there as perspective.”

— Mayor Richard Bissen, South Maui Storm Recovery Meeting, March 31, 2026 | The Maui News, April 2, 2026

He continued: the county was dealing with flooding in areas where developers had built on wetlands. "I'm not able to point fingers, accuse anybody over what was allowed back in the day when those places were built, but of course, we're trying to reverse that." Rain patterns had changed, he said. "I can tell you for sure we're getting more water in a short amount of time" (The Maui News, April 2, 2026).

Kym Ferrari, whose parking lot had flooded after the county failed to clear the ditch, offered a different assessment of what had and had not been addressed: "It wasn't addressed. The mud from the wetlands is higher than my driveway" (The Maui News, April 2, 2026).

Why This Report Exists

P. Denise La Costa, candidate for Maui County Mayor, compiled this report. In her words:

"I have lived on Maui for 36 years. For five of those years, I served as Chair and Commissioner on the Maui County Planning Commission — the body that reviews the exact kind of infrastructure decisions documented in this report. I watched drainage plans get studied and never built. I watched permits get delayed while buildings deteriorated. I watched communities absorb the consequences of a government that managed problems instead of solving them.

I compiled this report not to win an argument but because Maui voters deserve the full picture before August 8. Every fact is sourced. Every person is named. The evidence is public record.

The families in these pages — Susan Hungerford, Ludeane Bonner, Paula Westfal, Michael Casey, and hundreds more — did not cause the storms. But they paid the price for drainage infrastructure that existed only on paper, for permits denied when they should have been granted, and for a government that managed crises instead of preventing them.

Storm accountability is not separate from the question of what Maui County government should be. It is the question. A government that acts builds the

drainage infrastructure before the flood. A government that manages writes the emergency proclamation after.

If you want to know more about what different leadership looks like for Maui, visit mayorlacosta2026.com."

Sources

All claims in this report are sourced to public reporting or official documents. Key sources:

Maui Now (April 5, 2026) — Kīhei Kai owners association statement of county culpability and Susan Hungerford account
Hawaii News Now (March 17, 2026) — Michael Casey account; Kīhei Kai collapse description
The Maui News (April 2, 2026) — South Maui storm recovery meeting; Paula Westfal testimony; Bissen Mother Nature quote
Honolulu Star-Advertiser (March 25, 2026) — Ludeane Bonner and Joe Wood accounts; damage estimates
Maui Now (March 17, 2026) — Mayor Bissen emergency \$15 million funding request
Maui Now (March 20, 2026) — Council emergency appropriation; damage estimate details
Honolulu Civil Beat (March 2026) — Charter cap on emergency appropriations; FY2027 budget finalized before storms; ~\$100M reserve draw
Maui Now (March 22, 2026) — Public Works Director Molina on drainage plan status; Council Member Cook on bridge design
SaveKihei.org (March 2026) — Stormwater system analysis; unbuilt infrastructure documentation
GoKihei.org / Kīhei Community Association (November 2021) — Legal action to release ecological alternatives analysis
Honolulu Civil Beat (February 2022) — 2016 drainage plan history; community objections
National Weather Service — March 2026 storm rainfall and wind data
Hawaii News Now (March 15, 2026) — MEMA Deputy Administrator Kono Davis staffing quote
County of Maui FY2027 Proposed Budget — Budget figures
County of Maui Emergency Proclamations (March 10 and March 19, 2026) — Emergency authority documentation