

Rawlings-Blake plans to merge city agencies

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

Baltimore Mayor Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake plans to merge several city agencies, abolishing as many as 15 positions and saving up to \$1.5 million, The Baltimore Sun has learned.

Under the plan, the Commission on Aging would be folded into the Health Department, while the community relations, wage and disabilities commissions would be consolidated under a new Office of Civil Rights, according to a senior official who spoke anonymously because he was not authorized to publicly discuss the changes. Also, rat control duties would shift from the Health Department to Public Works.

The reorganization is part of an effort by the mayor to hack \$121 million from the city's \$2.2 billion budget. She will not formally introduce her preliminary budget until next week, but information about her plans has trickled out of City Hall and drawn outcries from city officials, unions and other groups affected by the deep cuts and an ambitious plan to boost revenue.

Among those protesting are hospitals, which would be hit with a tax of up to \$350 per bed.

"A proposal to significantly increase taxes on Johns Hopkins, on top of the \$7.3 million a year we already pay in energy, telecommunications and parking taxes, would present a serious challenge to our ability to continue to support the level of programming and the level of employment we now support," Hopkins spokesman Dennis O'Shea said.

Jim Reiter, a spokesman for the Maryland Hospital Association, said hospitals are already struggling because of decreased Medicaid fees and a flood of uninsured patients who cannot pay their bills.

Other revenue-generating measures the mayor is proposing include a tax on containers, such as plastic bottles, and higher telephone and energy taxes. City officials have often cited the need to extract more revenue from nonprofit institutions, which do not pay property taxes.

Nonprofits, which receive city services, should help shoulder the tax burden, Councilman William H. Cole IV said, because city residents already pay staggeringly high property taxes. "If you increase property taxes, you would tip the balance and push people out of the city," he said.

Rawlings-Blake is also considering a plan drafted by Councilman Robert W. Curran to impose an excise tax on video poker machines, commonly found in bars and convenience stores.

Under Curran's plan, either a flat or tiered tax would replace a state-collected amusement tax, which can be under-reported by the machines' owners. "I'm trying to remove an administrative nightmare by eliminating under-reporting," he said.

While the mayor has dangled new revenue sources as a way to ease her proposed cuts, her plan to eliminate several police units and close three fire companies drew some heat.

While Fire Chief James S. Clack said he was not "panicked" by the proposed cuts, they would delay responses to fires. "Anytime we lose resources, we're going to be a little bit slower, a little bit less efficient," he said.

But that could have a disastrous effect, said former Fire Chief William F. Goodwin. "A fire that burns for three minutes is exponentially more intense than one that burns for two minutes," he said.

Glennard Middleton, president of the local chapter of the [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees](#), decried potential job losses.

"Our members already provide the most necessary services to the city of Baltimore," he said. If they are laid off, "they would go on the city's social services, and the city would still have to pay."