

Hope Lives as Lahaina Heals and Plans the Next Steps

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LAHAINA, Hawaiʻi – For longtime Lahaina resident Kim Ball, the sound of construction echoing along Komo Mai Street is a welcome harbinger of renewal.

Already, the foundation of his new home is emerging from the outlines of the one destroyed by wildfires last August. Standing on his property, Ball can also see the work beginning on his neighbor's house. Down the hill, another new home is further along. Its roof is already in place.

Ball, who owns Hi-Tech Surf Sports on Maui, is among the first Lahaina homeowners to start rebuilding. He received a permit from Maui County in 15 days. To speed up the work, he made no changes to the original blueprints for the house he had built only five years before the wildfires. It's the same 2,300-square-foot, two-story structure surrounded by stone walls.

"I want to see it done in my lifetime," said Ball, who is 71.

A year after wildfires raced across Lahaina, local, state and federal officials working with community groups have also accelerated their timetable, working with urgency to help survivors heal and restore their community.

"In September, we had predicted two to three years before we could issue even the first building permit," said Maui County Mayor Richard Bissen, noting the debris cleanup program is months ahead of schedule.

By July 31, more than 319,000 tons of fire debris was cleared from Lahaina alone, and nearly 34 tons of asbestos was shipped off island for disposal. Maui County was proud to say it had issued permits for 47 homes.

Inside the closed perimeter of the area burned by the wildfires, progress is visible.



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Page 1 of 8

A patchwork of cleared lots covered with gravel is emerging from a landscape previously dominated by ash and rubble. The gravel itself is recycled concrete, harvested from broken driveways, foundations and walls, and signifies the lots are ready for rebuilding.

Beyond one of the many checkpoints limiting entry to Lahaina, the destroyed sections of the once lively commercial center remain eerily silent, awaiting the community's plans for its future revival.

The Day That Changed Lahaina

The magnitude of the disaster hit the morning after Tuesday, Aug. 8, when the winds died down and smoke cleared enough to see the extent of the damage. Later, it was revealed that Lahaina lost 102 lives, with two others still missing. More than 2,200 structures had burned, including 26 homes in the Upcountry town of Kula.

Local and state officials knew immediately that they would need federal help, and Gov. Josh Green requested a major disaster declaration. On Aug. 10, six hours after the governor submitted his request, President Biden approved the declaration that directed federal agencies to respond.

Of paramount concern was that Lahaina survivors have a roof over their heads. With funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the state established an emergency sheltering program and contracted with the American Red Cross to operate it.

The Red Cross moved 7,796 displaced wildfire survivors into hotels. It took only 13 days. The governor described this effort as the biggest accomplishment in the first days after the disaster.

"Moving the entire town into hotels was just something to behold," Green said. "And I'm grateful to everyone."

The sheltering program brought a measure of stability to survivors still shaken by their escape from the wildfires. Among them was Kenderson Smith, a Pohnpeian landscape worker, who recalled the stress of leading his family to safety.



FEMA

Page 2 of 8

With thick, black smoke surrounding his home on Waine?e Street, he loaded 12 of his family members, including his wife, into their pickup and drove them to the parking lot of the Maui Medical Group nearby. Then he returned on foot to his home to rescue his cousin, who was in the yard trying to fight the flames with a garden hose.

Smith recalled their exit – a slow, halting drive first through heavy smoke, then clogged traffic to Wailuku, where relatives took them in. But there was little room there; the Wailuku house was already occupied by a large family.

Like many other displaced residents, they managed for a while, then spent a few nights in a short-term rental unit before moving again, this time into the Red Cross sheltering program.

“We felt such a sense of relief,” Smith’s wife, Selina Albert, said through an interpreter.

Cleaning Up and Starting Over

Faced with the responsibility of clearing debris and restoring Lahaina’s infrastructure, FEMA brought in other federal agencies, tapping into their resources to help state and local officials move toward recovery. By the end of July, more than \$1.3 billion had been obligated in direct federal assistance funding for their work.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency performed the initial stage of the cleanup by removing lithium batteries, large household appliances and other hazardous material.

With the immediate hazards and fire-damaged material removed, residents were allowed to visit their properties – to grieve and recover what they could, including family heirlooms and cultural artifacts.

Kim Ball remembers, with tears in his eyes, his first visit last November. Nothing was left but a dishwasher and broken dishes. The fires destroyed his two other family homes as well.

With the permission of homeowners, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers removed the remaining debris and tested the soil at no cost to property owners. Once that



FEMA

Page 3 of 8

important step was completed, lots were ready for development.

That work is steadily progressing, with 1,357 lots cleared as of July 31.

The Army Corps of Engineers was given other tasks, including installing a temporary school for up to 600 children. It was finished in just 95 days. USACE is also preparing FEMA's Kilohana temporary group housing site, with the work expected to be completed by October.

The U.S. Coast Guard, which was called in to clear Lahaina's harbor, removed 98 damaged vessels, more than 10,000 gallons of petroleum and nearly 25,000 pounds of hazardous material from the harbor. USACE also removed more than 3,000 fire-damaged cars from the burned area.

The Environmental Protection Agency worked with Maui County Department of Water Supply to evaluate drinking water quality and ensure safe drinking water was available when Lahaina residents returned to their homes.

"We've had an unbelievable team of federal responders responding to this fire, working across all different levels of government and private sector nonprofits to help those in the community," said Bob Fenton, FEMA's regional administrator who is leading the agency's response and recovery efforts.

FEMA's Public Assistance program, which provides funding to help communities faced with major disasters, also plays a significant role in rebuilding damaged infrastructure and covering emergency costs. The program adopted an expedited process for approving funding for proposed restoration projects.

Among the projects, the program approved \$45 million for the reconstruction of the King Kamehameha III Elementary School. Another \$35 million was approved to help the State of Hawai'i Public Housing Authority fund reconstruction of three buildings and a community center at Pi'ilani Elderly Homes as well as all nine buildings at the David Malo Circle housing complex.

Another \$10 million in Public Assistance funding was approved for reconstruction of the Lahaina Public Library.

Responding to Every Need



FEMA

Page 4 of 8

When FEMA specialists and other federal officials arrived in Hawai'i, they had to earn the trust of Maui residents. Rumors were rampant. Some in the community feared the federal government would take their land. Others believed disaster workers would harm cultural artifacts and sacred sites.

To help overcome distrust, federal government agencies collaborated with state and local officials as well as with community organizations and cultural practitioners. The result: Trusted leaders were invited to help open and ready disaster recovery centers, offices and construction projects for Maui's healing and recovery. They trained thousands of federal workers in cultural protocols – helping them understand cultural considerations unique to Maui.

“One of the key things here is everything we've done has been in partnership,” Fenton said.

The Army Corps of Engineers brought in cultural monitors and archaeologists, experts who watched each step of the way as workers cleared properties. Also observing were cultural advisors, people with a deep understanding of cultural practices.

Before and after work each day, the workers rebuilding Lahaina gather for “pule,” a blessing. “Pule is how we begin to heal fully,” said cultural practitioner Mehanaokala Hind. “It's heavy, you know, in these spaces.”

FEMA tapped local and state organizations to provide an array of free social services, among them crisis counseling, behavioral health teams, veterans' services and disaster legal service organizations.

Interpreters were available for 12 spoken languages and American Sign Language. Onsite language interpreters were stationed at disaster recovery centers to help survivors with applications and other essential information.

They interpreted in many languages, including Chuukese, Hawaiian, Ilocano, Kosraean, Marshallese, Pohnpeian, Portuguese, Samoan, Spanish, Tagalog, Tongan and Vietnamese.

Four of these language experts were wildfire survivors themselves. They had lost everything in the fires and understood what others were going through. Interpreters were stationed at the Lahaina Civic Center gymnasium, where people



FEMA

Page 5 of 8

could get assistance from disaster workers and assemble for cultural ceremonies or community meetings.

Out of Hotels and Into Temporary Housing

One of FEMA's major challenges was moving wildfire survivors out of hotels and into temporary housing, where families could have a kitchen and more bedrooms.

FEMA offered two options.

The Rental Assistance program provides grant funding for eligible applicants. Under this program, tenants found their own rentals, which could be on Maui, the other Hawaiian islands or any other U.S.-governed location, and FEMA would pay the survivor a sum toward the rent.

In contrast, under the Direct Lease program, FEMA leased rental units for survivors, and paid rent to the landlords through a property management company.

State and local officials worked with federal officials to move the Direct Lease program along. FEMA held Industry Day events to encourage property owners to participate in the program. Maui County offered to exempt owners of short-term vacation rentals from property taxes as long as they housed wildfire survivors.

By July 31, some 1,199 households had been handed keys to their new temporary housing. Wildfire survivors said these homes gave them a chance to get back to normal.

Each household was matched with temporary housing, including accessible units, based on its individual needs.

FEMA was able to lease two houses for Kenderson Smith's large family – 15 members in all including 10 children, one of them a newborn. The families originally came to Maui from Pohnpei, a Pacific island in the Federated States of Micronesia.

Before the fires, they had lived together in a single large home on Waine?e Street. Their current temporary homes in the town of Makawao are just a few blocks apart.



“Our house burned down, and we thought we wouldn’t have a place to live,” Selina Albert said. “The help that we received from FEMA was really good.”

FEMA also found suitable homes for people with unique considerations. That was the case for Molimoli and Elone Toa, an elderly Tongan couple who lost the apartment they shared with extended family. Both had medical issues and dietary requirements.

While they appreciated help from the emergency sheltering program, they frequently had to change hotels. That ended when FEMA’s Direct Lease program found them a two-bedroom apartment in Kihei.

Molimoli especially appreciates having a kitchen again. It means she won’t have to prepare meals for herself and Elone in a park. It also means she can look forward to the day when she can cook for her three adult sons and their families when they come home to visit.

Her eyes light up when she talks about preparing their favorite Tongan dishes, laulau and lu sipi.

Recovery on the Horizon

The debris removal and repairs to infrastructure are setting the stage for Lahaina to rise again, lot by lot and project by project.

“With the help of so many federal agencies, we have been able to accelerate some of the progress that’s happening,” the mayor said.

Funding will be available for many of those who plan to rebuild. As of July 31, the U.S. Small Business Administration had approved more than \$394 million in low-interest disaster loans for fire-damaged homes and businesses as well as companies outside the impacted zone that suffered financial losses.

Community groups, local and state planners are already discussing the bigger picture, the Lahaina they would like to see blossom in coming years.

“There is great solidarity among the people of Hawaiʻi to rebuild and to focus a little bit more on our local needs rather than some of the economic activity that was coming from the mainland,” the governor said.



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Page 7 of 8

Various ideas are under discussion – a historic district along Front Street, a park where the former Lahaina Public Library stood, a community plan for construction of affordable housing.

“We want to work with the community to ensure that we support them and their vision for long-term recovery,” FEMA’s Fenton said. “A lot of our programs are focused on building back stronger, more resilient and better.”

Kim Ball is hopeful that Lahaina will rebound. He raised his three sons in Lahaina, went to the same Baptist church and coached wrestling here for 40 years. Hope and love for Lahaina are what drives him.

“There’s no other place like Lahaina. I just love the whole ambience,” he said. “The core of our town loves Lahaina so I think the future is bright for Lahaina.”

