'25JAN30 AM 8:03 CITY CLERK

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HONOLULU FIRE COMMISSION

*Komikina Kinai Ahi o Honolulu*

**CITY AND COUNTY OF HONOLULU**

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January 28, 2025

**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Michael D. Formby
Managing Director

FROM: David A. K. Matlin, Chair *DAKM*
Honolulu Fire Commission

SUBJECT: Chapter 3, Article 15, Revised Ordinances of Honolulu 2021, as amended (ROH): Periodic Review of Boards and Commissions -- Honolulu Fire Commission

In accordance with Section 3-15.4, ROH, the Honolulu Fire Commission ("Commission") reports the following:

**1. A statement of the purpose for which the board or commission was created.**

The Commission was created pursuant to Council Resolution No. 94-267, CD2 and the resulting public vote in the 1996 general election, to "ensure qualified and professional leadership and personnel for the [Honolulu] Fire Department [HFD], as well as enhance public oversight of departmental operations."

As outlined in Section 6-1006 of the Revised Charter of the City & County of Honolulu 1973 (Amended 2017 Edition) ("Charter"), the Commission is entrusted with several essential powers and duties to ensure the effective functioning of the HFD. These include adopting rules

necessary for the conduct of Commission business and reviewing rules for the administration of the HFD, reviewing the annual budget prepared by the Fire Chief, evaluating the HFD's operations, assessing the Fire Chief's performance, reviewing HFD personnel actions, addressing citizen complaints, and submitting an annual report on Commission activities to the Mayor and City Council. In addition, pursuant to Section 6-1003 of the Charter, the Commission is responsible for appointment of the Fire Chief.

**2. A summary of the accomplishments of the board or commission during the preceding five-year period.**

In performing its Charter-prescribed duties for Calendar Years 2020-2024, the Commission had the following key accomplishments:

Close Monitoring of the Performance of the Fire Chief and HFD

In 2021, upon the retirement of former Fire Chief Manuel P. Neves, the Commission approved the installment of former Acting Fire Chief Lionel E. Camara, Jr., then conducted an extensive and thorough Fire Chief selection process with the assistance of the City's Department of Human Resources, culminating in the appointment of current Fire Chief Sheldon K. Hao in December 2021.

The Commission assessed the performance of Chiefs Neves, Camara and Hao – and by extension, the performance of HFD – through heavy dialogue with the Chiefs and their executive staff at the Commission's monthly meetings. The regular reports of the Fire Chief have been closely scrutinized and discussed, resulting in real-time performance feedback as well as various enhancements to the report content including (a) incident data and trend analysis for major incidents – fires, rescues, and hazardous materials and medical incidents; (b) greater details on necessary facility and equipment acquisitions and maintenance; and (c) listings of specific vacancies within the department. These enhancements serve the public by highlighting downward trends and encouraging discussion on how to reverse course (e.g., better signage and communications to reduce overnight hiking rescues); by making clear to government officials and community stakeholders that more funding may be needed to ensure functional facilities for HFD personnel; and by making qualified persons aware of current job opportunities within the department.

The performance information collected through the Commission's monthly meetings was incorporated into the annual evaluations of the Fire Chief, copies of which were transmitted to the Mayor and Honolulu City Council. At its December 2024 meeting, the Commission approved a new evaluation template that is tied to HFD's published Strategic Plan 2022-2027, and places emphasis on HFD employee morale and addressing of facility maintenance concerns. The template will be utilized starting in Calendar Year 2025.

Greater Public Visibility of HFD Affairs and Needs

For the public's benefit, the Commission made best efforts at its monthly meetings to dig deep into headline incident involving HFD, asking various questions and offering suggestions on operational procedures (with several Commissioners having worked in HFD and/or emergency management), support and counseling of personnel, and keeping the public informed. Considerable time was spent discussing the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on operations, the

2023 Hawai‘i wildfires (including the Lahaina, Maui wildfires for which HFD provided assistance) and the December 2024 Kamaka Air crash at Honolulu International Airport.

Over the years, Commissioners have visited HFD stations and other facilities. These visits were increased starting in 2023, to further increase public understanding and support of the department's work. Since the start of 2023, Commissioners have visited 24 of 43 (66%) fire stations. Additional visits include old and temporary aircraft hangers, maintenance and repair shop, Charles H. Thurston Fire Training Center, Joint Traffic Management Center and a Fire Explorers meeting. The Commissioners witnessed firsthand the regular demands placed on HFD personnel, facility maintenance issues that had been left unresolved for extended periods, and community programs spearheaded by personnel that were highly commendable but not particularly well-publicized (e.g., the Fire Explorer Program, for persons ages 14-20 wanting to learn about firefighting as a potential career). The Commissioners brought the information from fire station visits to the Commission's monthly meetings, advocating for more City budget funding to fix the facilities, and encouraging HFD to give presentations on the Fire Explorer Program and other achievements.

The Commission also pushed for greater HFD use of social media resources – HFD website, Instagram, Facebook etc. – to not only highlight the department's work, but also to promptly communicate emergency situations and associated guidance for the public. For example, with respect to Oahu's 911 call outage in November 2024, it was noted that HFD could have used its social media resources to announce the outage and provide the alternate phone numbers that the public could call for help.

In 2024, for greater in-person public access to meetings, the Commission voted to hold several meetings a year at fire stations or other HFD locations outside of HFD Auditorium near downtown. The November 2024 meeting was held at the Charles H. Thurston Fire Training Center near Honolulu International Airport.

Finally, the Commission has taken a more visible role with respect to compensation for HFD executive management. In 2022, the Commission transmitted a letter to the Mayor in support of pay adjustments for Assistant Fire Chiefs under Fire Chief Hao, since the unfavorable pay structure for these positions discouraged personnel from applying to fill the vacancies. And in 2024, the Commission transmitted a letter to the Salary Commission in support of the latter's recommended pay increases for the Fire Chief and Deputy Fire Chief, in light of Fire Chief Hao's strong performance evaluation for Calendar Year 2023.

<u>Implementation of Online Document Portal to Streamline Commission Business</u>

In 2024, the Commission requested that HFD management establish a Google Drive document portal, managed by the Commissioner Secretary. This portal would grant Commissioners online access to specific document folders tailored to their assigned tasks. For instance, a dedicated Budget folder would be created for the two Commissioners involved in the HFD annual budget review, containing a curated selection of budget materials for their online review. The portal was launched in Fall 2024, facilitating the Commission's operations.

**3. Factors that aided or inhibited the achievement of the accomplishments, including, but not limited to, the composition and purpose of the board of commission and staff support.**

a. The COVID-19 pandemic restricted the operations of the Commission during the emergency period, including fewer in-person meetings involving Commissioners and/or HFD personnel.

b. The Commission's HFD annual budget review was more general during the early portion of Calendar Years 2020-2024, due to lack of Commissioners with hands-on budget accounting experience. Commission staff recommended to the Mayor's Office that they weigh such experience more heavily in making Commissioner appointments. The Commission, as of the date of this report, has capacity to do in-depth review.

c. The Commission lacks accessible office space to hold all of its paper files for ready access. Commission staff was informed that if has a shared office at Kapalama Hale at 925 Dillingham Boulevard; but it is not clear whether there are keys to get into the office, or parking at the facility. While an effort is underway for the Commission Secretary to convert paper files into electronic files, there is still a need to house the current paper file in a secured area.

**4. A statement of the measures implemented by the board or commission to enhance transparency in its operations.**

The Commission's public website, at https://fire.honolulu.gov/honolulu-fire-commission/, contains the Commission's meeting agendas and regular session minutes, its administrative rules, and its annual reports.

In addition, the Commission has kept tabs on opinions and other guidance issued by the State Office of Information Practices (OIP) with respect to the Sunshine Law and the Uniform Information Practices Act (UIPA), and has adjusted its meeting agendas, board packets, meeting procedures, and responses to UIPA public record requests accordingly.

**5. A statement of the measures implemented by the board or commission to ensure responsiveness to inquiries and comments from the mayor, the council, and the public.**

The Commission's administrative rules set forth clear processes for addressing information requests and complaints brought by the public. Additionally, the Commission Chairs and Vice-Chairs have maintained open lines of communication with the Mayor's Office and the City Council and have responded promptly to their requests, including re-delivery of annual evaluations of the Fire Chief which were misplaced on the City Council side, and expansion of the Commission's annual reports per Mayor's recommendation.

**6. The annual costs of operation of the board or commission for each year of the preceding five-year period.**

The Commission is set to request additional funding for equipment and training in the upcoming budgets to enhance its operations. The total expenses for the Commission from Fiscal Year 2020 through Fiscal Year 2025, including staff salaries, are detailed below as per the City's approved Executive Operating Budgets:

- FY 2020: $71,626
- FY 2021: $20,676
- FY 2022: $20,008
- FY 2023: $20,008
- FY 2024: $21,700
- FY 2025: $22,732

It is important to note that Commission staff pay is currently under review and may warrant an upward adjustment in Fiscal Year 2026, reflecting the evolving job responsibilities.

**7. A statement of whether the charter or ordinance provisions establishing the board or commission should be retained without change, amended, or repealed.**

The last paragraph of Charter Section 6-1006 states, "Except for purposes of inquiry or as otherwise provided in this charter, neither the commission nor its members shall interfere in any way with the administrative affairs of the department." This language has been deemed vague, prompting the Commission to seek clarification from the Council in 2020 regarding what actions would constitute interference with administrative affairs. Additionally, the term "review and/or reviewing" has been identified as too ambiguous, as it limits the Commission's true authority to only the hiring and firing of the Chief. The lack of clear definitions has raised concerns about the boundaries of the Commission's authority in relation to departmental administration.

**8. If applicable, suggested modifications and revisions to membership number and qualifications; organization; purpose; or powers, duties, and functions to better enable the board or commission to serve its purpose, including justification and suggested amendatory language.**

N/A