

Clothes, tickets top officials' gift lists - Indictments heighten scrutiny of ethics forums

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

Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon received \$400 worth of tennis clothes, City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake attended nearly a dozen balls and Councilman James B. Kraft has some new tools.

This peek into the tastes and habits of the city's elected officials comes from the annual financial disclosure forms that they had to submit at the end of last month.

Disclosure (or nondisclosure) of gifts is at the heart of the corruption cases brought this year by the state prosecutor's office against Dixon and Councilwoman Helen Holton.

Dixon is accused of committing perjury by not disclosing trips, designer clothing and gift cards from developers, and Holton was indicted for not reporting a \$12,500 political poll for her district that she allegedly asked a developer to pay for. Both politicians say they are innocent.

The mayor reported receiving three gifts in 2008. One was a gift basket of chocolates worth \$100 from Michael Beatty, president of H&S Bakery, for Christmas, according to the mayor's disclosure form.

She also reported \$426 worth of workout clothes from Fila Inc. that she received after tossing the first serve at the PNC Tennis Classic in November. The clothing included two shorts, two shirts, a jacket and two pairs of \$95 tennis shoes.

The third gift was from a person who listed no business affiliation: It was a \$75 basket of flowers accompanied by a note, "Thank you for being a great mayor."

Scott Peterson, the mayor's spokesman, described the clothing as mementoes of a tennis event that included Serena Williams, and said all gifts were listed "in accordance with the law." The City Council president reported the most items. She listed 10 galas, four fundraisers, two Ravens games, five parties and eight dinners (including two sponsored by the Maryland Food Bank). For each event she listed tickets that cost either "\$50" or "\$50 plus."

Her spokesman, Ryan O'Doherty, said Rawlings-Blake disclosed more items than required.

"When it comes to openness and transparency in government, more is better than less," O'Doherty said in an e-mail.

Rawlings-Blake also reported free tickets to three events at 1st Mariner Arena: a

Jonas Brothers concert, an Alicia Keys concert and a circus.

Generally, officials are forbidden from receiving gifts from entities they regulate or groups that do business with the city, but there is an exemption allowing them to accept free tickets to events if the tickets are provided by the event sponsor.

Frank Remesch, general manager of the arena, said he commonly sets aside concert tickets for city and state officials.

"It's a city-owned building," he said.

No other elected officials listed concert tickets. In fact, most council members, including Holton, did not report any gifts.

One exception was Councilman James B. Kraft, who listed a \$20 case of beer and a \$40 portable tool kit from Ameriprise Financial Services in Columbia. Gifts under \$50 don't need to be reported.

Councilman William H. Cole IV didn't report any gifts, saying that he does not accept any that would require disclosure.

In what he called an "abundance of caution," Cole listed stock he owns, which is not required. His holdings include 12 shares of Ford Motor Co. bought last summer.

"One of the things about being in the public eye is people will scrutinize everything," Cole said.