

4 council members vie for presidency - Young, Cole seen as front-runners for Rawlings-Blake's job

By Annie Linskey, *Baltimore Sun*, January 8, 2010

Now that City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake will become mayor in February, the job she is leaving is up for grabs and council members wasted little time expressing their interest in the office.

Baltimore's City Charter is clear on the process: The council members vote for a new leader once Rawlings-Blake vacates her fourth-floor office and moves two flights down to the mayor's suite. But the election could be messy, pitting old allies against one another. The winner will need support from eight of the 14 members.

"The transition on the second floor will be smoother than the transition on the fourth floor," predicted Councilwoman Rochelle "Rikki" Spector, who has not committed to a candidate. "We know who the mayor is going to be."

While four of her colleagues have expressed interest in the office, two are believed to be the front-runners: Councilmen Bernard C. "Jack" Young and William H. Cole IV. Young, who chairs the budget and public safety committees, has been the most eager. He's quietly been lobbying for the job for weeks.

Young is viewed by colleagues as having an independent voice and a hunger for higher office. The most recent campaign finance reports - from last January - showed that he had more money than Dixon.

"I'm very much interested," Young said of the council presidency. He said he began lobbying colleagues before Dixon resigned because he heard that others were putting out feelers. "I had to let people know what my intentions are."

Four council members reached Thursday said they're supporting him.

But the wheeling and dealing continues, mostly surreptitiously, so any speculation about how much support any candidate has is likely premature.

"There is a month before there is any vote on the council president," reminded Cole, a relative newcomer to the council and a former state delegate with ties to Rep. Elijah E. Cummings.

Cole's name has long been floated as a contender, but he was more circumspect about running.

"The mayor just resigned [Wednesday]," Cole said. "I need to talk to my colleagues. I'm more focused in making certain that Stephanie has a smooth transition."

The council president's office comes with trappings of power: a car, nice offices and a bigger budget. But in Baltimore, where the mayor controls the appropriations process and an army of city workers, the council president has limited influence.

Under the City Charter, the council president must be "a person of known integrity," at least 25 years old and a city resident for at least a year, said City Solicitor George Nilson. The council president does not have to be a current or former council member.

The charter does not spell out a time frame for appointing a replacement after the president leaves office, although the council will likely fill the position as soon as possible, he said.

Several council members say that Young's tendency to speak his mind is their reason for supporting him.

"I think it is important for the council to be independent from the mayor as much as possible," said one supporter, Councilman Bill Henry. "There are times when each [body] is a needed check on the other."

Young let the city's power brokers know of his plans. State Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden jokingly addressed him as "Mr. City Council President" after a City Hall news conference convened hours after Dixon announced her resignation.

But Young's sometimes brusque personality rubs some the wrong way. Councilman Nicholas D'Adamo Jr. said Young approached him a few weeks ago and asked for his support. "I said, 'Sit down and talk to me,' " D'Adamo said. "He wouldn't. He walked out."

D'Adamo said he's thinking of seeking the post himself, as did Councilwoman Belinda Conaway.

Cole is considered a close ally of Rawlings-Blake and frequently co-signs letters with her. He has stood with her when she criticized Dixon's land bank legislation. He provided a key vote for Rawlings-Blake's overhaul of live entertainment rules in the city, even though he represents neighborhoods deeply resistant to the legislation.

Several council members have for months privately discussed his candidacy - but none reached yesterday was willing to openly commit.

Young and Cole helped Rawlings-Blake mount a fight against the mayor's proposed budget this year, and they were instrumental in rounding up the votes to kill Dixon's initial spending plan. It was the first time in a decade that a mayor's spending plan had been rejected.

Former mayoral candidate and ex-Councilman Keiffer J. Mitchell Jr. has been floated as a possible candidate. He said he's not interested, but he opined that the best person for the job would be someone who could calm the waters.

"Right now, the most important thing the council president needs to do is bring stability," he said. "If it is a long, protracted fight, it continues to delay moving forward."

And if a current member does get the job, it would create another vacancy on the City Council. The remaining council members would elect a new representative to fill out the term.