

Council Member Shortage Puts City Ethics Bills On Hold

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A Baltimore City Council committee didn't have the requisite number of people Wednesday night to vote to tighten ethics rules. Two bills are pending before the Judiciary and Legislative Committee. The first gives a clearer definition of doing business with the city, and the second makes the city ethics board more independent.

But confusion and a lack of interest at the meeting indicated that a vote on ethics reform may not come quickly, I-Team lead investigative reporter Jayne Miller said.

Bill 10-0445 is known as the "Lipscomb Loophole." It's a reference to former Mayor Sheila Dixon's one-time boyfriend, developer Ron Lipscomb, and Dixon's argument during her trial that she didn't have to report the gifts he gave her because he didn't meet the technical definition of doing business with the city.

The bill better defines when gifts to city officials and employees have to be reported and the types of businesses covered by ethics rules, but the council meeting -- broadcast over the city's cable channel -- produced plenty of questions about it.

"I just need to understand what all the words mean in the definition of who you can and who you can't accept. Is this what this bill is -- who you can't accept gifts from?" questioned Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke.

Council President Jack Young questioned whether the new rules would apply to what he likes to do for community organizations. "I normally ask different companies, like Pepsi Cola or any other company, to contribute to the picnic. I can't do that anymore?" he asked. Legislative reference Avery Aisenstark confirmed that Pepsi does do business with the city. Young was then informed the scenario he raised is already covered under existing ethics law.

"I understand that, but there's a lot of things on the books, and it's always been muddy waters -- you might can, you might can't -- there's no clear direction," he said.

Both bills were to be considered for a vote at the meeting, but no vote came. *WBAL-TV 11 News* learned that the meeting started with the requisite number of people, even though committee members Bob Curran and Agnes Welch were no-shows, but Fourth District Baltimore City Councilman Bill Henry left the meeting early, putting progress of both bills on hold. Henry told *WBAL-TV 11 News* that he didn't realize there was going to be a vote.

Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and 11th District Councilman Bill Cole came up with legislation to revamp the city's business ethics laws.

"I just want to put on the record that this committee is choosing to delay the two most significant ethics reform bills in the last five years -- if not the last 20 -- because we do not have enough participants to vote," Cole said. The committee's chair responded to that by saying he was prepared to get a vote Wednesday night and that he'll try again on Monday.