

Council decries inaccuracies, seethes over mayor's budget

By Julie Scharper, *The Baltimore Sun*, May 11, 2010

Baltimore City Council members railed against Mayor Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake's spending plan, complaining of a lack of transparency, in the first of what could prove to be a series of contentious hearings on the budget proposal.

A Monday afternoon hearing on the budget for the Mayor's Office of Cable and Communications stretched on for more than two hours — four times longer than originally scheduled — as council members griped over a plan that would essentially eliminate salaries for all employees of the office with the hope that they would be funded through other sources of revenue.

The mayor's chief of staff, Sophie Dagenais, said, "There's a disconnect between the budget book and the reality facing the agency," noting that although eight positions are listed in the budget, there is no guaranteed funding to pay their salaries.

City budget director Andrew Kleine called the \$412,000 in salaries "a placeholder" in case other funds are found. The salaries were originally to be paid from a special fund, but Finance Department staff members later learned that they could not be paid from that fund.

City Council members, who are considering Rawlings-Blake's \$50 million package of new taxes to help plug a \$121 million budget gap, decried the incomplete budget information. Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke said the administration had put the council in a "ridiculous position." "I've never seen a budget presented to this council in which a line of funding is a 'placeholder.' This has set us on a very ambivalent position on everything in this book and whether it is real or not real," she said, thumping the 837-page budget proposal.

Councilman William H. Cole IV reminded the others that the council had agreed last year to slash funding to the cable office, which has been criticized as a public relations vehicle, particularly under Mayor Sheila Dixon.

Rawlings-Blake cut more than \$700,000 in general funds from the cable office's budget and has said that she wants the station to focus on airing public meetings and hearings.

Council members said they were disturbed by inaccuracies in the budget book. Councilwoman Belinda Conaway, the budget committee chairwoman, scheduled another hearing on the cable office next week, saying, "The hearing did not go well."

"We have a bad situation here, and we're just getting started," said Councilman James B. Kraft. The budget hearings will continue through next week.