

Despite charges, Holton votes with City Council committee - Council president revoked her leadership role but let her remain active on panel

By Annie Linskey, Baltimore Sun, January 23, 2009

Baltimore City Councilwoman Helen L. Holton participated in hearings of a City Council finance committee, voting twice yesterday to sell city land, despite having been indicted this month for accepting a bribe from a developer who sought tax breaks from that committee.

City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake stripped Holton of her leadership position on the Taxation, Finance and Economic Development Committee on Jan. 8, the day after she was indicted.

Based on an e-mail from the council president's office, The Baltimore Sun reported that Holton had been removed from the committee outright. Yesterday, Rawlings-Blake's spokesman Ryan O'Doherty said he misspoke, confirming that Holton would remain a member of the committee. Holton did not respond to a phone message.

The hearing yesterday was the first since Holton's indictment.

Other council members publicly and privately expressed surprise that Holton remained on the panel. Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke said removing Holton from the committee would be "the right decision" while the legal case goes forward.

Councilman William H. Cole IV, who is acting as chairman of the committee, stressed that the votes yesterday were unanimous.

"She participated fully," he said. "She asked questions."

In one case, Cole said, a bill scheduled for a vote was held up after the city could not provide information that Holton requested about the appraised price for a piece of land it sought to sell.

Holton voted yesterday to sell three vacant city-owned houses in Sandtown-Winchester to a developer, Maryland 25 LLC, which plans to sell them at market rate after rehabilitation. The corporation will purchase them for \$5,000. Cole said the lead developer owns other property in that neighborhood.

Holton also voted to sell a piece of city-held land in Baltimore County to a business that plans to build a warehouse. She also participated in, and voted on, an investigative hearing she had organized about foreclosures in the city.

She was indicted this month after allegedly sending a \$12,500 bill for a political poll to a developer, who paid it. The developer, Ronald H. Lipscomb, was at the time working on projects for which her committee approved millions of dollars in tax breaks. She has said she did nothing wrong.

Lipscomb was also indicted on a bribery charge and has said through his lawyers that he is innocent.