

State Center district chancellor Deborah Blue's status up in the air

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By John Ellis and Hannah Furfaro

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Months of speculation about the future of State Center Community College District Chancellor Deborah Blue appear to be coming to a head Tuesday, when the district's board is scheduled to discuss her contract.

For at least the last week, her supporters have believed the board is prepared to fire her. There's been letters of support from Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin and [Fresno Unified School District Superintendent Michael Hanson](#), and Fresno City Council Member Oliver Baines has also taken up Blue's cause.

Some of her supporters have suggested that race may be an issue. Blue is African-American.

Her job status has been the topic of two special meetings this year, each with only one agenda item: public employee discipline/dismissal/release. The latest, on Saturday morning, drew a crowd of 40 with nearly a dozen speaking in support of Blue. Board members refuse to talk publicly, saying it is a personnel matter. They won't even acknowledge that the personnel matter is about Blue.

The closed-session item is back on another special meeting agenda, to be discussed Tuesday afternoon at Reedley College before the board's regular meeting. But [in announcing Tuesday's special meeting](#) on Monday, the district added an open-session item: approval of amended employment agreement for chancellor.

The political drama took a turn over the weekend when a couple of Blue's supporters suggested race is playing a role in her employment status.

Fresno resident Carolyn Dickson, in addressing the board on Saturday, said Blue's absence at a meeting in which she is being discussed "almost reminded me of you guys wearing sheets over your head ... I will just call it as it is, that you don't have the gumption to face her to tell her what is going on in this meeting."

As those comments were aired publicly, Angie Barfield -- whose husband Greg is Baines' chief of staff -- was sending out several tweets about the meeting. In one, she said trustees should be

"ashamed" for trying to fire Blue, the district's first African-American chancellor, the day after the end of Black History Month.

In another, Barfield said she was "a black woman who fights for the education of our youth. Dr. Deb Blue is a leader and inspiration. Time to stop hating."

Baines, who also addressed trustees and described himself as Blue's friend, said he doesn't think her employment status is racially driven, but "the perception of racism is there."

"The reason people think it's racial is because of the way the process is looking," he said. "The way this is unfolding, from the public's perception, it is a clearly discernible reason."

On Monday, Barfield echoed Baines: "The perception (of racism) is there, but there's no proof that there is. When you don't have proof, what do you do?"

Barfield -- who said she locked her Twitter account Sunday after getting some unwanted followers -- said none of her questions were answered at Saturday's meeting, which means she still wonders if race is an issue.

Dickson could not be reached.

Fresno Unified Trustee Cal Johnson said he'd worked for the State Center district for three decades and was "instrumental I believe, in changing the complexion of the district, because when I first came, we did not have that many people of color."

He then said he "always talked about that we needed people to work in the white house," his reference to the State Center administration building on Weldon Avenue near Fresno City College. "It appears to me hearing the whispering campaign that is going on, that we are not going to have a person of color at the top of the helm anymore."

Carol Drake, a Fresno City College dean emeritus who retired in December, said rumors began floating after the State Center's seven-member board met behind closed doors on Jan. 16 and again Saturday.

Baines said it is obvious that Blue is under fire because she's the only person trustees really hire and fire.

I know some board members and I respect them very much," Baines said. "But from the public's point of view, no one knows why (her job is in question). You start to question, 'What is this all about?' It's very hard to understand why a public body would take this course of what is seemingly a popular figure."

Swearingin recently appointed Blue to her Presidents' Council, a nearly two-dozen member advisory panel of education, business and other industry leaders intended to help with the city's long-term planning.

In her letter dated Feb. 27, Swearingin gave Blue kudos for helping launch the executive group, calling her a "key proponent of this collaboration."

The mayor acknowledged her close relationship with Blue, saying they've worked together since Blue's earliest days as chancellor to tackle Fresno's unemployment challenges.

In a letter dated Feb. 28, Hanson lauded Blue for her willingness to partner with Fresno Unified.

For example, he said, Blue recently agreed to co-organize college readiness and financial aid events with Fresno schools. Hanson also thanked Blue for backing a new district plan that gives Fresno high school students more access to community college classes before they graduate.

Blue, who has served as the State Center chancellor since 2010, was hired to replace Chancellor Tom Crow. She manages Fresno City College, Reedley College and several smaller campuses across Fresno and Madera counties.

The Illinois native oversees 2,980 faculty and staff. Her last reported salary in 2012 was \$223,000.

Blue is a former associate dean at Fresno City College. She previously worked as an administrator at Contra Costa Community College District and Oakland-based Laney College.

In January, she was tapped as one of seven semifinalists for a top community college post in Louisiana.

The Louisiana Community and Technical College board then picked Blue and three others to interview in the final round. A candidate who leads a community college near New Orleans was ultimately selected for the job.

Although Blue said little publicly about her job search, she told The Bee in an email she was recruited for the position.

Blue could not be reached for comment about her State Center job status and trustees Isabel Barreras, Richard Caglia, Pat Patterson and Eric Payne declined to comment, calling it a personnel matter. Trustees John Leal, Ronald Nishinaka and Dorothy Smith could not be reached for comment.

Ongoing coverage: [Crowd packs Tuesday public forum to support Blue](#)

The reporters can be reached at (559) 441-6330, jellis@fresnobee.com or johnellis24 on Twitter, or hurfaro@fresnobee.com or @hannahfurfaro on Twitter.

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