

Make youth funding a priority, group demands

By Sara Neufeld, Baltimore Sun, December 11, 2008

Nearly 1,000 members of a Baltimore advocacy group gathered at a church last night to demand that, in trying economic times, funding for youth programming be a priority for the state and the city.

Members of Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development want Mayor Sheila Dixon to commit to spend the first 25 percent of any economic stimulus package from the incoming Obama administration on youth center renovations. Alternatively, the group says it would be satisfied if Dixon spent a quarter of the city's Rainy Day Fund - where it keeps its budget reserves - on youth violence-prevention programs.

Gathered at St. Matthew's Roman Catholic Church in Northeast Baltimore, the group also demanded that Gov. Martin O'Malley maintain at least a 1 percent funding increase for schools, or \$11 million for Baltimore.

"When times are hard, we're forced to make choices about what we value," said the Rev. Andrew Foster Connors, pastor of Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church. As he spoke, audience members opened umbrellas to symbolize the storm for children in a city beset by violence.

City schools chief Andres Alonso spoke at the event, pledging to travel with the group to Annapolis on Jan. 15 to lobby for funding. "It is unconscionable, unconscionable, for our budgets to be cut," he said.

BUILD also plans to rally at a city Board of Estimates meeting Dec. 17.

Ian Brennan, the mayor's spokesman, said Dixon cannot commit to spending federal stimulus money that could come with strings attached. And he said that tapping into the Rainy Day Fund would jeopardize the city's bond rating, hurting budgets long into the future.

Several City Council members - including Mary Pat Clarke, Robert Curran, Sharon Middleton, Jack Young, Helen Holton, Edward Reisinger and William H. Cole IV - have supported the stimulus package demand, but some are reluctant to use the Rainy Day Fund. Clarke, Curran, Middleton, Holton and Cole attended last night's event.

Rick Abbruzzese, a spokesman for O'Malley, said the governor does not intend to back away from his longtime commitment to education, but that the budget is "a work in progress" and "everything, unfortunately, is on the table."

The city faces an estimated \$65 million shortfall for the 2010 fiscal year. The state's projected budget gap for next year is about \$1 billion, with another \$200 million in cuts needed to keep the current year's budget balanced.

BUILD members say they understand those realities, but tough times require leaders to prioritize, and children should be at the top of the list, particularly given the recent string of youth homicides in the city. Twenty-five juveniles have been killed in Baltimore this year, including four in the past month.