

Dixon defends salary increase: Mayor says she, others deserved increases because city employee union members also got pay hikes

Annie Linskey, Baltimore Sun, December 10, 2008

Mayor Sheila Dixon rejected suggestions that she give back a \$3,700 pay increase quietly granted last month, saying city law would not allow such a move.

Mayor Sheila Dixon plans to keep a \$3,700 pay raise despite a public outcry and pledges from some City Council members to return or donate their equivalent cost-of-living adjustments.

Asked Wednesday whether she would give the raise to charity, Dixon said at a news conference: "To be honest with you, no, 26 1/27 percent, based on what I do seven days a week, 24 hours [a day], trying to raise a family, a daughter in college." The mayor will now make \$151,700 yearly.

But City Council members fielded angry phone calls and e-mails from constituents after being blasted on talk radio for accepting raises while simultaneously calling for cuts to city services. A third of those on the 15-member panel said they would give the raise that lifted their salaries to \$58,425 back to the city or to a charity.

One councilman was talking Wednesday about amending the city charter to prohibit elected officials from receiving increases during times of projected deficits. Such a change, however, could take years.

The cost-of-living increases for Dixon, Comptroller Joan M. Pratt, City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake and members of the City Council were approved on the day before Thanksgiving with no discussion by the five-member Board of Estimates, on which all three women sit.

The raises come at a time when the city is reducing police and fire overtime and canceling midlevel management salary increases to close a budget shortfall. The paperwork for the raises listed only salary grades, and did not note that the positions were held by elected officials.

Pratt and Rawlings-Blake were circumspect when asked about the raises, which bring their salaries to \$100,450.

Pratt said that she would "possibly" return her \$2,400 increase. Rawlings-Blake, who received the same raise, did not answer the question. Her spokesman did not reply to an e-mail asking about her plans.

Some leaders pointed out that the increases were fair, because fire, police and city unionized workers received 3 percent pay increases this year.

"What ever city employees get, we should get," said City Councilman Nicholas

D'Adamo, who will receive a \$1,425 raise.

The pay increases had been set last year by the Elected Officials Wage Commission, which was established a year earlier through a ballot initiative designed to prevent politicians from having to vote on their own increase.

Even though the 2.5 percent raise had been set by the panel, city leaders concluded that the spending panel needed to approve the change.

The Board of Estimates agenda item listed a "salary adjustment" for job categories 88E, 887E, 83E and 81E, The Baltimore Sun reported Wednesday. There were no titles listed, and no discussion at a pre-meeting before the board formally convened or during the board's regular meeting. Other personnel items on the agenda included titles in addition to job categories.

Dixon, Pratt and Rawlings-Blake each abstained from voting on their own salaries. Rawlings-Blake also did not vote on the salary increases for her fellow council members.

Pratt's office prepares the weekly agenda. She did not return calls Tuesday or Wednesday seeking comment on why the items were listed without noting that they referred to elected officials.

Much of the criticism Wednesday focused more on the timing of raises than on the cost. Together, the increases amount to less than \$30,000 of a \$2.2 billion city operating budget.

"I wonder, why do this for just 2.5 percent?" said Matthew A. Crenson, an emeritus professor of political science at the Johns Hopkins University. "They could have made many more points [with voters] at a low cost by not taking it."

The state Republican Party implored the officials, all Democrats, to return their raises. "I certainly think that \$26,250 might save at least one job," party chairman James Pelura said in a statement.

Council Vice President Edward Reisinger was the highest-ranked city official to pledge to return his raise. "I know it is hard out there," he said. "People are getting laid off and making tough choices." He said would donate his \$1,575 raise to Child First, a nonprofit group that lost some city funding this year for after-school programs.

Councilman William H. Cole IV, who faces a furlough from his full-time job with the University of Baltimore and has three children, said he would donate his \$1,425 increase to charity that does work in his district.

"It is not the amount of money, it is the message," he said. Cole is also considering legislation that would make it possible to forgo pay increases in years when the city faces a budget deficit.

City Council members Warren Branch and Mary Pat Clarke said they would not accept their raises. Councilwoman Belinda Conaway said she would refuse her raise if city workers got laid off.

Another local official, Howard County Executive Kenneth Ulman, is also set to receive an automatic increase. Ulman, whose county is also facing fiscal shortfalls, said Wednesday that he would donate his \$7,000 raise to charity. "Ulman cannot in good conscience accept a pay raise when he is asking county employees to do more with less," said his spokesman, Kevin Enright, in an e-mail.

Noting that city union workers had already received a pay increase over the summer, Councilman Robert W. Curran said elected officials were the victims of bad timing. William Henry, who represents Northwest Baltimore on the council, will take his raise and wants to make legislative changes so the pay hike does not go through the Board of Estimates at all. That would take "the political differences out of it," he said.

The full-time job of Councilman William H. Cole IV was misstated in a previous version of this article. The Baltimore Sun regrets the error.