

Trash talk may escape backlash - Many think Baltimore mayor's garbage plan will fly

by Janel Davis, *Gazette.net*, June 5, 2009

At another time, Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon's plan to reduce trash collection throughout the city could have sunk her political career.

But times have changed, and the fallout for tampering with as basic a quality-of-life issue as trash collection does not bring the dire consequences faced by politicians years ago, some observers say.

Forty years ago, New York City Mayor John Lindsay did not have the streets of Queens plowed following a snowstorm, which is another quality-of-life service. Many cite this failure as a reason his political career ended.

If Dixon's plan works as drawn up, city residents, in fact, could end up singing her praises. And even if it does not, according to some observers, council members are more likely to hear the complaints, and the mayor should experience only a minimal loss of votes, if she runs again.

Dixon's "One To One" plan reduces trash collection to once a week from the previous twice-weekly schedule and increases the collection of recyclables from every other week to weekly.

Dixon called the new schedule, which the City Council approved this week and begins July 14, a "lifestyle change," with the intention of pushing the city toward a greener future.

The plan is designed to save \$7 million and 200 jobs, she said, although 32 city government jobs were cut last week.

Without the legislation, 400 public works and sanitation workers would have been laid off, Dixon's administration said, and the city can collect more money through the sale of more frequently collected recycled items.

Typically, reducing trash collection can have political consequences, said Herb Smith, politics professor at McDaniel College in Westminster — but not this time.

"In many Baltimore neighborhoods, this will not be a great hardship," Smith said. "This will require ongoing education in areas of high density, but one of the principal features of Baltimore is single-family dwellings."

On Dixon's side is the "compelling" case the administration made for saving money, and the willingness of some neighborhoods to adopt environmentally friendly policies, McDaniel said.

Those advantages were missing when colorful politico William Donald Schaefer tried to reduce trash collections in the late 1970s.

Sen. George W. Della Jr. was on the City Council in 1979 when then-mayor Schaefer announced the plan.

"I told him, 'Boss, you can't do this,' and he told me, 'Junior, I am the mayor of Baltimore city. Not you, me,'" Della said.

Della sued, and won.

"The public applauded our effort because they couldn't concede to storing their trash in their home for a week," he said. "Now, recycling is good and they throw that in the mix, and it sounds good."

Della (D-Dist. 46) of Baltimore opposes Dixon's "One To One" plan, but does not believe the mayor's political well-being is in jeopardy as a result.

"I hope it works for her sake," he said. "Are there inconveniences for the public? You betcha."

But if things go wrong, residents will not reach out to the mayor, they will complain to their City Council member, Della said.

Still, there is some tangible opposition to Dixon's ambitious program.

Five of the 13 council members voted against the plan and several public works employees protested outside city hall this week, saying the program would threaten their jobs. Union officials said that if trash languishes on city streets, it will become a "public safety" issue.

One of the council members who voted against the legislation, William H. Cole IV (D-Dist. 11), worried that the city, as a whole, was not ready for the program.

"It's such a complicated issue," he said. "And to think we can be ready to roll this out July 14, I think, is a bit na