

Council passes new budget - Often-angry debate, weekend of bargaining end with mayor's spending plan mostly intact

By Annie Linskey, *Baltimore Sun*, June 16, 2009

The Baltimore City Council passed a \$2.3 billion budget Monday, coming to an agreement with Mayor Sheila Dixon that left her spending plan largely intact despite weeks of often-heated debate.

The approval came after an unusually contentious budget battle that culminated last week when the council, angry that Dixon proposed closing recreation centers and fire companies, slashed money to some of the mayor's priorities. But after Dixon reached out to several members and promised to restore some funds, the council approved a budget that fell into line with what she wanted.

"The council made it clear to the mayor what their priorities were," said City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake. "Our job is to be an advocate and hold the administration accountable."

But it is not clear that the budget battle is entirely over. In a 9-5 vote, the council cut 40 percent - \$200,000 - from the inspector general's office, a reduction that Dixon opposes. Dixon is considering using her line-item veto authority to restore that cut.

Should Dixon veto that section of the budget, the council could offer another plan, but if it does not act, the funds would be restored to the inspector general's office.

Declining revenues had forced the mayor to cut \$65 million and propose reductions to summer programs, fire companies, libraries and recreation centers. The proposal ignited widespread protest from community members, with hundreds of young adults flooding the Inner Harbor this weekend asking for access to city-sponsored summer recreation.

The opposition to Mayor Dixon's proposed cuts led Rawlings-Blake to offer a series of amendments Thursday that cut \$1.1 million from the mayor's budget, the first time in a decade that a Baltimore City Council had made changes to the executive's spending plan. The council's cuts would have taken money from the city's cable station, translation services, outside legal fees and the inspector general's office.

"It was part of the whole negotiation process," Rawlings-Blake said Monday. The City Council can only make cuts to the budget, and cannot direct where the saving from those cuts can go. It does it so rarely that the body is viewed by many as a rubber stamp for the mayor's priorities.

But this weekend, Dixon contacted council members who opposed her budget, pledging, as she had previously, to restore summer camps at rec centers, child-care centers, a community action center and a fire engine company. Then, Monday afternoon, she met with council leaders saying she would dedicate more funds to Teach for America and the

Maryland Food Bank, two of the council president's priorities.

Dixon acknowledged Monday that this year's budget was difficult. "I think that my hair got grayer than I've ever seen it," Dixon said. Just back from a meeting of the nation's mayors in Rhode Island, she noted that Baltimore is far better off than other big cities, around the country where police officers and firefighters are being laid off or taxes have been increased.

Reaching out to council members this weekend paid off for Dixon, who called the final budget "responsible" and "right-sized."

"The main thing was the communication between the second floor [the mayor's office] and the council," said Councilman Edward Reisinger, who switched his vote and supported Dixon on Monday. He said a compromise could have been reached earlier if Dixon's office had done a better job specifying the cuts it planned to restore.

Councilwoman Belinda Conaway also switched her vote, siding with the mayor Monday after opposing her budget on Thursday. The reason, she said, was that a recreation center in her district was not on Thursday's list of centers to remain open. "I was very, very angry," Conaway said. But after exchanging e-mail with Dixon over the weekend, she was convinced that the mayor would find summer activities for young people in her district.

Councilwoman Agnes Welch also switched her vote to support Dixon. "I got my fire engine," Welch said, explaining her change of heart. Dixon said last week that she would keep open Engine Company 36 on Edmondson Avenue after initially requesting that it be replaced by a fire truck that could not pump water.

But others remained unconvinced. "If the choice is between kids and a cable station, I pick kids," said Councilman William H. Cole IV, who voted to cut funds from the city's cable access channel and have that money redirected to youth programming.