

The Maui News

Another exit at Liquor Control

Deputy Director Mark Honda tenders his resignation Friday



Mark Honda

Maui County Department of Liquor Control Deputy Director Mark Honda resigned Friday amid a handful of other recent departures within the department and Liquor Control Commission, county officials said.

The vacancies follow more than a year of criticism of the department and commission from residents and community groups.

Liquor Control Director Glen Mukai, who appointed Honda in November 2016, said in a phone call that his deputy's departure "*caught me by surprise.*"

"The reason he gave was personal," Mukai said. *"I believe we'll keep on trucking. We'll adjust to any changes."*

Honda could not be reached for comment immediately Friday. He worked as an attorney in Wailuku for decades before taking the deputy director job.

Honda's abrupt departure follows Commissioner Brenda Lee's letter of resignation, which was sent to the Mayor's Office a day after the commission's Nov. 8 meeting, said Mike Molina, an executive assistant to the mayor. In her letter, she cited "*personal and health issues*" as well as "*travel commitments*" that would make attending meetings difficult.

The commission's secretary left earlier this year, and Mukai's secretary plans to retire at the end of the year as well, Molina added.

"They have to scramble and find a new secretary and new deputy director so there's some housecleaning going on there," he said.

Mukai said he hopes to fill the positions as well as hire an auditor in "*a month or so*" through the standard county personnel and recruitment process. He said he originally appointed Honda because he was "*well-qualified*" and had "*extensive experience.*"

He did not immediately know when he would fill the deputy position.

"It's too soon. We just learned about it," Mukai said. *"It caught me by surprise, so we have to do a search again."*

Mukai has faced heavy scrutiny from licensees and residents for nearly his entire term as director. The former Liquor Control deputy director took over as head of the department in June 2016 after a tumultuous, eight-month hiring process.

Commissioner Dana Souza, son of a former director, originally had been selected as director in 2015 after the commission waived the selection process, but community complaints about ethics and transparency resulted in Souza declining the position.

Later, Mukai was selected as director in a 5-4 vote over former Deputy Director Traci Fujita-Villarosa. Mukai fired her shortly afterward.

Since Mukai has taken over, he has pushed major rule changes that included allowing 24-hour retail sales of liquor and imposing stringent requirements on nonprofit groups seeking single-event licenses to serve alcohol. Most of the changes initially approved by the commission have been reversed after more than a hundred people testified against them over the past year.

Nonprofits have continued to complain to the commission over dealings with the department. However, commission Chairman Bob Tanaka promised more changes to assist groups.

A charter-mandated annual review of Mukai by the commission has been planned for months, but it has progressed little because of new commission members and lack of a quorum. While some members have left meetings because of other obligations, sometimes right before Mukai's scheduled evaluation on the agenda, Souza has not attended a meeting since Aug. 9.

Residents have notified the Mayor's Office of Souza's absence, and officials have contacted Souza, Molina said. Commissioners can be asked to resign or be removed if there is an *"excessive amount of absent meetings."*

"We're in process of finding out why and contacting him," Molina said.

As for Lee's resignation, Mayor Alan Arakawa nominated Leslie-Ann Yokouchi of Kula to replace her, Molina said. Yokouchi's nomination could be heard as early as next month by the Maui County Council's Policy, Economic Development and Agriculture Committee.

Yokouchi is the owner and principal broker of Better Homes and Gardens Real Estate Advantage Realty Valley Isle.

Souza and commission Vice Chairman Darren Lopez plan to finish their terms at the end of March and will need to be replaced. Commission terms last five years.

“I appreciate the work of the department and the commission, which has some tough decisions they have to make,” Molina said. He thanked Yokouchi and all the other residents who agree to serve on county boards and commissions.

Mukai said he did not know what to expect during his review by the commission, which *“set the criteria of the review.”* He believes the department has been running well considering the vacancies.

“We’ll continue to improve the department, and the service that we provide to the licensees,” he said. *“I think with the staff shortage we’ve been doing excellent. As best as we can with the amount of people that we have.”*

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