

Baltimore City Council defies Dixon over budget cuts - Mayor's priorities cut in bid to press her to restore funding

By Annie Linskey, *Baltimore Sun*, June 12, 2009

The Baltimore City Council asserted itself on a budget battle for the first time in more than a decade Thursday evening, stripping money from Mayor Sheila Dixon's \$2.4 billion spending plan.

The move is designed to press Dixon to restore money for recreation centers, pools and other programs by cutting \$1.1 million from the mayor's other priorities. And it sends a clear message: This City Council has the votes to act independently.

"I knew we'd get this," City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake said after the votes. "I wasn't sure who the eight or nine votes would be. We are representing the concerns of our constituents. We are bombarded with constituents who want us doing more with less."

Dixon said she was "blindsided" by the cuts and that her staff only learned about proposed amendments in an e-mail about 11 a.m. "The council is exercising its legislative role," she said. "Am I disappointed? Yes. This was a difficult budget. We've already made some adjustments. So this is going beyond that."

The mayor gave little indication about what she would do next. In the past, Dixon has said she would put any money the council cuts toward a property tax reduction and would not change her budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1. Such tax relief would only be a fraction of a penny per \$100 in assessed value.

Baltimore's charter gives the City Council little power in shaping city spending: It can cut funds from the mayor's proposed budget, but cannot move money to other programs. The council so often acquiesces to the administration's will that even some members refer to it as a rubber stamp.

This year was different. Just weeks after Dixon outlined proposed cuts to make up an expected \$65 million budget gap, the council countered with a resolution condemning parts of her proposal.

Dixon administration officials started Thursday's hearing with a peace offering: They suggested adding \$270,000 for child care centers, summer programs and pools. But for some members of the council, that did not go far enough.

Led by Budget Chairman Bernard C. "Jack" Young, the council quickly took up one amendment after another, passing three of the four amendments offered by Rawlings-Blake.

The council reduced funds for the Mayor's Office of International and Immigrant Affairs, Cable and Communications and the inspector general's office. Acting on an amendment offered by Councilman William H. Cole IV, the council cut money to the city solicitor's office, reducing by \$181,239 the funds that can be spent on outside lawyers.

Then, in a move that caught some by surprise, Cole asked that the council vote to keep the budget in committee. That ensures that the battle over the budget will continue.

The procedural move angered Councilman Robert W. Curran: "I am not going to hold a gun to the mayor's head," he shouted. "That is what we are doing. I am not going to be one to hold a gun to the mayor's head."

He stormed out of the meeting.

Some council members were haunted by the past, making references to the last time the body stood up to the mayor. That was in June 1998, when the council sliced Kurt L. Schmoke's spending plan. Council members then, like now, were urging the mayor to restore funds to recreation centers.

But rather than returning that money to programs, Schmoke used it for a 3-cent reduction in the property tax rate.

"History tends to repeat itself," warned Councilwoman Rochelle "Rikki" Spector, who opposed the cuts. "You know, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing and expecting different results."

On Thursday, Dixon's legal and budget officials told the council repeatedly that the money cut cannot be put back into the general fund. So, if Dixon does not put the cuts toward a minor property tax reduction, they will go into an undesignated surplus fund.

But administration officials conceded that such money could be spent if the city needs it to plug a hole during the budget year.

The council insurrection was led by Rawlings-Blake, Young and Cole.

Other members expressed concern that cuts in their districts had not been restored. Councilwoman Belinda Conaway at one point held up her vote on an amendment while waiting to hear from the Finance Department whether a recreation center in her district would reopen. Not satisfied with the answer, she voted against the mayor.

The first amendment took \$39,000 from the Mayor's Office of International and Immigrant Affairs, a unit that reaches out to foreign countries to bolster cultural ties and trade with Baltimore. That office was set to receive a 45 percent spending increase to use for translation services.

The next amendment cut \$702,984 from the city government's cable channel. Council

members had expressed frustration with the department during a budget hearing, saying that its director is not responsive and rarely airs programs that are not focused on the mayor.

Dixon opposes that cut. "That is practically eliminating the whole function," she said.

The council also took \$200,000 from Inspector General Hilton Green's office, a department that has had a lackluster record. In the past two years, Green has investigated only a handful of cases that led to prosecutions, Rawlings-Blake said. She'd prefer to see his shop folded into the city's law department.

Dixon said she shares the council's concerns about the inspector general's office and is poised to making some changes. "Stay tuned," she said.

Absent from the meeting were council members Helen L. Holton and Nicholas D'Adamo.