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Hawaii News

City Ethics Commission has new chief

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COURTESY PHOTO

Jan Yamane: The former acting state auditor is set to make about \$115K per year

Onetime acting state auditor Jan Yamane this week was appointed executive director and legal counsel for the Honolulu Ethics Commission.

Yamane replaces the commission's embattled chief Chuck Totto, who first took the job in 2000 and resigned in June amid controversy.

The job pays her about \$115,000 annually — slightly more than what Totto was making, commission Chairwoman Victoria Marks said Wednesday. She will serve at the will of the commission members, under no conditions on length of time, Marks said.

Yamane was acting state auditor from 2012 to 2016.

The six members of the commission (a seventh member was approved by the City Council on Wednesday) voted unanimously to approve Yamane's appointment, Marks said.

Laurie Wong-Nowinski, who had been serving as acting executive director during the past month, will be retained as associate legal counsel, Marks said. Wong-Nowinski had been Totto's associate legal counsel but resigned in April after a disagreement with him.

The commission is working with Yamane to fill its investigator vacancy, Marks said.

Asked if the office is functioning properly, Marks said, "We're getting there. We've turned the corner."

Totto resigned after skirmishes with city Corporation Counsel Donna Leong and commission members, particularly Marks and two others appointed by Mayor Kirk Caldwell.

Totto has stated publicly that Leong and Caldwell's commission appointees hindered his ability to manage the commission office. This spring, Totto served a 30-day unpaid suspension for, among other things, allegedly fostering a stressful work environment.

When he returned, the commission required its attorneys and investigators to complete daily time sheets detailing their tasks in six-minute increments.

Supporters of Totto said he was being retaliated against by Caldwell and his appointees after a 2013 ruling involving the mayor and an inaugural luau. Caldwell has denied that charge.

Critics of Totto, who has made rulings unpopular with Council members and mayors as well as other city employees, maintain he had gone unchecked while conducting investigations subjectively.

The commission is expected to formalize Yamane's hire on Tuesday.

