

5 more Cabinet members named

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POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Dec 05, 2010

CABINET PICKS



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Gov.-elect Neil Abercrombie yesterday filled more slots in his Cabinet, turning to the Maui budget director to lead state tax policy and the former state Senate vice president to handle agriculture.

Abercrombie nominated Fred Pablo, Maui budget director, as director of the state Department of Taxation. Last week, the governor-elect chose Kalbert Young, Maui County finance director, as the state budget chief, giving the new administration's fiscal team a Valley Isle flavor.

Abercrombie nominated state Sen. Russell Kokubun (D, South Hilo-Puna-Kau) as chairman and director of the state Department of Agriculture. Kokubun, who has served in the Senate since 2000, was chairman of a sustainability task force and has a background as a county planner and farmer. He was the Senate vice president and was a contender for president but lost power in the recent Senate reorganization.

Kokubun's nomination will create another Senate vacancy once he resigns. State Sen. Dwight Takamine (D, Hamakua-South Hilo) was nominated by Abercrombie last week as director of the state Department of Labor and Industrial Relations. Takamine, who also lost power in the Senate

reorganization, has resigned effective tomorrow.

Abercrombie will get to fill the vacancies from recommendations from the Democratic Party of Hawaii, because Democrats held the seats. The new governor will also be able to fill the vacancy created when state Sen. Colleen Hanabusa resigns to go to Congress.

The governor-elect nominated Keali'i Lopez, president and chief executive officer of 'Olelo Community Media, to be director of the state

Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs.

He picked Sunshine Topping, director of human resources for Sandwich Isles Communications, to be director of the state Department of Human Resources Development.

Abercrombie named Bruce Coppa, a management consultant with communications and construction industry experience, director of the state Department of Accounting and General Services.

"These are the happiest days for me," the governor-elect said at a news conference in the lobby of the State Office Tower. "We can make, I think, so many people happy because they can see that a new day for Hawaii is taking shape."

Abercrombie's Cabinet nominees are subject to Senate confirmation.

Pablo, the tax director nominee, said he worked closely with Young on budget and finance issues on Maui. He said it was too soon for him to decide whether to continue some of the tax policy decisions

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of the Lingle administration.

State tax officials have been aggressive over the past few years in collecting back taxes and cracking down on the cash economy to gather revenue owed the state given the economic downturn. Gov. Linda Lingle delayed tax refunds this year to try to get through the fiscal year without a deficit.

"The economy has been quite challenging the past couple of years," Pablo said.

Along with Kokubun, Abercrombie named Jimmy Nakatani, a former state agriculture director and

watercress farm owner, deputy director of agriculture. He also added Guy Kaulukukui, associate director for strategic partnerships at The Kohala Center, a Big Island research group, as deputy director of the state Department of Land and Natural Resources.

Kokubun, who grew zucchini as a farmer, said the challenges facing agriculture are well documented. The state has yet to find crops to replace the value of pineapple and sugar cane and depends mainly on imported food. Food security was one of the themes of Abercrombie's campaign and of Kokubun's sustainability work.

"We're kind of in a desperate situation with agriculture," Kokubun said.

State Senate President Shan Tsutsui (D, Kahului) said Kokubun, like Takamine, will be missed in the Senate.

"He is a champion for the preservation and conservation of our natural resources, and his experience as a farmer, long commitment to agricultural issues, as well as his service in the county of Hawaii and in our state Senate, provide him a varied background that will enable him to aid our state in its quest for a more sustainable future," he said.

Abercrombie, who will be sworn in as governor tomorrow, has made 11 of his 16 Cabinet appointments. He still has to name an attorney general and directors of the departments of defense, health, human services and transportation.

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