

# **City To Strengthen Ethics Laws, Ethics Board**

## **Legislation Comes As Fallout From Dixon Corruption Case**

*WBALtv.com*, January 25, 2010

The most visible fallout from Mayor Sheila Dixon's criminal case will come on Feb. 4 when she resigns from office and Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake takes over, but the case may also lead to lasting, systemic changes.

Two bills will be introduced at Monday night's City Council meeting that are intended to strengthen public trust by eliminating legal loopholes. The bills are expected to toughen Baltimore's ethics law and overhaul the city's ethics board.

"These are real, concrete things that we're doing to ensure openness, transparency, and fairness," said Rawlings-Blake, who is pushing the board overhaul.

In its current state, it's completely controlled by the mayor.

According to the bills, the council president and controller would each nominate one ethics board member. The mayor would name three members -- two of whom must be members of the bar. The five-year terms would be also staggered.

The board will also be charged with filing an annual report, which will include recommendations to strengthen and enhance the city's ethics code.

A second measure sponsored by Councilman Bill Cole, D-District 11, seeks to clarify and expand the ethics law.

"People need to understand that their public officials are operating above board at all times -- that they're not being unduly influenced by gifts or by relationships that may in fact be polluting our process," Cole said.

The bill also spells out when a public servant must recuse him or herself from participating in an official act. It makes clear from whom they may solicit or accept gifts.

"When you have a prosecutor saying our ethics laws need reform, it's something to look at, and I think this is one area people generally agree that we need to close this loophole now," Cole said.

Behind the scenes, the bill is being called the Lipscomb Loophole, which aims at the heart of Dixon's defense argument -- that she wasn't obligated to disclose the gifts from developer Ron Lipscomb because he did not meet the definition of someone "doing business with the city."

Cole's bill would make that meaning clear. He said he's yet to feel pushback on the measure.

"I think it's too early to tell, but I think if you fall in that class where you can't give a gift, you're probably relieved, because it means you probably won't get solicited anymore," Cole said.

The measure also expands ethics training requirements to more public officials.

One official told 11 News the measures take the "I didn't know" excuse out of the equation.