The new administrator for the Florida Department of Health in Leon County doesn’t start her new job until June, but her hire by the Florida State University College of Medicine as part of an agreement with DOH has come under fire.

Claudia Blackburn, who most recently served as health director of the Sedgwick County Health Department in Wichita, Kan., was selected by FSU and DOH after a national search this spring to run the state’s health department. Under the terms of the employee exchange agreement signed in April, she will be a university employee assigned to the state health department. She will report to and be supervised by DOH’s deputy secretary for statewide services, as is the case for all of the state’s 67 county health administrators.

Florida law allows for such employee exchanges between state agencies and universities. A similar arrangement exists between the University of South Florida and state health departments in Polk and Hillsborough counties.

"Working in partnership with the university provides an enhanced opportunity to recruit the best qualified candidates from around the nation," DOH Deputy Press Secretary Pamela Crane said.

But Leon County Commissioner Bill Proctor, along with outspoken minority public health advocate Dr. Ed Holifield, question the motives of the FSU-DOH partnership and condemn the lack of community input into Blackburn’s hiring. The county commission ratified her selection April 8, after it was added to the commission agenda at the last minute as an add-on item.

In a fiery May 1 letter to state Surgeon General Dr. John Armstrong, Proctor blasted the move as an FSU takeover of the county health department that is not in the best interest of its mostly black clients.

"This questionable contractual relationship is unprecedented in Leon County and caught the County Commission by surprise," wrote Proctor, who approved Blackburn’s appointment, but expressed concern at the meeting that Florida A&M University’s College of Pharmacy was not involved in her selection. “This situation is offensive in nature, questionable in law and perplexing as to the political dynamics it foretells."

FSU College of Medicine’s Dr. Les Beitsch, who worked with DOH on the agreement and was involved in the candidate search, called the new partnership “a win for everyone.” A longtime DOH official, former agency deputy secretary and Commissioner of Health for Oklahoma before joining FSU’s medical school, Beitsch stressed that such collaborations help, not hurt the community.

"It's not a Florida State University takeover of the health department," said Beitsch, chairman of medical humanities and social sciences for the college. “This is meant to strengthen everyone’s capacity and capability.”

Through the partnership, Beitsch said Leon County was able to attract a “very high-caliber individual” in Blackburn. She officially will be a visiting assistant professor at the medical school with an annual salary of $122,000, all but 11 percent of which will be paid by DOH. The balance will come from university grant and contract money. Her contract is for one year and can be renewed annually.

“she is a very community-minded and civicly engaged person and I think that is an area the health department can benefit from in a very strong way,” he added. “I am tremendously excited about having her on board.”

Holifield, however, said Blackburn was “rammed down the throats of the black community.” In an email, he wrote: “Will she too be fired if she dares to open her mouth like Homer Rice, or was Claudia Blackburn chosen because she has provided assurances that she will keep her mouth closed despite crisis health conditions affecting black people in Leon County?”

Rice, the county’s former director, was forced by DOH to retire last year after making public comments about Florida’s poor access to health care rates.

In his letter to Armstrong, the surgeon general, Proctor said a local person would have been better suited to run the county health department.

"It seems (Blackburn’s) lack of knowledge of our area is the obvious asset she brings to be a ventriloquist to execute an unpublished agenda," he wrote.
Beitsch was flummoxed by the criticism.

“I have never been hounded so relentlessly for having a purer motive,” he said. “There is no personal gain for any of us, the only intent is to serve the community.”