

**MUNICIPALITY OF ANCHORAGE  
COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE (CEDC)**

**MEMORANDUM**

**FROM:** Assembly Member Martinez

**DATE:** June 11, 2026

**SUBJECT:** Lessons from Lahaina, Lessons for Anchorage: Resiliency, Recovery, and Preparedness Following the Wildfire Disaster of 2023

**I. PURPOSE**

This memorandum summarizes key lessons emerging from the response, recovery, and rebuilding efforts following the 2023 Lahaina wildfire disaster and identifies policy considerations relevant to Anchorage's long-term resilience, economic sustainability, and disaster preparedness.

The wildfire disaster serves as one of the most significant recent examples of how a community can be transformed within hours by a catastrophic event. The lessons learned extend far beyond wildfire response, offering valuable insights into infrastructure planning, emergency preparedness, housing resilience, economic recovery, governance, and community partnerships.

The purpose of this memorandum is to inform future discussions regarding Anchorage's resiliency strategies and to support the implementation of preemptive resiliency as a core element of the Municipality's long-term economic development framework.

**II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

A central lesson from the 2023 wildfire disaster is that recovery begins before disaster occurs.

Communities that recover most effectively are those that have already invested in preparedness, mitigation, infrastructure resilience, emergency communications, and strong community partnerships. Conversely, vulnerabilities that exist before a disaster are often magnified during and after the event.

The rebuilding effort has demonstrated that resiliency is not solely a public safety objective. It is also an economic development strategy. Disasters affect housing supply, workforce stability, business continuity, municipal finances, infrastructure systems, and public confidence.

Anchorage faces increasing exposure to a range of natural hazards, including wildfire, flooding, severe weather events, and infrastructure disruptions. While significant planning efforts have been undertaken, continued investment in preparedness and risk reduction remains necessary.

**The lessons outlined in this memorandum support a broader conclusion:**

Preemptive resiliency is among the most important long-term investments a community can make. The costs of preparation are high, but the costs of inaction are substantially greater.

### **III. KEY LESSONS FROM LAHAINA FOR ANCHORAGE**

#### **1. Recovery Begins Before Disaster**

One of the strongest lessons shared by Maui officials was that resilience cannot be built during an emergency.

Communities must establish:

- mitigation systems;
- evacuation planning;
- hardened infrastructure;
- interagency coordination;
- public trust; and
- financing mechanisms before a disaster occurs.

Lahaina demonstrated the consequences of delayed preparedness and the extraordinary costs of rebuilding afterward.

**Anchorage Application:**

Anchorage should continue moving from a reactive emergency-response model toward a preventive resilience model, particularly in wildfire-prone areas.

#### **2. Wildfire Risk Is an Economic Risk**

Conference discussions emphasized that wildfire events disrupt:

- housing availability,
- insurance markets,
- local business continuity,
- workforce stability,
- transportation access, and
- municipal finances.

Disasters produce long-tail economic impacts that persist for years.

**Anchorage Application:**

Preemptive resiliency should be considered an economic development strategy, not simply a public safety initiative.

Municipal planning should evaluate:

- long-term wildfire mitigation funding;
- critical infrastructure redundancy;
- housing resilience;
- emergency access routes; and
- business continuity planning.

**3. Community Partnerships Matter**

Recovery in Lahaina was not carried by government alone.

Successful recovery depended upon:

- nonprofit organizations,
- local businesses,
- neighborhood groups,
- cultural institutions,
- philanthropy, and
- resident leadership.

Repeatedly, conference speakers stressed that trusted local relationships determined recovery success.

**Anchorage Application:**

Anchorage should expand neighborhood-based resilience partnerships and public-private preparedness planning.

Potential opportunities include:

- community wildfire preparedness districts;
- neighborhood resilience training;
- local emergency communication systems; and
- formalized partnerships with nonprofits and major employers.

**4. Land Use and Infrastructure Decisions Matter**

Maui officials repeatedly emphasized that historical land-use patterns influenced disaster vulnerability.

Road access, vegetation management, utility placement, and development decisions all affected outcomes.

### **Anchorage Application:**

Anchorage should evaluate:

- single-access evacuation routes in hillside and fringe areas;
- wildfire interface development standards;
- vegetation management practices;
- emergency ingress/egress redundancy; and
- utility resilience.

This discussion is directly relevant to ongoing conversations surrounding wildfire interface planning and mitigation efforts.

The recently adopted Assembly resolution evaluating a Wildfire Interface Service Area (WISA) recognizes increasing wildfire risk and the need to evaluate dedicated mitigation funding mechanisms for high-risk areas. The resolution specifically calls for evaluating wildfire-prone geographies, funding structures, and service models to support long-term risk reduction.

## **IV. POLICY OBSERVATIONS FOR CEDC**

Based on conference discussions and observations, several strategic questions merit committee discussion:

### **A. Are We Adequately Prepared?**

Anchorage should candidly evaluate:

- evacuation readiness,
- fuel mitigation capacity,
- long-term funding sustainability,
- emergency communication systems,
- continuity planning for critical infrastructure, and
- community preparedness levels.

The answer today is likely: **Not yet.**

However, meaningful progress remains achievable through early action.

## **B. Preemptive Resiliency Must Become Operational**

If resiliency is a core pillar of Anchorage's economic development framework, it should move from aspiration to implementation.

Potential next steps include:

1. CED resiliency work session focused on housing development and wildfire and climate preparedness.
2. Cross-department resiliency inventory identifying gaps in infrastructure and response capacity.
3. Economic resilience strategy for business continuity during disasters.
4. Neighborhood preparedness partnerships in high-risk areas.
5. WISA

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The most powerful lesson from Lahaina is this:

Communities do not rise to the occasion during disasters; they fall back on the systems, partnerships, and investments already in place.

Anchorage still has time to prepare. But resilience is not built through intentions alone. It requires planning, coordination, funding, and political willingness to act before crisis forces action.

With deliberate action, Anchorage can become substantially more resilient before the next emergency arrives.