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EDUCATION

College of the Desert VP Jeff Baker alleges school's president, 2 trustees defamed him

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College of the Desert Vice President Jeff Baker has initiated a legal claim against the college, the school's top leader and two board of trustee members, alleging they defamed him. He also claims the behavior of former trustee Aurora Wilson led to retaliation against him after he raised concerns about the college's 2021 search that resulted in the hiring of Superintendent/President Martha Garcia.

Baker, through a government claim filed with COD on Nov. 16, says he has suffered substantial emotional distress and damage to his reputation as a higher education administrator. Baker has been on a mental health disability leave from the college since September, according to the document.

"The conditions Defendants created for Mr. Baker at work are so intolerable that a reasonable person would find no option other than to resign," the document reads.

Baker, 52, served as the college's interim president/superintendent after the resignation of Joel Kinnamon in March 2021 until Garcia joined the school in August 2021.

Baker's attorney, Megan Beaman Jacinto, explained that filing a claim with the employer before going to court is a necessary step in certain cases against government entities. If COD and Baker do not reach a settlement soon, Beaman Jacinto said she will file a demand for a trial by jury with Riverside County Superior Court.

Beaman Jacinto said she has not heard from COD regarding the claim. COD spokesperson Nicholas Robles told The Desert Sun: "The matter is going to be discussed by the board as a part of closed session at Friday's upcoming board session."

The document adds to a stark, ongoing division at the college between those who supported hiring Garcia and those, like Baker, who were allied with Kinnamon and had favored his preferred successor, Annabelle Nery, who was passed over for the job.

Trustees Aurora Wilson, Bea Gonzalez and Ruben Perez supported the selection of Garcia. Trustees Fred Jandt and Bonnie Stefan voted against her appointment.

The board dynamics are now shifting. Kinnamon was elected to the board of trustees in the Nov. 8 election, ousting Wilson. He will be ceremoniously sworn in at Friday's board meeting.

Beaman Jacinto has represented Kinnamon

Beaman Jacinto also represented Kinnamon in a recent legal affair with the COD board with regard to comments about Kinnamon's leadership made by board members during public meetings. And, she represents Kinnamon's husband and campaign manager, Christopher Parman, in his defense to continue to operate a website that mocks the college, Garcia, Perez, Gonzalez and Wilson. COD has requested that Parman take the site down, and claims it is defamatory and violates college trademarks.

Kinnamon, COD's president from 2012 to 2021, hired Baker as executive vice president in 2016.

He served in that role for several months before transitioning into a consultant position and later becoming interim vice president for instruction. In spring 2019, Baker became vice president for student services. Then, when Kinnamon suddenly retired in March 2021, Baker was named the school's interim president.

Baker says in the document filed with COD that by accepting the interim presidency, he and "all involved" knew he would be ineligible to apply for the permanent job. Baker claims that at some point during the search for COD's new superintendent/president, he "observed irregularities with the project, which he believed may violate the law." The document does not specify what those "irregularities" were.

Baker says when raised his concerns about those issues and “possible legal violations” with Wilson and Perez, Wilson “immediately became upset and indicated she did not want to hear about his concerns or have any discussions about the search process.” In the claim filed with COD, Baker did not detail what he believed the “possible legal violations” were.

Baker says he felt Wilson was “forcibly silencing him about his concerns.” Baker claims that Wilson eventually notified the other trustees about his concerns, and says the trustees thereafter excluded him from their search for a new president.

The Desert Sun was unable to reach Wilson by phone Tuesday afternoon.

Baker claims that a third trustee, Gonzalez, became upset with him after he denied her request to use college space for an event due to COVID-19 health and safety protocols.

He claims all of them — plus Garcia — proceeded to make harmful and false claims about his job performance in instances where, he says, they knew or should have known they were making false claims. The document does not specifically cite what those harmful claims were.

After Garcia was chosen, an outspoken group of faculty who had wanted the board to hire Nery, considered a vote of no confidence in Garcia and Wilson, Perez and Gonzalez, but ultimately decided against one. At the time, Kinnamon told them he believed the hiring process had been affected by politics.

Nery left COD last year to become president of Santa Ana College.

Last month, the trustees voted along the same 3-2 lines to extend Garcia’s contract through 2025 and give her a pay raise and an extended severance package, should she need one.

That decision came after results from the Nov. 8 election showed it was very likely that Kinnamon would defeat Wilson.

Baker says Garcia didn't talk to him after she was hired

Once Garcia became president, Baker returned to his position as vice president for student services.

In the following year, how COD should manage construction projects became a politicized topic across the valley, with multiple cities clamoring for higher education development.

Baker claims Garcia and the three trustees who voted to hire her made statements to the public and the media about projects in Palm Springs and Cathedral City that were not true. He alleges that the board took actions regarding the projects that appeared to be politically motivated. The document submitted to COD does not outline what Baker believes was untrue. Beaman Jacinto said supporting evidence for most claims is usually revealed in the discovery phase of a trial.

Baker says he quickly reached out to welcome Garcia and offer her information for a successful transition of leadership. However, he claims Garcia “showed no interest in meeting” and “did not do so” after assuming office. He believes that his qualms about the hiring search and his close relationship with Kinnamon might have played a role in that.

He says that Garcia, hired in July 2021, reached out to him that August about his knowledge of the Palm Springs campus project, a roughly \$350 million project financed by taxpayer-approved bond funds.

Baker said in the complaint that he “did not know a lot about that project,” so he referred Garcia to another administrator, Scott Adkins. But Garcia, he says, did not consult with Adkins about the campus until January — nearly six months after she was hired and one month after the college fired the lead industry consultant for a planned learning hotel at the Palm Springs campus.

Adkins’s husband, Wonnie Short, a Tennessee businessman, donated \$10,000 to Kinnamon’s trustee campaign.

Baker also alleges that Garcia did not ask him about the roughly \$30 million Roadrunner Motors project, a planned automotive education center in Cathedral City. Garcia asked consultants and trustees to consider relocating plans for the center due to projected cost overruns.

Ultimately, Baker claims that Garcia, Perez and Gonzalez each made claims about the college’s operations under his tenure that are false and could hurt his reputation, and Wilson’s behavior led to administrative decisions that caused him reputational and emotional injury.

The complaint also says Garcia gave Baker “extensive negative criticism” in a performance evaluation submitted in August. He claims the evaluation failed to provide specific examples or facts to justify that criticism, and he says he was criticized for a project no longer under his

purview. He says he was also criticized by Garcia for “not communicating” while he was on COVID-19 medical leave in June and July.

Baker said in the complaint it was the first such criticism he has received in his career.

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