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Hawaii News

# Ex-DOT official pays fine over ethics

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Madine Urasaki: She was accused of taking action on contracts with her husband's employer.

A former deputy director of the state Department of Transportation has paid a \$13,000 administrative fine to resolve allegations that she violated the state ethics code when she apparently took action on a dozen state contracts with a consulting firm that employs her husband.

Jadine Urasaki, the former DOT deputy director for capital improvement projects, apparently took official action on matters involving consulting firm Parsons Brinckerhoff Inc. that "likely constituted a conflict of interest" and a violation of the state ethics code because her husband, Randall Urasaki, is a vice president at Parsons, according to the Hawaii State Ethics Commission.

Randall Urasaki was also "Parsons' principal consultant and point of contact for the DOT Parsons projects," according to a notice announcing the settlement that was posted on the Ethics Commission website.

Urasaki, as deputy DOT director, also handled matters involving Hawaiian Electric Industries when she and her husband had investments in HEI stock totaling between \$50,000 and \$150,000, and the commission concluded she appeared to violate the state ethics law by taking official action on HEI matters that directly affected her financial interests.

"It did not appear that respondent (Jadine) Urasaki was aware that her actions with respect to Parsons and HECO likely were prohibited under the state ethics code," the commission said in the announcement. "Her apparent ignorance of the state ethics code, however, does not excuse her actions."

The commission noted Urasaki had attended a mandatory two-hour ethics training session conducted by the commission, and should have been "much more aware" of the requirements of the code.

Parsons Brinckerhoff issued a statement Wednesday saying that "although we cannot comment on the resolution of this case, we value our continued client relationship with the state and stand behind our robust business ethics and integrity programs."

Urasaki left her position overseeing DOT construction projects at the end of Gov. Neil Abercrombie's administration. Her position was created during the Abercrombie administration, and was discontinued after Abercrombie left office, according to a Transportation Department spokeswoman.

Urasaki is now public works manager in the Construction Management Section of the state Department of Education's Facilities Development Branch, and was unavailable for comment. Randall Urasaki did not respond to a telephone message left at his Parsons office.

Urasaki argued she did not actually take any action involving the Parsons contracts because DOT director Glenn Okimoto had final say over the contracts, according to the settlement announcement.

However, the commission said she was incorrect because she had exercised discretionary authority over the contracts, and "it appeared she was a key participant in the decision-making process."

Among the actions Urasaki “appeared to have taken” on the Parsons contracts were providing direction and instruction to Parsons personnel, including Randall Urasaki, directly and through a DOT project manager; and participating in meetings regarding a project with Parsons personnel, including her husband, according to the commission announcement.

The commission also said it appeared Urasaki discussed issues relating to Parsons’ performance with a DOT projects manager, and issued instructions on the management of the project.

As deputy director she also apparently reviewed correspondence from her husband to the department; made recommendations to the director on matters involving Parsons; and was involved in drafting the department’s response to a bid protest involving a contract awarded to Parsons, according to the commission.

She also apparently recommended the director approve a staff request to select Parsons as a consultant; recommended that the director ask the governor to release funds for a project on which Parsons was the consultant; and recommended action by the department on a request by Parsons for a change in a contract, according to the commission.

Okimoto, who oversaw Urasaki as director of transportation under Abercrombie, recalled that Urasaki worked on the project to rehabilitate a stretch of the H-1 freeway and add a lane from Middle Street to Punahou Street. Parsons Brinckerhoff was the consultant on that project, “and she was just doing the technical and engineering stuff,” Okimoto said.

“All the procurement and the selection, it all happened previous already,” Okimoto said. “This is one of the priority projects that she was our engineer in charge from DOT, so I thought it’s just the technical stuff, she was out there checking the project and making sure it’s on time and on budget, and it did turn out, but everything else was prior, she wasn’t involved, so I thought it was OK.”

As for the other Parsons contracts, Okimoto said Urasaki was essentially the head engineer in the Transportation Department, “so all of the correspondence kind of flowed through her to review, to make sure that the processes were followed.

“It wasn’t just Parsons, it was everybody’s contract to make sure that we dotted the i’s and crossed the t’s,” Okimoto said. “There wasn’t any favoritism involved, and I think it was the opposite with her husband’s firm. She was stricter ... because of that situation.”

The Ethics Commission filed a formal charge against Urasaki on Sept. 16 for the alleged conflicts of interest, and agreed to resolve the case with the \$13,000 penalty and a public statement about the case because those terms were “fair and in the public interest,” according to the announcement.

The resolution of the case does not mean that Urasaki admits to any wrongdoing, and does not mean the commission determined she had actually violated the ethics code, according to the announcement.