

Commentary  
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**Preservation Division chief's resignation gives  
Thielen a chance to make a difference**  
By Senator Jill Tokuda

The resignation of Melanie Chinen as head of the Department of Land and Natural Resources' Historic Preservation Division presents DLNR director Laura Thielen with an opportunity to make a big difference in a small amount of time. However, making such a difference will require stepping away from past practices and taking a hard look at what is best for the division and our state.

While Melanie Chinen came under fire for her handling of SHPD and for what seemed to be a long string of controversies surrounding the division, we need to keep in mind that running any division with the state government is a challenging task at best. For a division such as SHPD, which deals with difficult and emotion-laden issues, and often finds itself in the spotlight, the challenge is all the greater. We owe Ms. Chinen our thanks for the work she has done, for her dedication to preserving our precious historical sites, and for performing under tough circumstances and with a great deal of public scrutiny.

The question now, though, is what comes next for the division. This transition represents an opportunity. The DLNR director can demonstrate her willingness and ability to bring about true, effective change by committing herself to a process that addresses the serious challenges the Historic Preservation Division has faced, and responds to the specific concerns that have been voiced by the division's critics.

My recent experience examining the situation at the State Bureau of Conveyances, also a part of DLNR, has highlighted some important considerations. Like SHPD, the bureau has had a long history of internal challenges and staff discontent. The two divisions are also similar in that despite their importance to the people of Hawai‘i, all efforts to bring about meaningful change have fallen short.

The depth of the difficulties at the Bureau of Conveyances has resulted from their being allowed to persist for too long. We can hope that SHPD’s challenges are still susceptible to change. That is why this opportunity is so significant: it marks a point in time where the DLNR and its director can show that they are ready to make a difference, starting now.

While naming a transition team to assist in the search for a new administrator is reason for hope, the composition of the team brings fewer assurances. All three members represent government and bureaucratic concerns, from the office of the Attorney General to the Office of Hawaiian Affairs and SHPD itself. Still, many of the questions that arose in the recent past came from professional archaeologists, and appear to reflect a disconnect between departmental priorities and the archaeologists’ opinions of what their jobs should entail. Both are legitimate viewpoints, and assembling a decision-making body that represents only one view is not likely to address the core issues. Among those central concerns should be the qualifications of the SHPD administrator and key staff positions, an issue that raised serious questions among the division’s critics.

Compare the SHPD transition team to the group assembled to oversee Superferry operations under the legislation passed in the recent Special Legislative Session. In the latter case, voices of cultural practitioners and environmentalists—those who had been

critical of the operations under consideration—we included, reflecting an awareness that all concerns must be heard if a review is to be effective. Change comes in the wake of the courage to turn away from what you want to hear, and seek instead what you need to know.

Coming to grips with dissent is not easy, but I doubt anyone expects that bringing effective change to SHPD will be simple. Pushing against the status quo, focusing on what is best rather than what is comfortable, calls for real leadership. We should all hope that the DLNR and its director will demonstrate that leadership, expand the transition team to include those whose opinions will make a difference to the division's long-term success, and provide our community with the assurances it deserves that SHPD will operate as intended.

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