ROBERT CHAMPION HAZING CASE

PRESIDENT RESIGNS AMID FAMU SCANDAL

JOE BURBANK/STAFF FILE PHOTO

FAMU President James Ammons, shown at the June 19 Board of Governors luncheon at UCF, said Wednesday that he will resign.

Ammons hopes to take post in faculty

By Denise-Marie Balona | Staff Writer

Florida A&M University President James Ammons resigned Wednesday amid a growing scandal over the hazing death of drum major Robert Champion and widespread criticism over management of the university.

Ammons, who just completed his fifth year as FAMU's 10th president, submitted his resignation to the university's board of trustees on the same day that Champion's parents filed a lawsuit in Orlando blaming the school, in part, for their son's beating death.

Ammons' decision also comes a month after trustees gave him a vote of no confidence and days after incoming state Senate President Don Gaetz said he wanted a joint legislative review of the financial, academic and other problems uncovered by the Orlando Sentinel since Champion's hazing in Orlando last fall.

In his resignation letter, Ammons said he plans to retire Oct. 11 and, at some point, to take a faculty position at FAMU, his alma

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Pam Champion, right, and husband Robert announce lawsuit in son's death. **A12**

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mater.

But some trustees, during a teleconference held to discuss budget issues Wednesday, questioned whether Ammons should remain president that long.

"I don't think that having a lame-duck administration — a lame-duck leader — is a way to go into the fall term," said trustee Bill Jennings of Orlando, the board's longest-serving member.

Trustees agreed to meet Monday morning to discuss Ammons' departure and a process for selecting a new leader.

Some of Ammons' closest staff members in Tallahassee said his decision came as a surprise, despite the intense scrutiny he has faced lately.

Just weeks ago, he told the Sentinel he would not leave his job "until the final bell rings." After the vote of no confidence, he repeated his commitment to FAMU and insisted he would "fix things."

"We met with the president in this very room at 1 o'clock today, and it was a sober environment," Provost Larry Robinson said after Wednesday's teleconference, for which key administrators had gathered in the president's conference room.

Ammons was not present for the trustees' conference-call meeting and could not be reached for an interview. Robinson could not say whether he might accept the role as interim president if offered.

In his short resignation letter, Ammons did not mention hazing. But he did say he intended to help the university move past its "challenges."

"I am determined to move all of the major challenges toward resolution and move our university toward success," he wrote. "When the next president experiences her or his transition in, she or he will very likely find additional challenges, albeit not nearly to the extent of that which I faced at the outset, or those I am now facing."

Ammons' departure as president follows the recent retirements of longtime band director Julian White and veteran police Chief Calvin Ross.

Two music professors also were forced to quit about two months ago after it was discovered that they were present at a hazing event at the home of one of the professors in 2010.

Champion's mother, Pamela Champion, and the family's attorney applauded Ammons' decision to resign.

"As I've always stated," Pamela Champion said, "for this university to move forward, they have to do housecleaning, and that means taking care of the entities that are there in order to prevent something like this from happening again."

Dean Colson, chairman of the Board of Governors of the State University System, said the board is ready to help FAMU trustees "in order to fully resolve these challenges and ensure FAMU's future success."

Colson had sent trustees a letter just days before Ammons' vote of no confidence, urging them to hold him accountable.

"I realize that this must have been a very difficult decision for President Ammons and his family," he said in a prepared statement. "As the President candidly and correctly noted in his letter, there are challenges remaining at FAMU that 'must be met head on.' "

Trustee Chairman Solomon Badger, among Ammons' staunch supporters, expressed disappointment.

"I am saddened by President Ammons' decision to resign, but it is his choice to do so," he said in a prepared statement. "Given all that has transpired, it seems to be in the best interest of the University and I applaud him for putting FAMU ahead of his personal goals."

Ammons was hired in July 2007 to turn around the school, which was struggling with accreditation problems and financial mismanagement. But during the past year, the university has wrestled with a string of financial issues related to, among other things, submitting more than a dozen faulty internal audits to the state and spending money on marching-band members who were not FAMU students and did not qualify to be in the famous ensemble.

Three of those ineligible members were among the 11 people charged in connection with Champion's beating death after performing at the Florida Classic football game in Orlando on Nov. 19.

Since his death, evidence has surfaced that points to a long-standing culture of hazing in the Marching 100 that the university did not, some say, do enough to control.

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement, meanwhile, is continuing to investigate financial irregularities at the school, and the Board of Governors is still looking into the school's response to hazing leading up to Champion's death.

On Wednesday, some trustees said the university should be careful about how it moves forward with the pending presidential transition. They argued for the need to be respectful of a leader who has accomplished many things and to carry themselves in a way that will not hurt their chances of attracting top-notch presidential candidates.

"There's a lot of emotion around this subject, for sure," said newly appointed trustee Cleve Warren of Jacksonville. "But there is a need for us to be genteel, if you will, in our treatment of it. Aggressive and assertive, for sure. But genteel nonetheless."