

Rawlings-Blake calls anger over Dixon pension 'understandable' – Incoming mayor asks review of elected officials' benefit plans

By Julie Scharper, *Baltimore Sun*, January 12, 2010

Baltimore's mayor-to-be Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake vowed Monday to re-examine the city's pension plan for elected leaders in the wake of outrage over Mayor Sheila Dixon's \$83,000-a-year benefit and to strengthen ethics laws governing city officials.

"It's understandable that people are very upset about the prospect of a lifetime pension," City Council President Rawlings-Blake said during a lengthy interview with The Baltimore Sun's editorial board. "I know there are ways we can look at other pension systems around the country, to kind of close these loopholes."

It was her first extended public comment on the legal woes of Dixon, whom she will replace on Feb. 4. Dixon was convicted of embezzling gift cards meant for the poor and pleaded guilty to perjury for failing to disclose a developer's gifts on city ethics forms.

Rawlings-Blake stopped short of directly criticizing Dixon, but said, "I think it's pretty obvious. A jury of her peers felt strongly that she acted outside the law. It speaks for itself."

In the wake of ethics complaints raised during Dixon's trial, Rawlings-Blake said she was preparing to introduce bills to guide the city's policy, including changing the composition of the ethics board and a program of "continuing education" for elected officials.

"We are invested with so much as elected officials ... so integrity is important," she said. "It's important for the public to have confidence in the decisions we're making."

Rawlings-Blake spent the day juggling her current duties as council president with her coming responsibilities as the city's next mayor.

She met with Deputy Mayor Christopher Thomaskutty and City Solicitor George Nilson to prepare for the transition and, in the early evening, presided over the year's first City Council meeting.

Both Rawlings-Blake and Dixon attended a customary Monday luncheon hosted by the mayor for the council members, their first public appearance together since Dixon announced her resignation last week.

Since the mayor's trial began in November, the two leaders have rarely crossed paths at public events, except at meetings of the city's spending board, on which both sit.

Dixon appeared cheerful at the luncheon, joking with the council and handing out umbrellas as gifts to two members who celebrate birthdays this month. However, few council members stopped to chat with her, and she sat with a group of close advisers for most of the meeting.

Earlier in the day, Dixon joined in a ceremony marking the first day of service for a long-delayed free downtown shuttle paid for by parking tax revenue.

In her remarks to the editorial board, Rawlings-Blake answered questions in her trademark calm and methodical style, and made several references to her decade of work as a public defender.

She sketched out plans for dealing with the budget crisis, a looming issue involving pension payments for retired firefighters and police, and the city's goals for the General Assembly session, which begins Wednesday and ends after she is slated to be sworn-in.

Rawlings-Blake plans to attend the opening day ceremonies. Dixon does not intend to participate in a formal capacity, according to a spokesman. When asked who would lead the city's efforts during the session, Rawlings-Blake described it as a "difficult situation" and said "we're sort of feeling our way" through that decision.

She reiterated concerns about the rotating fire company closures and said they were meant as temporary fixes for the budget shortfall. And while she said raising property taxes would be a "last resort" to make up for plummeting revenue, it was "still on the table."

Dixon pleaded guilty last week to one count of perjury for failing to disclose on city ethics forms the gifts she received from a developer. As part of a plea deal, she will keep her \$83,000 pension. She will receive probation before judgment for the perjury count and the embezzlement conviction. She also must donate \$45,000 to charity and is banned from seeking city funds to pay her legal bills or working for the city or state during her probationary period.

A Facebook group titled "Sheila Dixon does not deserve an \$83,000 pension" has drawn more than 1,000 members and has announced plans to hold a protest on the steps of City Hall on Wednesday afternoon.

When asked about the terms of Dixon's plea, Rawlings-Blake said that she could not fully evaluate the deal because she was not privy to all the information uncovered by State Prosecutor Robert A. Rohrbaugh.

"He knows the strength of the case. He knows the cost," the council president said, adding that Rohrbaugh is a "smart guy" who "made a decision based on the best information he had."

Rawlings-Blake asked Councilman William H. Cole IV, a close ally on the council, to lead a review of pension plans for elected officials across the state.

"We're going to look at other jurisdictions with executive-based government to see if we're in line or not," said Cole, who chairs the council's taxation and finance committee. The analysis should be completed within the next week or two, he said.

A separate review of the fire and police pension program is expected to be submitted by the Greater Baltimore Committee next week.

At the evening council meeting, Rawlings-Blake, known for her reserved demeanor, was particularly conversational, telling a girl who spoke on behalf of a young women's mentoring group that pink was her favorite color, and praising Maryland Shock Trauma Center officials who were recognized with an award.

Afterward, when asked by a reporter if proposing ethics legislation was awkward in light of the mayor's conviction, Rawlings-Blake said, "Everything about this process is awkward."