

Whoopi Goldberg's Cannabis Venture in NJ Faces Court Fight

Whoopi Goldberg's Marijuana Company and Convicted Ex-Mayor Face Off in Court

A cannabis venture backed by legendary actor and entrepreneur Whoopi Goldberg is locked in a legal battle with a nonprofit led by former Paterson, New Jersey, Mayor Joey Torres, who previously served prison time for corruption. The dispute underscores the challenges facing cannabis businesses attempting to navigate local approvals in communities with limited retail options.

Dispute Over Rent and Zoning

Goldberg's company, WhoopFam, and Torres' nonprofit, House of HOPE, have filed competing lawsuits over a stalled attempt to open a cannabis store in Paterson. At the heart of the case is a disagreement over unpaid rent and allegations of misrepresentation regarding zoning approvals.

House of HOPE claims WhoopFam owes back rent after halting monthly payments of \$5,665 in September 2024. The nonprofit filed suit in May, seeking \$52,514 in unpaid lease payments.

WhoopFam counters that it was misled by Torres and his team into believing the property they leased in September 2023 had already received necessary local approvals for a cannabis business. The company's July counterclaim alleges Torres assured them that both the mayor and City Council had signed off on the site—an assertion that proved inaccurate.

WhoopFam's Counterclaim

According to court filings, WhoopFam is seeking reimbursement of more than \$167,000 in expenses, including a \$60,000 application fee it paid to the city. The company argues that Torres either knew or should have known that the property lacked the proper zoning and approvals.

Without local authorization, the store never opened, leaving WhoopFam unable to advance its business plans despite having secured a state license.

Paterson's Limited Cannabis Market

The dispute comes against the backdrop of Paterson's limited cannabis retail options. Currently, the city has only one dispensary, a Green Thumb Industries store that previously operated as a medical-only location.

Efforts to approve at least three additional cannabis businesses in July 2023 failed because their proposed sites were deemed too close to homes, schools, or religious institutions. WhoopFam was not among those rejected applications but has struggled to gain traction locally despite its licensing win.

Partnership With House of HOPE

WhoopFam's initial lease with House of HOPE was framed as a partnership with a social equity focus. According to reports, the collaboration aimed to provide cannabis industry jobs for ex-offenders through WhoopFam's retail operations.

House of HOPE, founded in 2019 by Torres after he served 13 months in prison on corruption charges, positioned itself as a community-focused nonprofit. However, the failure to secure local approval derailed both the business venture and its associated workforce development goals.

Torres' Legal History

Joey Torres' involvement adds another layer of complexity to the dispute. Torres, who served as Paterson mayor until 2017, pleaded guilty to corruption charges that year and was sentenced to prison. He was convicted again in 2023 after launching a reelection campaign despite being legally barred from holding public office in New Jersey.

It remains unclear how Torres and Goldberg became connected or how the partnership between WhoopFam and House of HOPE was initially formed.

Broader Implications for Cannabis Businesses

The WhoopFam dispute highlights ongoing barriers that cannabis companies face when trying to expand into communities with strict zoning rules and political complexities. Even with a state-issued license, businesses can find themselves entangled in costly legal and regulatory hurdles at the local level.

For Whoopi Goldberg's WhoopFam, the outcome of the court battle could determine whether the company is able to establish its presence in Paterson—or whether the stalled project becomes a costly setback in its expansion plans.

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