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Embattled city ethics chief Totto steps down

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Honolulu Ethics Commission, Executive Director and Legal Counsel Charles W. Totto is photographed amongst investigation files.

Honolulu's longtime city ethics director has agreed to step down after several years of butting heads with city leaders and facing upheaval on his staff.

The City's Ethics Commission announced the decision to part ways with Executive

Director Charles Totto after meeting for more than an hour in closed session Wednesday.



Totto, who has written advisory opinions against mayors, Council members and other powerful people over a span of more than a decade, listened to the announcement in person while flanked by his lawyer, former mayor Peter Carlisle.

Carlisle announced last month that he's running to reclaim that seat.

"This is an unfortunate end to a career devoted to demanding ethics in city government," Carlisle told the commission. "As a friend, my opinion is this was undeserved and shabby treatment for a devoted employee of the city."

Critics of Totto say he has long gone unchecked while conducting investigations subjectively. Supporters, however, believe the director should have the authority to conduct investigations without fear of political influence.

Totto has clashed over the commission's independence — and, specifically, its budget — with Mayor Kirk Caldwell's administration since Caldwell took office in 2013.

Many of those disagreements have been with Corporation Counsel Donna Leong, with Totto questioning her authority to assert control over his budget and personnel actions.

In March, he served a 30-day unpaid suspension for, among other things, allegedly fostering a stressful work environment. Upon his return, the commission informed him that it wanted its attorneys and investigators to complete daily work time sheets detailing their tasks in six-minute increments.

"The way that things have been handled with Chuck Totto have not been fair," Natalie Iwasa, a Honolulu resident who frequently attends public meetings, told the commission before they went into closed session. Often, in situations where other public employees are being investigated, it's difficult to get even basic details such as their identities, she said.