

Alleged corruption at HCC detailed

Former acting chancellor describes her accusations against community college trustees in ongoing lawsuit

By **Ericka Mellon**

The former acting chancellor of Houston Community College said she detailed numerous corruption allegations to authorities, including claims that current and former board members tried to steer taxpayer-funded contracts to supporters and to line their own pockets from HCC business deals.

In court records filed

Tuesday as part of an ongoing lawsuit with the college, Renee Byas offered the most comprehensive description yet of her communications with the FBI, the U.S. Attorney's Office and the Harris County District Attorney's Office.

Byas, ousted by the HCC board of trustees in 2014, listed an array of alleged acts that she found questionable over the last several years, the records show.

In one instance, she alleged, a board member took a free trip to the Caribbean with an HCC vendor on the vendor's plane. Another time, she claimed, a board member accused another in closed session of accepting bribes and kickbacks, and the accused starting punching that trustee.

Byas also said she told law enforcement authorities that three trustees tried to orchestrate a deal

in which the college would buy property and they would receive 10 percent of the money that HCC paid to the seller, according to the court records.

Byas, a lawyer who also served as HCC's general counsel, did not tie each allegation to specific trustees but said she talked to authorities about eight current or former trustees and believed they attempted to violate the law or did so.

"The allegations directed at HCC in this lawsuit continue to be unounded," said Grant Harvey, an

attorney representing the college.

"Many of the allegations referenced in Tuesday court filings are years of concern individuals who are no longer HCC trustees, and have no actual relevance to the pending lawsuit. HCC looks forward to refuting the claim in court."

HCC, one of the nation's largest community colleges, filed a civil lawsuit in September asking the court to declare Byas' last employment contract exte

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HCC demands Byas' complete disclosure

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sion invalid. In response, Byas filed a whistleblower claim.

As part of the case, HCC asked Byas to answer written questions about her reports to law enforcement. HCC filed her answers with the court on Tuesday and has asked the judge to compel Byas to disclose phone records and the names of federal agents with whom she communicated.

HCC said it is entitled to the information "to corroborate or disprove key aspects of Byas' whistleblower claim, including whether Byas did, in fact, meet with or speak to the FBI on the dates she claims and, if so, about what they spoke (i.e., whether she was truly making a good faith report of legal violations to the law enforce-

ment authority)."

Byas said she communicated with law enforcement officials as early as 2011 and as recently as June 2014.

She said an FBI special agent called her in July 2014, but she did not return his call.

In addition, Byas said, she has provided documents to an assistant U.S. attorney who had obtained a subpoena for HCC records related to vendors, the issuance of bonds, bond counsel, financial advisers and the bid process.

HCC has drawn scrutiny for years over alleged conflicts of interest and has hired law firms to conduct several investigations. No criminal charges have resulted.

The Houston Chronicle reported in September 2011 that the FBI was investi-

gating possible corruption at HCC.

The status of the probe is unclear.

The FBI typically does not comment on the existence of investigations.

Byas, in her recent written responses to the college's questions, said HCC trustees asked her to "circumvent" the procurement process and award contracts to their "friends, supporters, or business contacts," the court records show. She also alleged that trustees had conducted personal business with vendors of the college and that vendors and trustees would exchange text messages before votes on contracts.

A hearing in the case is scheduled for Monday.

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