

Measures would target ethical issues raised during Dixon probe

Baltimore Sun, January 26, 2010

Baltimore City Council members took the first step toward ethics reform Monday night when two bills were introduced to address issues that arose during the criminal investigation of Mayor Sheila Dixon, who resigned as part of a plea deal to resolve the case.

One measure, introduced by council member William H. Cole IV, was designed to close what some City Hall staff are calling the "Lipscomb loophole," for the developer and one-time boyfriend of Dixon Ronald H. Lipscomb, who gave her lavish gifts that she failed to disclose on her city ethics forms. Dixon pleaded guilty to one count of perjury for failing to report those gifts.

Dixon's defense had argued that she did not have to disclose them because Lipscomb did not meet the definition of someone doing business with the city. Cole's bill would clarify the definition and specify what officials are required to disclose.

The other bill was introduced by Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, who next week will become mayor. As she detailed in a *Baltimore Sun* interview, her proposal would reduce the mayor's influence over the city's board of ethics.

The mayor or staff who work at her will currently appoint all five members of the board. Rawlings-Blake's bill would turn over two of the appointments to the city council president and the comptroller. It also would require the board to file annual reports on its activities and require ethics training for officials and members of other city boards and commissions.

The bills, each of which was co-sponsored by a majority of the council members, were sent to the judiciary committee for review. Also sent to the committee was a proposal by council member Belinda K. Conaway to amend the charter to shrink the Board of Estimates, the city's spending panel, from five members to three as a way of reducing the mayor's influence on it.