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CU regent decries “public lynching” after board seeks probe of efforts to cut funding to marijuana program

Regent Wanda James, who owns a Denver dispensary, supports eliminating funds to CU campaign to educate youth





University of Colorado Regent Wanda James at Simply Pure, the marijuana dispensary she owns in Denver, on Thursday Dec. 28, 2023. (Photo by Andy Cross/The Denver Post)



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The University of Colorado's Board of Regents is launching an independent investigation into one of its own, Regent Wanda James, after the dispensary owner pushed to cut state funding from a CU campaign to educate youth about the risks of high-potency marijuana.

James, the first Black dispensary owner in the country and CU's first Black female regent in decades, called the investigation a "public lynching" meant to tarnish her name because she decried imagery used on the educational campaign's website as racist for portraying negative tropes about Black families and drug use.

"For a \$6 billion university system to put out images like that was hurtful to the community and wrong on every level," James told The Denver Post on Wednesday. "I called those images out and they're upset. The Board of Regents at CU has decided to be judge, jury and executioner for the sole Black woman on the board for speaking out on racist tropes."

CU Board of Regents Chair Callie Rennison and Vice Chair Ken Montera [issued a joint statement Tuesday](#) announcing their decision to hire a third party to review whether James violated her fiduciary and legal obligations to the university.

“To campaign against our campuses getting money is something we think needs to be looked at,” Rennison said in an interview Wednesday.

The issue began in January when James — owner of Denver’s Simply Pure dispensary and a Democrat representing the 1st Congressional District on the board — raised concerns about images used in a state-funded marijuana education program called [“The Tea on THC,”](#) produced by the Colorado School of Public Health at CU’s Anschutz Medical Campus.

The education campaign featured online illustrations depicting a Black mother, child and teenager suffering from the consequences of the mother’s marijuana usage.

“In that imagery, they used every racial trope of Black people,” James said. “That we have cognitive dissonance, inability to control our impulses. They used caricatures of Black people to emphasize whatever it is they were supposed to be doing public service for. These images were disgusting.”

James raised her concerns with university leaders on Jan. 26 and the images were removed the following day “as there was agreement with Regent James that the illustrations were insensitive,” Rennison and Montera said in their statement.

Officials at CU Anschutz declined to comment about the situation Wednesday, deferring to the Board of Regents.

James [told Denver news outlet Westword](#) at the time that she wanted to see the “Tea on THC” campaign pulled, with its remaining funding redirected to grants for marijuana business owners who qualify for social equity licenses. Social equity licenses in Colorado are granted to qualifying individuals in the [cannabis industry from marginalized communities](#), providing support and resources to “acknowledge the effects of decades of criminal enforcement of marijuana laws on communities of color.”

In a January article published by cannabis-focused news outlet [Green Market Report](#), James was quoted as saying she had a conversation with Gov. Jared Polis and his team about the images, and that the governor’s office was looking at pulling funding from the Colorado School of Public Health.

On Wednesday, James said she was slightly misquoted in that article. She said she texted the governor in late January about the images and that he agreed they were horrible. She also said she talked to the state’s cannabis office.

“I said that money should be used in places... that knew how to do this the correct way,” James said. “I did have that conversation and still believe if you are going to put out something so horribly racist, perhaps (the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment) should be doing this campaign.”

Polis’s proposed funding cut nixed by JBC

Ally Sullivan, a spokesperson for the governor’s office, said in a statement Wednesday that Polis did propose a funding reduction for this campaign “as well as many other difficult decisions across multiple agencies.”

But those proposed cuts were presented in the governor’s November budget proposal to the legislature’s Joint Budget Committee, according to state documents — before James raised the issue with Polis.

“The images portrayed in the campaign were insensitive and we are glad they were taken down and the media campaign was re-considered,” Sullivan said in the statement. “If the JBC agrees with the governor and deems this not to be an effective program, then they can take action to eliminate it and use the funds to support public education ”

“The Tea on THC” program was funded through [a 2021 bill](#) requiring the Colorado School of Public Health to perform a systematic review of the scientific research related to possible physical and mental health effects of high-potency marijuana. The state has allocated about \$7 million toward the school for this purpose over the years.

On Jan. 31, the Polis administration made a second request to the Joint Budget Committee to eliminate the initiative’s funding. But on Wednesday, Rep. Emily Sirota, a Denver Democrat and committee member, said the JBC voted to reject the proposed cut to the Colorado School of Public Health.

“The CU School of Public Health had been doing a lot of research and they came up with a campaign for some PSA-like work, and we think it’s important to let that work go forward as we’ve already invested in its development,” Sirota said.

James stands by her statement that funds to the “Tea on THC” program should be cut.

“I have a First Amendment right to speak to reporters,” she said. “That’s not a policy discussion.”

But Rennison said constituents reached out to the board, viewing James’ press statements as inappropriate and a potential conflict of interest due to her dispensary ownership. But James denied any conflict exists because she said the money was never going to come to her.

“When regents are sworn in, we take an oath to be a fiduciary for the university,” Rennison said. “Many people believe that may have been violated.”

Montera, the Board of Regents’ vice chair, said the independent investigation was crucial for ensuring the integrity of the institution’s academic freedom.

“One of the things our faculty is adamant about is academic freedom,” Montera said. “Their ability to research, develop education through educated views. One of the things they remind us is if that’s compromised, the faculty really have their ears open trying to understand what took place. Once that door opens and a regent is allowed to impact academic freedom, that compromises the mission of the university.”

Board could choose to censure regent

Jeremy Hueth, CU’s university counsel, wrote a memo Feb. 28 in response to Rennison and Montera’s request to investigate whether James violated regent policy or Colorado statute regarding elected officials. He outlined several policies that could be reviewed, including conflict of interest, fiduciary responsibilities and undue influence.

But Hueth noted the Board of Regents — a nine-member elected board — does not possess the constitutional authority to remove a duly elected member. Instead, he wrote, the board could choose to vote on whether to censure James.

“Nobody has called for a censure,” Rennison said. “The whole point of the third party is to get as much info as possible and the board would decide where we go from there.”

Hueth noted that the Board of Regents could also provide the information to the Colorado Attorney General’s Office or other law enforcement agencies if it felt any laws were broken.

“CU has not lost one dime because of this,” James said. “What are they investigating? There’s nothing that will come from this. They’re trying to have me charged criminally through the AG’s office. Clearly, I have done nothing criminally.”

In a letter earlier this month, the Colorado Black Democratic Legislative Caucus demanded a formal apology to James from the Colorado School of Public Health, a meeting with CU President Todd Saliman and an official opinion from the attorney general clearing James’ name.

Christopher Sparks, a spokesperson for the Board of Regents, said no third party has been retained yet to conduct the review, so no cost estimate was available.

“We have been an incredibly high-functioning board,” Rennison said. “Some people are claiming there is all this discord, but that is simply not true. We look forward to putting these questions behind us and getting back to do other board things.”

Denver Post reporter Seth Klamann contributed to this report.

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Updated 11 a.m. March 30, 2025: *This story has been updated to clarify the timeline of when the Polis administration proposed cuts to the Colorado School of Public Health’s marijuana education program.*

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