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LOCAL

MSU Board of Trustees continues to support Simon

Eric Lacy and RJ Wolcott Lansing State Journal

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Michigan State University Board of Trustees Chairman Brian Breslin said Friday that Lou Anna Simon will continue to lead the university, even as calls for her resignation intensify as the Larry Nassar case continues.

"Through this terrible situation, the university has been perceived as tone deaf, unresponsive and insensitive to the victims," Breslin said Friday afternoon, following a five-hour-long meeting of the board. "We understand the public's faith has been shaken. The Board has listened and heard the victims."

Noting that the board earlier Friday had asked state Attorney General Bill Schuette's Office to review the events surrounding the Nassar case, Breslin said "as information is presented, the Board will act. This can never happen again.

"We continue to believe President Simon is the right leader for the university and she has our support."

He did not answer questions after making the statement.

This week's sentencing hearing for Nassar, the former MSU and USA Gymnastics doctor, has focused national attention on the sexual abuse that Nassar perpetrated for decades, frequently under the guise of medical treatment, and on what MSU's leaders might have done to stop it.

Nassar has pleaded guilty to 10 counts of sexual assault in Ingham and Eaton counties, all but one related to the abuse of a patient, but more than 140 women and girls have alleged he abused them. Dozens have read statements this week in Ingham County Circuit Court, where he is being sentenced on seven of those charges.

Rachael Denhollander, the first of Nassar's victims to come forward publicly, said she found it "appalling" that the board had again come out in support of Simon.

"Simon could have come out the hero here," she said, "and that's what we wanted. That's what I wanted. The fact of the matter is she had employees who horrifically mishandled sexual assault allegations not only once, not twice, but over and over and over again."

Simon said in a statement released after Friday's meeting that she appreciates the board's confidence and that of "the many people who have reached out to me.

"I have always done my best to lead MSU." she said, "and I will continue to do so today and tomorrow."

Yet the calls for Simon's resignation did not diminish despite the promise of an external investigation.

State Sen. Curtis Hertel Jr., D-Meridian Township, said MSU's request to Schuette didn't satisfy him. He and Rep. Sam Singh, D-East Lansing, called for Simon's resignation on Thursday.

"There's a difference between criminal liability and moral liability," Hertel said Friday. "I don't think we're all saying that a crime was committed. We're saying that a culture was created where survivors don't feel safe and don't feel they were being listened to. And I don't think the attorney general can answer that question."

Also Thursday, state Senate leaders called for Simon to step down and the cover of The State News, MSU's student newspaper, said "President Simon, RESIGN."

That night, Associated Students of Michigan State University, the university's student government, passed a resolution saying "we, as undergraduate students, no longer have the faith and confidence in the current administration of Michigan State University to carry out the duties of fostering a safe and secure campus atmosphere."

On Friday, ASMSU' President Lorenzo Santavicca said the board's continued support of Simon, "Runs contrary to where we stand on this issue. It shows the trustees are not in touch with students on this matter."

That feeling was shared by others around campus on Friday.

"I'm angry," said sophomore Michelle Tolman, 20, of Grand Rapids. "Did the board not listen to what was being said in court? How can they say they heard the victims and then decide to

keep her? We need complete new leadership."

Junior Cole Smith, 21, of DeWitt, said he's beyond upset. "There is no accountability," he said. "She should resign. It was on her watch. She can't justify staying."

The Board of Trustees' letter to Schuette suggested they are aware of such strong public sentiments.

"Although we have confidence in the integrity of the various reviews already conducted by law enforcement, subject matter experts and outside counsel to the university, we are making this request because we believe your review may be needed to answer the public's questions concerning MSU's handling of the Nassar situation."

Schuette said in a statement that "a full and complete review, report and recommendation of what occurred at Michigan State University is required and I will provide that.

"However, this week and the coming weeks are time for the survivors of Larry Nassar to have their day in court, and I refuse to upstage their time for healing."

John Manly, an attorney who represents dozens of the women and girls who are suing MSU, called the request too little, too late.

"MSU, its president and board first misrepresented they did an investigation with a former prosecutor," he said. "That turned out to be a lie. MSU until now has fiercely resisted all calls of Nassar's victims, victim advocates, political leaders and the press for the sunshine of an independent investigation.

"The only reason Ms. Simon asked for one today is because MSU's culpability has been exposed."

The perception that the university has been less than forthright about the facts of the case could have consequences.

On Friday, state House Speaker Tom Leonard called on the state Legislature to open investigations of MSU's handling of the Nassar case.

MSU has "refused to reveal the events that occurred on its campus" despite unanswered questions and public calls for greater transparency, the DeWitt Township Republican wrote in a letter addressed to Rep. Klint Kesto, R-Commerce Township, who chairs the Law and Justice Committee and to state Rep. Kim Lasata, R-Bainbridge Township, who chairs of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education.

Kesto said Friday that he wanted MSU officials in front of his committee “ASAP.”

“We're gonna look at why, when people were told and notified of these heinous crimes and these heinous actions, that nobody did anything about it,” he said. “We're going to get transparency and we're going to get accountability, for the Legislature, for the people of Michigan, and most importantly, for the victims.”

On Friday, State Rep. Jim Runestad, a White Lake Republican and chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, called for an amendment to the state budget that would require public universities and colleges to report their legal fees to the Legislature.

Runestad first called for the change last year, “as a means of acquiring information on the number of students, faculty and staff who pursue lawsuits on free speech rights violations on public campuses,” he said in a statement, but renewed that call on Friday in light of the Nassar case.

Lawmakers' power over MSU and other universities is limited. The state constitution puts MSU under the control of its independently elected board. The Legislature’s main avenue for oversight is their power over the appropriation of state funds, which make up about 20% of MSU’s \$1.3 billion annual operating budget.

Surrounded by reporters while waiting for an elevator, MSU Trustee Joel Ferguson was asked whether he was worried about those lawmakers taking aim at MSU when state appropriations are decided.

“I’m dealing with today,” he responded. “I’m just sorry that we have a slow elevator.”

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