

Talking Story with Governor Linda Lingle

By Tom Blackburn-Rodriguez

After two years in office, Governor Linda Lingle still enjoys being governor. While noting progress in her goals of restoring trust and integrity in government, and in diversifying Hawai'i's economy—there has been a net gain of 29,000 jobs since her inauguration—the Governor remains unsatisfied with the pace and scope of educational reform, preferring for now, at least, to focus her efforts on improving pre-school and post secondary education in Hawai'i.

She appears relaxed, able to laugh at speculation about possible national political ambitions, and to have shaken off the electoral setbacks of the previous year by seeking areas of agreement with the legislature, and working to build a record of accomplishment in the second half of her administration.

Always a hands-on politician, Governor Lingle is known for mending fences and keeping her ear to the ground. It's part of her record of pragmatism that helped provide a rationale for her 2002 election as Hawai'i's first woman governor. We caught up with the Governor following an address to the students at Seabury Hall. It was part of a long day that began on Oahu with a 7:00 AM radio program and would continue until after 7:00 PM that evening following a meeting with Maui's non-profit directors, hosted by Maui Economic Opportunity, Inc. We sat down in the Seabury headmaster's office for the interview.

REMS: Governor is there any chance that we might be referring to you in the future as Vice President or Senator Lingle? Do you see any possibility of public service at the national level?

Governor Lingle laughs as she answers a question about future national political ambitions. Declaring that she doesn't know what the future holds, but that she is running for election in 2006 and, if successful, plans to serve until 2010.

Well, I don't know what the future holds, but I do know that I'm going to run for election in 2006. So, if I'm successful I would serve out a full term that would take us to 2010, and that's a long way away. So I don't plan beyond that. I want to do a good job now and I want to be reelected in 2006.

REMS: This magazine is read by people in the real estate industry and by people who are thinking about moving to Maui. Is there anything you'd like to say to those readers?

Well, I think the fact that so many people want to come here is an indication of the people of Maui. People feel comfortable when they come here; they're treated well, and from our side as state government, we want to create the kind of environment where people can come to Maui if that's what they choose.

I was asked a question by one of the students today, "Are you for more development of housing?" and I said that I would put it a different way. I'm in favor of people being able to afford to live here if they want to, and the only way to do that is to increase the supply of housing. For people who say, 'We don't want any-more development,' what they're really saying is 'We're elitist. We don't want anyone to be able to afford to live here,' and if you have children they would have to move because they would never be able to afford to live here. And again, supply and demand is a key factor in the prices of real estate.

REMS: Governor, on the issue of affordable housing. Is it your view that Hawaii can solve the crisis in affordable housing—not just for the low-income or the homeless—but also for our working families? What is your approach and what are the barriers to success? Do we need any specific reforms to speed the development of affordable housing?

Yes, I think we can meet the crisis. I'm not certain we will be able provide an affordable home for every single person who needs or wants one, but we can certainly have a big impact on the current crisis that exists in



Discussing how her religious views affect her decision-making, Governor Lingle doubts that there is anyone who is in a leadership position that does not call upon some power bigger than themselves.

affordable housing, and yes, there need to be changes in the law.

We proposed a very comprehensive affordable housing plan. It's called, "The Affordable Homes Act of 2005." It was based on a task force that involved 100 citizens from across the state. The State Senate had passed a resolution and they told us to 'Go form a Task Force,' which we did. We had a hundred people participate. They came up with proposals. We took what we felt were the best of the proposals, and that had the greatest chance of having an impact and of passing this year. Because, we don't think this can wait another year, it has to pass now.

REMS: You said that laws needed to be changed. Can you be specific?

One of the laws that needs to be changed, that we proposed, is for those projects that are 50 acres or less that need a land use change from the state. We would delegate that down to the county. Let the counties make their own decisions about lands being put into housing, but we picked 50 acres or less so you couldn't come in and mass redesignate land. The Land Use Commission would still do that. But, if it was 50 acres or less that would cut probably 2-3 years off the process and that, of course, would save money.

We also introduced a law that would prohibit any raids on the state housing funds. Since 1996, there's been \$200 million taken out of state housing funds to be used for balancing the general fund and that has contributed to this crisis...our proposal mandates that because of this crisis you cannot take money out of those state housing funds anymore.

Another proposal is for a \$4,000 per unit tax credit for affordable rentals. If you meet certain thresholds, government—for the first 2,500 units that are built in the state, you get a \$4,000 per unit tax credit. The reason we did it on the first 2,500 is because we want to incentivize the industry. To say, look, if you wait and you're not among the first 2,500 units built, you're not getting the tax credit. And it actually sets the time; it's from July first of this year to December 2007. But, it's to get the housing on the market very quickly, and it's also to make certain that everybody understands what is the maximum credit this could be. So, if you've got 2,500 units at \$4,000 that's \$10 million that we'd set aside for this particular tax credit.

REMS: Is there anything in your package that addresses the Conveyance Tax?

We have doubled the amount of the conveyance tax, we haven't touched the rate so the tax stays the same, but the amount that's going to go to the general fund we cut, and we want to put that into the housing fund. We would make it 50/50. (Ed. note: currently 75% of the funds raised by the conveyance tax go to the general fund and the remaining 25% is split between housing and environmental protection activities.)

REMS: Governor, I also want to touch on something that I know you have been involved in and that here on Maui we're

concerned about—of course, that’s ICE, or methamphetamine use. It seems to be exploding in major cities on the mainland; do you think we’re getting a handle on it? What can be done in Hawai’i? Is it more laws, treatment? What is your view?

I think it’s a combination. You need a three-pronged approach. You need prevention, which are educational activities for young people. You need treatment once people are addicted, so they have some opportunity to get off it, if they want. And you need law enforcement tools, because you’ve got to stop it from coming into the state. You’ve got to stop it from being manufactured. You’ve got to arrest dealers. So, we need to have some of the changes we proposed last year and we’re proposing again.

It’s things that are supported by the entire laws enforcement coalition,



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which means all police chiefs, all prosecutors, the U.S. Attorney and the (Hawaii) Attorney General. These are things that other states have. It’s modernizing the wiretap laws so we can get the drug rings out of operation. It’s more serious sentences for these dealers who continually do this and poison the community, rather than letting them off.

Again, it has to be a combination. It can’t just be treatment. Treatment is the most expensive and least—in my opinion—the least likelihood of success. Anybody in treatment would probably agree that for treatment to work it often takes several attempts. For many people it’s never going to work. It’s a very expensive way to go. It’s a much better investment to put it on the prevention side, so that people don’t get addicted in the first place.

Because, once it’s happened it’s no different than any health issue, and I do think it’s a health issue. If I can prevent you from living a sedentary

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lifestyle, so I get you out there exercising. If I can get you on a good diet, my money spent doing that is much better than money spent later on when you have diabetes, high blood pressure, hypertension, heart attack—and that’s just a huge expense.

REMS: Let me ask you also about the environment. On Maui, it has become popular to say that the environment is the economy. What is your administration doing to preserve and protect the environment in Hawai’i?

We’re coming at it from a number of different angles. First of all, we have the first ever major invasive species multi-year program that’s ever been put in place in this state. I went to the legislature and I told them that we need \$5 million a year over the next four years to deal with this, so it’s a \$20 million plan. We got \$4 million the first year, we’re asking for \$4 million this year. Because, when invasive species come in as it did here with the Miconia over in East Maui, for instance, it can destroy native habitat. The Coqui frog is another issue, and these (fire) ants that can come in.

And then there are the more serious, that are not just the physical environment, but also health and the West Nile virus and that whole issue. So, it’s keeping the invasive species out of our state because we have a very delicate ecosystem here. So, clearly that has to be a focus.

Our state parks have been allowed to fall into terrible disrepair, so we’ve allocated substantial new funding to try to get the parks back in line. But, I don’t think it’s just a trite phrase, ‘That the environment is the economy.’ I think that’s very clear. I formed this year by executive order the Hawaii Coastal Commission, to involve for the first time all groups who are involved with the shoreline and near shore waters. We have everybody from the Seagrant program to the Whale Foundation, the county, CCM programs, everybody involved now in one place and in one group.

I think it is important to protect the environment. There’s always going to be a tug and pull between what’s enough protection and what’s enough spending, but I do think it’s important. It is something we put a lot of focus on.

REMS: Governor, we live in a time when people are seemingly more comfortable now in talking about faith, and I don’t mean in a superficial way, but actually bringing those values into the public square. What role does your religion play in your life and how do you make your decisions?

Well, it’s a great question; I think, because each of us is a combination of our background, our experiences, our upbringing, and for me being Jewish has a big part to play in how I am tied to people. Being a Jew, part of your heritage is that you have an obligation on earth to help those in need and an obligation to try to make things better. You’re not responsible, ultimately, for the outcome because God is responsible for that. But, you are responsible to try and to make the effort.

REMS: Do you, when you take a look at what you want Hawai’i to be after you’re Governor, do you ask yourself, “Am I leaving it better, how can I leave it better?”

Everyday. Everyday. I know a lot of Governors now. I’ve gotten fairly close to many of them, of both parties, and I would say that I don’t know of a governor in the country who does not have a strong faith, regardless of what their religion is. And partly, it’s because of the nature of the job. That there’s so much responsibility on your shoulders, and by nature you’re the kind of person who feels a tremendous obligation. People gave this opportunity and you have got to deliver now. You’ve got to make an impact on important issues. You have to do it. At the same time, you’re responsible when there’s a civil emergency, a disaster, a hurricane, a fire. I don’t know a governor who doesn’t have a strong belief in God, and doesn’t pray about things.

I don’t tend to talk much in public about it. But, I don’t know any person in a position of leadership, and I’m certain it’s true for private companies, who don’t call upon some power bigger than themselves.

REMS: Governor, thank you for your time, and I’ll remember your advice about avoiding that sedentary lifestyle and getting out there and exercising. REMS