

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Tuesday, March 11, 2020**

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### **STATE SENATOR BRENDA GILMORE CALLS FOR SUSPENSION OF THE WATKINS-BELMONT DEAL, CHIDES COMMISSIONERS, BOARD FOR LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND INCLUSION**

#### **Lawmaker questions why Fisk, TSU, and others were not offered the same \$20M windfall given Belmont**

(Nashville, TN) State Senator Brenda Gilmore has released a letter that calls for the immediate suspension of the announced takeover deal between Watkins College of Art and Belmont University. The letter further calls for the Watkins Commissioners and Board of Trustees to appear at a public meeting to answer community questions about the deal, and answer questions from other institutions that were left out of the months-long closed-door negotiations. The date and time of the meeting are currently being organized. Gilmore's letter, addressed to the Watkins College of Art Commissioners and Board of Trustees, raises pointed questions about the appropriateness of the pending deal to hand over the assets of Watkins, which would include tens of millions from the sale of the current Watkins campus real estate, to Belmont, a private Christian University.

The District 19 lawmaker writes, "As an educational institution that was established by the legislature, and by state law is overseen by Commissioners appointed the Governor, it is troubling that I was not informed, nor consulted, prior to a deal being announced between your Board and Belmont's Board on January 28."

Citing the potential loss to her North Nashville district of an "invaluable independent educational asset", Senator Gilmore's letter goes on to question why nearby historically-black colleges Tennessee State University and Fisk University were never approached by the Watkins Board with a similar deal as was offered to Belmont. She continues that she is "hard-pressed to believe that, had either [Fisk or TSU] been approached with a \$15 to 20 million dollar gift, or a move-in-in-ready satellite campus complete with dorms, or similar partnership opportunity, they would have declined to entertain such a generous gift".

The Belmont deal, as announced, would result in the closing of Watkins' longtime Metro Center campus and the absorption of Watkins programs of study into Belmont. The sale of Watkins real estate and property would net Belmont an estimated \$20 million dollar cash windfall, which Belmont has announced would be deposited into an endowment fund to generate scholarships for future Belmont fine art students, under the moniker "Watkins College of Art at Belmont".



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Watkins leadership has described the takeover by Belmont as necessary and the best available outcome for the cash-poor, but land-rich school, which has been in continuous independent operation for 135 years. “Save Watkins”, a coalition of Watkins alumni, faculty, staff, students, and community leaders, has vigorously opposed the deal, questioning whether a public Trust like Watkins is allowed liquidate its State-managed assets to a private religious institution. Objections are also being raised to Belmont's controversial LGBTQ+ policies, and whether the terms of Samuel Watkins will be violated by converting property that he deeded to the State of Tennessee for the establishment of an independent school to a cash donation to an outside private party.

Watkins College was established by State statute in 1881, pursuant to the will of wealthy Nashville philanthropist Samuel Watkins. The institution is overseen by three Commissioners who are appointed by the Governor, and a Board of Trustees, which currently numbers nineteen, including officers and Commissioners. Samuel Watkins' will deeded property to the State of Tennessee, as well as \$100,000 to be held in trust by the State for the purpose of establishing and running a school in his name.

(2) Attachments include Senator Gilmore’s letter and press release

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