

Sam Choy's IN THE Kitchen

sundays @ 6:30pm **khon2**

click here to watch online

sponsored by 



Watching the watchdog; ethics commission slaps restrictions on its leader



By **Gina Mangieri** (<http://khon2.com/author/khonginamangieri/>)

Published: May 2, 2016, 9:38 pm | Updated: May 2, 2016, 10:32 pm



Honolulu Ethics Commission executive director Chuck Totto

Open-government supporters say the Honolulu Ethics Commission is in shambles.

There are critical staff shortages and a board keeping close watch on its executive director.

On Monday, the ethics board told the man who has headed the Honolulu Ethics Commission for 16 years he'll have to work side-by-side with a board member to hire key staff.

Critics call it a move to clamp down on an agency that's supposed to keep county staff walking a straight line.

Longtime commission director and legal counsel Charles Totto is just back from a month-long suspension, with his only investigator just off the job and a key in-house attorney vacancy.

At his agency's board meeting, another shoe fell: he can't make hires for those jobs without oversight from the board. It's a first during his tenure.

"I think under the circumstances, we might want to be involved," said chair Victoria Marks.

"I would like to ask Chuck if he has any comment," said commissioner Stanford Yuen.

"No, I don't have any comments," Totto replied.

The motion received unanimous approval.

He was gone for month without pay, accused by a whistleblower who quit that he caused a stressful work environment, too doggedly investigated council members who were later cleared of conflicts for meals and drinks with rail supporters before their votes, and for pushing to know what the board was saying about him in executive session.

Once back, the board told him and what staff he has left to log their work six minutes at a time,

Through his attorney, Totto declined to comment, but community advocates spoke out.

"I'm really concerned about (the climate inside the ethics commission)," said open-government advocate Natalie Iwasa. "There's a lot of concern about the way the executive director and the staff have been treated, because we have a situation where they're not truly independent. We have council members who have been investigated. We have the mayor whose been investigated. We have the chief of police investigated."

Issues involving the Honolulu police chief were taken up in executive session at the board meeting. Chief Louis Kealoha and his wife, Katherine, a county deputy prosecutor, launched a federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaint alleging discrimination against them and other minority county workers.

The complaint was filed after the ethics commission opened at least 16 cases tied to the Kealohas.

“The way that the process occurred, there was absolutely no process. There was no due process at all,” said Katherine Kealoha.

“What it really looks like from those complaints is they’re trying to manage the department from that commission,” said Louis Kealoha.

“We have a lot of pressure coming down on one person or several people who are just trying to do their jobs,” Iwasa said. “For a long time, the ethics commission has been under-funded, under-staffed, so that’s a big issue. But not only that, there have been cases where the administration has come down hard on the executive director.”

Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell has appointed three of the sitting commissioners, including the person serving as chair, and there’s one more vacancy to go.

“Are they positioned to be an effective watchdog agency at this time?” Always Investigating asked.

“That’s really tough question to answer,” Iwasa replied. “We need somebody who is going to be out there watching out for the people, the public, the taxpayers.”

Any structural changes to the commission would have to be approved by the county charter commission, and so far proposals have gone nowhere.

KHON2 (<http://khon2.com/>)

© 2000-2016 LIN Television Corporation, a Media General company. All rights reserved

Powered by WordPress.com VIP (<https://vip.wordpress.com/?>

[utm_source=vip_powered_wpcom&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=VIP%20Footer%20Credit](https://vip.wordpress.com/?utm_source=vip_powered_wpcom&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=VIP%20Footer%20Credit))

☺