

Councilmania: Keeping tabs on the City Council's activities so you don't have to

By Andrea Appleton, *Baltimore City Paper*, June 14, 2010

The City Council moved forward more than a half dozen bills expected to generate \$20.3 million and help close the impending \$121 million budget deficit. A bill to tax video poker machines, aka "simulated slot machines," and legislation to increase fines for public drunkenness and urination were passed by the Council and are expected to bring in more than a million dollars combined. On June 10, the city's Taxation, Finance and Economic Development Committee moved another package of bills forward. This second round went before the full council for a vote on June 14 (for an update, visit citypaper.com/news).

Bill 10-0519 Fire and Police Employees' Retirement System -- Benefits

Would modify retirement benefits for police and firefighters through a number of measures. These include raising the years of service required and eliminating a variable benefit that increases payments when the stock market is strong but does not reduce them in years when it is weak.

The Read: If the city doesn't revamp the pension system or somehow raise \$65 million by the end of the month, it will be deeply in debt. This bill is an attempt to close that gap. Police and firefighters would have to log 25 years of service to be eligible for retirement, an increase of five years. (Those who turn 55 and have completed 15 years of service would also be eligible.) The variable benefit--an expensive feature of late, given the vagaries of the stock market--would be abolished in favor of a fixed cost-of-living increase. The board that handles the pension-investment fund would also be reconfigured.

The bill replaces an earlier attempt that faced heavy opposition from several unions representing public safety personnel. But despite concessions in this version, police and firefighter unions aren't likely to cave. They filed a federal lawsuit the week prior to the bill's introduction, contending that the city has underfunded the pension system for years.

Bill 10-0520 Elected Officials' Retirement System -- Modification

Would increase the amount elected officials are required to pay into their pension fund and increase the age at which retirees would receive benefits.

The Read: Councilmember William Cole IV (D-11th District) introduced this bill in response to public outcry over former Mayor Sheila Dixon's pension. As part of the plea bargain she signed upon leaving office over criminal charges, she was awarded \$83,000 annually. "This would bring us in line with other jurisdictions in Maryland and take us from one of the highest pension systems down to somewhere in the middle," Cole said. The bill, supported by the majority of the council, would increase elected officials'

pension fund contributions from 5 percent to 7 percent and raise the age of retirement with full benefits by five years, to 55.

Bill 10-0521 Charles Village Community Benefits District -- Board Representation

Would replace several representatives from the Better Greenmount Alliance on the Charles Village Community Benefits District Board with representatives from the Waverly Merchants Association.

Bill 10-0522 Required Parking for Bicycles

Would require bike parking in new or expanded commercial buildings.

The Read: According to Councilmember Mary Pat Clarke (D-14th District), who introduced the bill, "If you need to park your bicycle in a garage, hold on . . . It will not be long before you will be entitled to do so." In general, the legislation would require that commercial buildings include about one bicycle parking space per 10 vehicle parking spaces. The spaces would have to include either a bike rack or a bike locker.

Bill 10-0523 Residential Permit Parking -- Little Italy Area

In Baltimore, parking for non-permit holders in residential areas is generally limited to two hours at a time. This bill would allow non-permit holders in Little Italy to park for up to three hours.

Bill 10-0524 Campaign Signs in Residential Areas -- Repeal of Maximum-Size Restriction

Would repeal the size restriction on campaign signs in residential areas.

The Read: "The large signs, the small signs, we love them all," Councilwoman Belinda Conaway (D-7th District) said by way of introducing this bill. Most of Conaway's family--her father, mother, and brother--are elected officials.

Resolution 10-0211R Informational Hearing -- Lease Agreements for Baltimore City Properties

Asks representatives from city agencies involved in leasing city-owned property to report on whether market-rate calculations are used in lease agreements and whether adequate audits of city-owned property are done on a regular basis.

The Read: The city owns more than 45,000 acres of property in surrounding counties, on top of its acreage within city limits. In May, news reports revealed that a Baltimore County Councilmember had been leasing 20 acres of city-owned property near White Marsh for years for less than a quarter of fair-market price. This resolution asks city

agencies to investigate the White Marsh situation and explain the procedures governing the leasing of city-owned property.

Resolution 10 -- 0212R Informational Hearing -- 2010 Health Disparities Report Card

Asks the interim Health Commissioner to explain the disparities in health outcomes for Baltimore residents.

The Read: The first comprehensive examination of health disparities in the city, the 2010 Health Disparities Report Card, was recently released by the city's Health Department. It shows that there are large differences in health outcomes depending on one's gender, race, and socioeconomic status. These disparities--in conditions such as prostate cancer, heart disease, and diabetes--have gotten worse over the last 10 years. The resolution asks Health Department officials to appear before City Council and explain why.

The next City Council meeting is scheduled for June 21 at 5 p.m.