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CU regents request internal investigation for conflict of interest

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University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus is pictured.

The Denver Gazette

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The investigation, requested by regents Ken Montera and Callie Rennison, comes after fellow regent Wanda James' objections to a campaign created by the state legislature and funded through the Colorado School of Public Health and CU Anschutz Medical Campus to educate the public on the health risks of highly concentrated marijuana.

"We know the people of Colorado expect the Board to provide excellent oversight and leadership to the University of Colorado," Montera and Rennison said in a joint statement. "We expect that as well and are confident that this review

will fairly answer questions that have been raised over the last several weeks.”



Photos courtesy of Andy Colwell and Dave Vaughn University of Colorado regents Callie Rennison, left, and Ken Montera. Both regents requested an internal investigation into regent Wanda James over potential conflicts of interest.

Photos courtesy of Andy Colwell and Dave Vaughn

James, a Black woman and prominent owner of a Denver cannabis dispensary, took offense to a series of images created for a campaign called “The Tea on THC” released last December that she believed were racist.

The images featured information on the debilitating effects of marijuana throughout a person's development and were accompanied by illustrations of a Black or dark-skinned person showcasing effects as they aged. She raised her concerns in January over the campaign's content with CU leadership, who agreed that the images were insensitive.

The images were later removed and Initium Health — which created the images for the campaign — issued a statement acknowledging the concerns.

In January, James continued to comment publicly on “The Tea on THC” through multiple media outlets. Among them was a story in Denver's Westword where

she said she would like to
have the campaign's
funding pulled and
reallocated to grants for
marijuana business
owners who qualify for
social equity licenses.

She was also
quoted by the
cannabis
industry
outlet Green
Market Report,
saying that she had
conversations with Gov.
Jared Polis about the images
and pulling the funding
from the Colorado School of
Public Health.



Wanda James
The Denver
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According to a memo by
Jeremy Hueth, CU's
university counsel, the Polis
administration sent a letter
to the state legislative Joint
Budget Committee on Jan.
31 that expressed Polis'

desire to “fully eliminate”
the funding source for the
“Tea on THC.”

Montera said he and other regents learned of the comments through these articles, social media posts and calls from constituents expressing concerns over a conflict of interest because of James’ roles with both the Board of Regents and the cannabis industry.

“We have a fiduciary responsibility to both the university and our constituents,” said Montera, from Colorado Springs. “We are doing this to keep the integrity of this board and this is by no way intended to single out anyone.”

This prompted Hueth’s memo, dated Feb. 28, to see whether James’ actions

violated either the board's laws and policies or state statute pertaining to elected official conduct. The memo cites the board's policies about conflicts of interest, fiduciary responsibilities and undue influence.

Regarding conflicts of interest, regent policy states that a regent's judgment about board business "must not be impaired as a result of conflicts between the interests of the university and the regent's own financial interest or personal interest, or the financial interests or personal interests of the regent's family or associates."

Hueth concluded that the Board of Regents does not have the authority to remove one of its members,

but can censure them if they are found to have violated a statute, board law or policy following an independent investigation. Rennison told The Gazette that there have been “no talks to date” about the possibility.

An investigation through the state Attorney General's office could also be on the table.

When reached for a response, James told The Gazette in an email that she “answered all of those questions in other articles.”

Colorado Public Radio reported that James was upset after learning about the investigation and called the efforts by her fellow regents a “smear campaign.”

The review will be performed by a third party in the coming weeks and a report summarizing the findings will be made public at the conclusion of the review.

Rennison said that she hopes the results of the investigation will bring a fair and impartial end to a matter that has been “enflaming some of the other regents to try and resolve this” in recent weeks.

“There's a lot going on in higher education and I'd think our time should be better spent addressing those challenges going forward rather than this,” she said.

Eric Young

Reporter

