

2 votes on city budget put off

Council, mayor offer no specifics

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Baltimore Sun, June 5, 2008

Baltimore officials abruptly canceled last night two City Council votes scheduled on the city budget, suggesting that last-minute negotiations over youth funding and property taxes might still be in play.

Minutes before a council committee was scheduled to vote on the \$2.94 billion budget, the City Council president's office announced that the hearing - and a council meeting on the budget scheduled for Monday - had been delayed indefinitely.

The decision ground this year's previously speedy budget process to a halt and raised questions about whether the council is attempting to slow down the approval to wrest concessions from Mayor Sheila Dixon's administration.

City Councilman Bernard C. "Jack" Young, chairman of the budget committee, said the council was working with the administration on "a series of issues." He declined to provide specifics.

Top aides to Dixon also declined to talk about specifics yesterday.

City Councilman William H. Cole IV, a freshman member who represents downtown and other central Baltimore neighborhoods, said he hoped to negotiate a way to pay for a 2-cent reduction in the property tax rate that was pulled out of the budget this year.

"I made a promise to my constituents that I would look for ways to preserve the 2-cent tax cut," Cole said. "There are other members of the council that have priorities that they would like to see funded. I think we continue to negotiate about a way to accomplish that."

Baltimore has taken a 2-cent bite out of the property tax rate, the highest in the state, every year for the past three years. In April, Dixon said the downturn in the economy had forced the city to not make that cut this year.

The city estimates that the property tax reduction would cost \$5.4 million.

A statement released by City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake 45 minutes before yesterday's hearing announced that the committee would delay voting on the budget and also would cancel a full City Council meeting Monday during which the council was expected to give final approval to Dixon's spending and taxation plan.

The committee also did not vote on the budget for the city schools.

Through her spokesman, Rawlings-Blake declined a request for an interview but released a follow-up statement noting that the council technically has until June 25 - five days before the July 1 start of the 2009 fiscal year - to approve the budget.

"The simple truth is that the council needs more time and we have more time to carefully review important priorities as part of the budget process," the statement read.

The sudden and guarded nature of the announcement - on the heels of a relatively benign budget process -- fueled speculation about behind-the-scenes negotiations.

The decision was made on the same day that Dixon met with advocates for Peer to Peer, a youth tutoring program that has been staging protests, including a recent hunger strike, and lobbying City Hall for \$3 million.

Hathaway Ferebee, executive director of the Safe & Sound Campaign - a nonprofit that has lobbied for the funding - said it is a good sign that the council is taking a closer look at the budget.

"I think that's great news," Ferebee said. "I just think it's wonderful that the mayor is so reasonable and thoughtful in working with young people."

Asked about the meeting earlier yesterday, Dixon noted that she had put more than \$14 million into the budget for other youth programs this year and said the Peer to Peer advocates had been disruptive.

"I'm not going to allow that," Dixon said at a morning news conference. "They have to come and sit down and be able to compromise. If they're not willing to do that, then I'm not going to move forward. I already know what I'm doing in this city to provide support to young people."