

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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'SAVE WATKINS' PRESSES FOR NEW WATKINS/BELMONT "MERGER" DOCS

New Public Records sought from State as Watkins Board ignores previous demand

(Nashville, TN) The controversial deal between Watkins College and Belmont University continues to heat up, as **Save Watkins** today issued a new public records request, seeking additional details about the deal that would absorb Watkins College into Belmont. This request, directed to the Tennessee Secretary of State's Office, seeks records related to discussions that occurred in recent months among representatives for Watkins, Belmont, and Deputy Attorney General Janet Kleinfelter. The request was filed under the Tennessee Open Records Act (TPRA).

The new demand for records comes after Watkins College Board of Trustees failed to respond to a previous TPRA request that was filed by a **Save Watkins** member on Thursday, February 20, 2020. State law specifies that public records requested under TPRA must be produced within seven days, or denied with explanations and citations to specific Tennessee statutes. Today is Day 8, and no response has been received.

"The arrogance of the Watkins Board, acting through their board member and attorney Larry Papel, in ignoring the previous lawful request for documents relating to the giveaway of Watkins to Belmont, is appalling, but not surprising", said Mark Schlicher, a member of Save Watkins who filed both requests. "Watkins is a public institution, established by state law, and affirmed by the Tennessee Supreme Court. There is no valid excuse to stonewall the citizens of Tennessee who have a right to information on this one-sided insider deal. Since Watkins' Board continues to refuse to produce documents, we reserve the right to use every lawful avenue to force them into the sunlight".

Save Watkins has called for a "pause and reboot" on the Belmont deal, which has not been finalized. They are demanding that all options be considered or reconsidered, in a transparent, inclusive, and equitable process. This would include inviting other potential partner Universities to the table, such as TSU, Fisk, or MTSU. These institutions were excluded from the secret negotiations that led to the offer to Belmont.

"I've also spoken personally with State Senator Brenda Gilmore and State Rep Harold Love, Jr. and they told me that this giveaway of Watkins was a surprise to them," notes Schlicher. "They have expressed serious concerns. As state elected officials, their reaction makes sense, considering that Watkins College is a state-overseen institution that is located in North Nashville, and Governor Lee has announced education as one of his top priorities. It makes no sense to close such a valuable community resource and give away its assets to a private entity."

District 2 Council Member Kyzonte Toombs, whose district includes the Metro Center campus, was also not informed in advance of the Watkins closing and property sale, and has called for answers and transparency. She has pledged her support to the goals of **Save Watkins**.



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Save Watkins, a collective of concerned Watkins alumni, students, staff, faculty, and community members, was formed immediately after the announcement of Watkins/Belmont deal. Under the announced terms, Belmont would receive all of Watkins' assets, including an estimated \$20 million dollars worth of real estate, which Belmont plans to sell and bank the proceeds. Belmont would brand their art department as "Watkins College of Art at Belmont", but is not obligated by the deal to adopt Watkins curriculum, professors, or staff.

The Watkins/Belmont deal has been harshly criticized for the secretive "insider" process, the lopsided terms, and the giveaway of Samuel Watkins public bequest to a private religious institution that has faced several recent issues, ranging from artistic freedom, religious tests for faculty employment, and LGBTQ discrimination. Belmont is also embroiled in a controversial land deal in the South Nashville neighborhood of Edgehill.

Watkins College of Art is a public non-profit college, founded in 1885, pursuant to the will of wealthy Nashville philanthropist Samuel Watkins. It is overseen by three Commissioners appointed by the Governor, and a board of 16 additional Trustees. In his will, Watkins specified that his fortune, rather than be given to existing elite universities of his day, would be directed to the purpose of a school that benefited "Nashville youth" with an affordable education. Watkins currently offers career-oriented bachelor of fine arts (BFA) degrees and graduate (MFA) degrees, as well as a popular Community Education program.

Save Watkins Mission Statement:

Save Watkins is a collective of Students, Faculty, Staff, and Alumni of the Watkins College of Art. Our mission is to secure a safe and open environment for Watkins Students to pursue their education. This may manifest as securing the funding to keep the Watkins College of Art open in its current form, working towards a partnership with a different institution, or changing existing policies at Belmont for the benefit of all current and future Watkins students.

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