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Boards cancel meetings as at least 16 members resign to avoid financial disclosures

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By Keoki Kerr, Reporter [CONNECT](#)

HONOLULU (HawaiiNewsNow) - Some state boards and commissions are canceling meetings after at least 16 of their volunteer members resigned rather than make public their financial disclosures under a new law Gov. Neil Abercrombie let become law without his signature. The state Land Use Commission decides controversial issues like reclassifying agricultural land for developments such as Hoopili in Kapolei. But after five of its nine members resigned to avoid disclosing their finances and two others' terms expired last month, there are just two members left, so the commission has canceled its next meeting that was supposed to happen Wednesday.

"Basically the Land Use Commission can't do anything until some new members are appointed," said attorney Ron Heller, who chaired the Land Use Commission for the last year before his four-year term as a commissioner expired June 30. "You need five members just to have a quorum and there are a lot of actions that require six affirmative votes." Heller said he wrote Abercrombie asking him to veto the new law and would have quit as well because of the new disclosure requirements for members of 15 boards the governor allowed to become law. "I just don't think that part of serving on the commission should be that I have to give up any personal financial privacy. The investments that I have, the assets that I own. And not just me, my wife too," Heller said.

Daniel Orondenker, the executive officer of the Land Use Commission's executive officer said there aren't any major projects that will be delayed for the next several months, until the positions can be filled, but there will be effects. "There are some important agricultural lands designations that are out there, there are some energy projects that were up for approval as well that may be implicated," Orondenker said.

Some of the projects that could be delayed include reclassifying agricultural land for solar installations, he said.

Projects that are seeking modifications to previous land use decisions may also be delayed if the openings drag on for three or four months, Orondenker said.

The LUC members who quit are Sheldon Biga, Dennis Esaki, Ernest Matsumura, Carol Torigoe and Lance Inouye. Chad McDonald, vice president of the engineering firm Mitsunaga and Associates, is one of two remaining members of the Land Use Commission. McDonald, who is the commission's vice chair, said "I'm hoping this can get resolved as quickly as possible so we can get back to business." Asked why he didn't quit, McDonald said, "Personally it was a tough decision because of my family and privacy. But I made a commitment to the governor and I'm going to stick to that commitment."

The only other remaining LUC member is Aaron Mahi, who holds the cultural practitioner position on the board. Mahi is the former head of the Royal Hawaiian Band.

The disclosure forms require the members of 15 state boards to disclose the income ranges of themselves and their spouses, as well as business and real estate interests. The open government and environmental advocacy group Life of The Land has been trying to get this law through the legislature for the last three years. "If some people want to serve in the public interest and don't want to disclose, then fine, let them leave.

Let's bring in people who will promote the public interest," said Henry Curtis, executive director of Life of the Land. Downtown State Rep. Karl Rhoads, who chaired the House Judiciary Committee that handled the proposal, said: "It's important for taxpayers to know what the financial backgrounds of people are who are making important decisions."

Four of the 15-member University of Hawaii Board of Regents have also quit because of the disclosures. The regents Monday canceled a Community Colleges Committee meeting set for Thursday because three of the committee's six members had resigned, UH officials said.

A spokesman for the governor said it could take several months for Abercrombie to solicit, vet and review applications and then make new interim appoints who would serve on the boards until they are confirmed by the State Senate during next year's legislative session that begins in January. Two of the eight-member Hawaii Housing Finance and Development Corporation board resigned, leaving a lack of leadership. Chairman Ralph Mesick and Vice Chair Paul Kyno stepped down from the HHFDC panel, according to the governor's office. The Agribusiness Development Corporation is losing four of its 11 members, according to Letitia Uyehara, the board chair.

That will make it difficult to make quorum, since six board members are required to be present for meetings and the panel is down to seven members.

"How are you going to get people to do this (volunteer for boards) now?" Uyehara asked. "We count on these private sector individuals for their expertise," she said, referring to the people who have stepped down from her board. Les Kondo, executive director of the state Ethics Commission, said the financial disclosures of the members of the 15 boards affected will be posted online Monday.

Kondo said he was waiting a few days to make sure all the board members who want to resign have done so. Kondo said other board members are amending their filings to erase entries that are not required by law, such as exact dollar amounts, since the form allows people to disclose broad financial categories, such as "at least \$50,000 but less than \$100,000."

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