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Hot seat gets hotter for CU Regent Wanda James | Jimmy Sengenberger

Jimmy Sengenberger
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The heat on CU Regent and marijuana retailer Wanda James cranked up this week as Board of Regents Chair Callie Rennison and Vice Chair Ken Montera announced an independent probe into whether she misused her position to benefit her business at the university's expense.

In January, James — who also owns Simply Pure marijuana dispensary and is a self-described “pothead” — slammed the Colorado School of Public Health’s “Tea on THC” campaign, a public education program established by the Legislature in 2021 and funded with \$4 million in marijuana tax revenue.

The program educates Coloradans on the risks of high-potency THC, drawing

from a systematic review of over 60,000 scientific articles documenting marijuana's dangers to youth under 25 and pregnant mothers. Of course, the eye-opening research doesn't bode well for pot sales.

James, who co-founded the first Black-owned legal medical-marijuana dispensary in 2009 and has helped shape marijuana policy for Govs. Jared Polis and John Hickenlooper, called the campaign "racist" for imagery depicting Black children in utero and older — despite publishing identical images of White children. She's demanded the website, TeaOnTHC.org, be "taken down immediately."

Even after CU removed the “offensive” material and apologized, she kept pushing the issue on social and traditional media while personally urging Polis and his staff “to defund the program and redirect funds.” Days later, Polis’ budget director requested the Joint Budget Committee eliminate the funding altogether.

Interestingly, that formal request came one day after James spoke with Ean Seeb, the governor’s cannabis adviser. “TY for chatting w me about this (and the rest of the world),” Seeb wrote in an email obtained through an open records request, although it’s unclear what he meant.

When faculty, staff and constituents raised concerns about a possible conflict of interest by James — as an elected CU regent and a purveyor — Rennison and Montera asked university counsel Jeremy Hueth to examine the facts. His resulting Feb. 28 memo indicated James may have “impaired the work of Colorado SPH staff” in ways linked to her business interests and potentially violated regent policies requiring “independent judgment” free from financial conflicts. Most troubling, it questioned whether she broke three state laws, including one barring attempts to influence public servants — the same class 4 felony that led to substantial prison time for former Mesa County Clerk Tina Peters.

“Regents have important fiduciary and legal obligations to the University,” Rennison and Montera wrote Tuesday. “As a self-governing body, it is incumbent on each of us to ensure we honor these obligations.”

On 850KOA Wednesday, Montera was clear on his concerns. “If we set a precedent where regents can affect the funding of specific academic programs from the university, I think we’ve completely overstepped our bounds,” he told me. “We can have influence on a lot of things within the university, but this is an area that we really need to understand where the boundaries are.”

“I would hope that none of the influence that may have been asked by the governor’s office was the driver of that recommendation to defund fund this program,” Montera said. “But that’s why we’re doing this investigation.”

James, a Democrat representing Denver on the Board of Regents, contends she’s the victim of a “Republican-led smear campaign” — seemingly oblivious to the fact the inquiry was initiated by the board’s Democratic chair from Boulder as well as its Republican vice chair from Colorado Springs.

“There was majority bipartisan support, verbally, to move to this next step,” Montera stressed. The investigation doesn’t require a vote, he added, and

the outside firm will have no university affiliation or partisan leanings.

James, though, doggedly refuses to take responsibility. On LinkedIn last week, she insisted: “I did not ‘defund’ the campaign. The Governor’s office and the Joint Budget Committee made independent decisions about funding based on multiple factors.”

Yet she’s openly bragged about calling in political favors to kill the funding. Which is it?

James quoted a CU Boulder professor about “silencing Black faculty who speak out against racism” — ignoring that she’s an elected official with fiduciary duties, not faculty. This isn’t her first

time leveraging her race as a shield: when her store failed an underage compliance check in 2019, she similarly cried “racism” and escaped with a slap on the wrist.

In an email, she asserted there’s “ZERO conflict of interest” in opposing “racist, taxpayer-funded propaganda” — boasting she’d “produced real results” since CU apologized and removed the images.

If the “offensive” content is gone, why keep attacking the program? Because it promotes what James calls a “false narrative that cannabis stunts brain development.” That “false narrative” is in fact hard science — that threatens her business.

In a bizarre deflection, James accuses Rennison of “a real conflict of interest” because she’s voted on tuition hikes that “directly fund her own salary” as a CU professor.

Let’s be serious: Voters elected Rennison knowing she was a professor who’d vote on significant university matters, including tuition. By contrast, voters never thought James would try to gut university programs to benefit her industry, whether she’s successful or not.

James wants Tea on THC’s funding redirected into “grants for marijuana business owners who qualify for social equity licenses” — licenses she helped create, for businesses like hers. Her

company was among the first to receive a state cannabis loan for licensees — another program she helped develop.

Imagine her outrage if an oil executive had been elected to the board and had tried to cancel research on climate change at CU. Does Wanda James seriously believe Coloradans won't see through her self-serving charade?

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