

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Thursday, February 20, 2020

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### **'SAVE WATKINS' GROUP DEMANDS TRANSPARENCY, DOCUMENTS**

#### **Public Records filing seeks to lift veil on murky Belmont deal**

(Nashville, TN) "**Save Watkins**", a collective of concerned allies of Watkins College of Art, is demanding access to public records relating to the pending agreement that would have private religious Belmont University swallow up the public Watkins College, handing over to Belmont a \$15-20 million dollar cash windfall.

An official Tennessee Public Records Act request was delivered today by Mark Schlicher, a 1999 Watkins alumnus and current adjunct professor, on behalf of **Save Watkins**.

"Up to this point, the Watkins Board and leadership have escaped public scrutiny and oversight on this lopsided proposal, which would amount to a multimillion-dollar land giveaway to Belmont, in exchange for a name on a building", said Schlicher. "Watkins is a public entity, plainly subject to Open Records law. The public has a right to know how Watkins got into this position, how and why the terms of the deal were negotiated, and whether it was done properly and in the public interest. There must be accountability."

"This proposal was hatched in secret, seemingly offered to only a single institution, obscured behind false and deceptive statements, and approved behind closed doors," he continued. "It was sprung without warning on the public, pre-packaged as the 'best and only way' forward. We have major questions that the law entitles us to get answered."

"I am shocked at how the stakeholders and citizens been kept in the dark about the apparent seriousness of Watkins' financial situation, and were, in fact, given deceptive and false information by Watkins leadership. We believe that the Watkins Board of Trustees has failed in their fiduciary duty. Their response is "Trust us". But they have broken the citizens' trust. We must see the documents", Schlicher added.

The agreement between Belmont to acquire and sell the Watkins campus property is the latest in a line of controversial land deals involving Belmont, including recent alleged irregularities with a contract to build a private Belmont athletic training facility on Metro Public Schools land in the Edgehill neighborhood.

The Public Records filing by **Save Watkins** seeks to gain clarity on several serious unanswered questions, including:

1. When did Watkins first reach out to Belmont about this deal? How long have negotiations been going on? At what point did they stop considering other options?
2. What were the conclusions of two recent consultant reports that were commissioned by the Watkins Board?



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3. What are the terms of the proposed/tentative agreement with Belmont that was announced on January 28?

4. What other schools, if any, did Watkins approach? Specifically, did they offer the same \$20 million deal to other schools that was offered to Belmont? What were the responses?

5. Did Watkins enter into any discussions with Fisk or TSU specifically, considering Watkins location in North Nashville? If so, what deal was offered, if any? What were the responses?

According to a statement issued today by **Save Watkins**, "The gross breach of trust by the Watkins executive leadership, Commissioners, and Board of Trustees has been a major issue from the moment the proposed Belmont takeover was announced. Despite repeated calls to disclose the terms of the deal and the process that led to it, Watkins leadership continues to stonewall. Unfortunately for them, the law doesn't permit this."

The Public Records request follows the release last Friday, of a Letter of No Confidence, signed by most of the faculty and staff of Watkins, which catalogued a number of Watkins President J. Kline's leadership failures during his five-year tenure leading up to the Belmont takeover and called for his firing. Alleged improprieties included nepotism, as well as other serious communication, management, and leadership issues. When Kline was placed on paid leave instead, **Save Watkins** criticized Belmont President Bob Fisher's statement defending Kline, and renewed the call for Watkins' board to fire Kline, and to take good-faith steps toward greater accountability and transparency.

**Save Watkins** has issued a call the Watkins Board of Trustees to "press pause" on the pending Belmont deal and immediately start a full, inclusive, transparent public engagement process. The Trustees should do a "full reset", meaning they should start with a clean slate of options for the future of the school, and work with all stakeholders to craft a significantly better, more equitable outcome for Watkins' current and future students, staff, and faculty, as well as the Nashville community at large.

"In 1881, when political winds were strongly blowing toward inequality and segregation, Samuel Watkins put his fortune toward a vision of radical inclusion, a school where all were welcome, " said Schlicher. "Watkins could have donated his fortune to one of the existing elite universities of his day. Instead, he directed that his money be used to start a school specifically for those who couldn't afford such institutions. With no disrespect to Belmont, Sam Watkins would have been adamantly opposed to this proposed takeover."

**Watkins College of Art** is a public non-profit college, founded in 1885, pursuant to the will of Samuel Watkins. It is governed by a board composed of three Commissioners appointed by the Governor, and 16 Trustees. 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** 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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