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VIEWS & VOICES

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OUR VIEW

TRANSPORTATION DEPARTMENT

Do more digging on DOT dirt

The state's new transportation director says his department's personnel office is "dysfunctional," but that is not the only section in his department that has been in disarray. Recent resignations at the top should be the first step toward a thorough review of past ineptness and misconduct. Other resignations and corrective action — perhaps even prosecution — may be appropriate.

Brian Sekiguchi abruptly resigned in August from his position as deputy director in charge of the state's 15 airports after denying that he accepted tickets from an airport vendor to the Masters golf tournament in Augusta, Ga., in April 2009. He remains a target of a state ethics investigation.

At a Senate Ways and Means Committee meeting this week, interim Transportation Director Michael Formby said Sekiguchi has not returned phone calls or e-mails to answer his questions.

Airport engineer Gene Matsushige admitted to the committee that he accepted a ticket to the Masters from Chevron, which has easements with the airports, and both he and Sekiguchi accepted free lodging at a home of the president of R.M. Towill Corp., a Honolulu-based engineering firm.

Matsushige remains on the job.

Formby said he also has discovered that \$2,858 in undocumented purchases were made at Lihue Airport with department cards similar to credit cards, "contrary to policy." The purchases were made in the

absence of required invoices or purchase requests.

The problem with the department's personnel division has been ineptness. Maui District Airports Fire Chief Eugene Perry said his division has had no promotions or hires since 2007, with only 26 employees where full staffing numbers 40. The result has been 19,779 hours of overtime, costing \$870,492, from January 2009 through August 2010.

Amazingly, Perry said he was frustrated in trying to prod the personnel office.

"E-mails went unanswered, phone calls went unanswered," he told the committee.

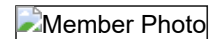
"Beyond conflicts of interest," Formby said, "beyond violations of policy, we don't want appearances of impropriety ...

because it breeds mistrust in the system."

State Sen. Donna Mercado Kim, the committee's chairwoman, is rightly furious about the misconduct and incompetence within the department and should continue to put pressure where needed.

"Are people going to get suspended for this?" she asked Formby. "Are they going to get terminated for this or what? Because this is the tip of the iceberg."

Those are questions that need to be answered, and union protection of employees accused of wrongdoing should not interfere with attempts to remake the department into a professional operation that runs as efficiently as taxpayers expect — and for which they are paying.



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