

Members back overhaul of Baltimore Ethics Board - Panel also backs bill to bar officials from taking gifts

By Julie Scharper, *Baltimore Sun*, February 19, 2010

The members of Baltimore's Board of Ethics have given their blessing to a proposed overhaul that probably would lead to most of them losing their posts on the volunteer panel. The board also signaled its approval Thursday for a measure that would clarify laws barring Baltimore officials from accepting gifts from those doing business with the city.

Attorneys for then-Mayor Sheila Dixon argued after she was indicted last year that current laws did not bar her from accepting, nor require her to disclose, lavish gifts from a developer she had been dating. The new mayor, Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake, in one of her last acts as City Council president, introduced a bill last month that would limit the mayor's influence on the Ethics Board. Under her proposal, the council president and city comptroller would each appoint one member to the board and the mayor would name the other three members. Currently, four members are appointed by the mayor and the fifth is either the city solicitor, who serves at the mayor's will, or the solicitor's designee.

The Rawlings-Blake measure would preclude city or state employees from sitting on the ethics panel. At present, two board members, Labor Commissioner Deborah Moore-Carter and Deputy City Solicitor Donald R. Huskey are city employees, and a third, Alexander Chambers, is a teacher at City College.

The Ethics Board's chairwoman, Dana P. Moore, a senior attorney at the Venable law firm, said she would offer her resignation to enable Rawlings-Blake to select a new leader. Moore was appointed to the panel by then-Mayor Martin O'Malley in 2004 and named chair by Dixon in 2008. The fifth spot has been vacant for more than two years.

At Thursday's meeting, board members also discussed a bill proposed by Councilman William H. Cole IV that would bar Baltimore employees from accepting gifts from contractors or subcontractors during the duration of their contract with the city.

Dixon was charged with perjury and would later plead guilty after failing to disclose on city ethics forms that she had received gifts from Ronald H. Lipscomb, a developer whose projects had received tax breaks from the city. Dixon's lawyers argued that she had acted within the law because Lipscomb was a subcontractor and the ethics code did not bar gifts from subcontractors. She resigned from office and stepped down Feb. 4 as part of a plea agreement.

Moore suggested that the language in Cole's bill be tweaked so that it is "simple, clear and user-friendly." "We want everyone to be able to understand what is acceptable and what is not," she said.

Both ethics bills are to be discussed at a City Council hearing Wednesday.