

Jack Young breaks with mayor, says city's rec centers should stay open

Rec budget should be increased, Young says; City Council plans to hold hearings.

Mark Reutter, *Baltimore Brew*, October 18, 2011

The closing of recreation centers should not be an option, says Baltimore's second highest elected official.

City Council President Bernard C. "Jack" Young opposes the closing of recreation centers in a public break with Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake who is pushing to privatize rec centers and shut down many of them as a budget-cutting move.

"The council president does not believe that closing rec centers should be an option," his spokesman, Lester Davis, said today in response to questions from this website.

"He believes that rec centers are not extra money, not wasted money, but part of a public safety strategy. He believes they are an essential front-end strategy to bring a positive direction for our youth who might otherwise slip into negative outcomes."

Long an advocate of youth programs and founder of the PLAY (Productive Lives, Active Youth) campaign, Young has been conspicuously silent over Rawlings-Blake's plan to spin off half of the city's 55 rec centers and close down centers that do not have private sponsorship.

In a follow-up interview, Davis said the council president "believes that *increased* funding for recreation is a strategy that benefits the entire city of Baltimore."

The statement came as Councilman Bill Henry (4th District) announced that he would introduce a resolution to hold council hearings on the mayor's rec plans on Nov 2.

Mayor's Plan "Not Viable," Says Budget Committee Chair

As news spread last week that [as many as 18 facilities](#) could be shut after Dec. 31, council members have become increasingly wary of the mayor's plan to "transition" the facilities to private management. Several said they are getting negative feedback from community groups and parents worried that their local rec center will be closed.

Belinda K. Conaway, chair of the budget and appropriations committee, told *The Brew* tonight, "What the mayor is proposing is not viable, in my opinion, and it is not what we were told during the budget process."

In budget hearings, Conaway said, "we were led to believe that several organizations were interested in partnering to run rec centers."

“Citizens should be outraged,” she continued. “They should demand to know what the [mayor’s] plan is.... I’ve said to people, ‘call the other challenged neighborhoods.’ They should come together to demand that their rec centers be saved.”

(Conaway is running as a write-in candidate in the Nov. 8. general election after losing to Nick Mosby in the 7th District primary.)

Other council members have privately said they were misled by Greg Bayor, director of Recreation and Parks, who said in testimony last June that no rec centers would be closed this year.

Bayor was technically correct. With the mayor running for reelection, the decision was made to hold back on any rec closings until after the general election. This meant that operations would continue at current funding levels until Jan. 1, 2012, when about half of the centers would shift into a new system described in the mayor’s budget plan as “partnerships and collaborations with community organizations, private enterprises, Baltimore City Public Schools and other city agencies.”

According to sources, Recreation and Parks currently has only enough budgeted money to operate 25 of the 55 rec centers after Dec. 31. Rawlings-Blake has vowed to make these facilities “model” rec centers with state-of-the-art equipment and increased operating hours.

City Council President Young does not have a specific plan for funding the older and often dilapidated centers that the mayor’s office wants to spin off, spokesman Davis said. But Young is committed to keeping the older centers open because they serve an important community function.

Requiring young children to travel out of their neighborhoods to attend “model” centers is not a wise policy, according to Davis. Many of them will drop out of the city program instead.

Davis also said Young is not opposed to turning some facilities over to private management. “He does want to make sure that any group that takes over a rec center has the capacity to sustain the center over the long run.”

Low Number of Bidders

The city has promised a modest aid package – \$50,000 for rec centers under 8,000 square feet and \$100,000 for centers over 8,000 square feet – as first-year “seed money” for private managers.

But the bids that came in last Wednesday in response to the city’s Request for Proposals (RFP) were considered extremely disappointing.

Only seven parties submitted proposals for 12 of the 55 rec centers. Following a review by the law department, the comptroller's office certified today that only five bidders had met the city's minimum bidding requirements.

The final lineup of accepted bids – which will now undergo a review by a city evaluation panel – is as follows:

- Boys and Girls Club of Metro Baltimore – bid on Brooklyn O'Malley
- John Darrell Brantley Financial Services – bids for Leith Walk, Northwood and Oliver
- Little Dimples II – bids for Liberty, Roosevelt Park and Woodhome
- Park Heights Renaissance Inc – bid for Towanda
- Reclaiming Our Children and Community Project (ROCACP) – bids for Cold Stream, Collington Square, Hilton and Lillian Jones.

Several of the proposed plans would include few programs for young people. The ROCACP plan, submitted by Dante Wilson, would turn the rec centers into day-care facilities with some supplemental after-school programs, including karate, art and crafts and drama, for older children.

Additionally Wilson proposes using the rec centers for psychiatric rehabilitation services for ex-offenders and “individuals who daily life functions [stet] have been disruptive in the areas of home, community and school due to mental health diagnosis.”

Another bidder, John D. Brantley Financial Services, would depend on a grant from the Department of Human Resources and unspecified “other grant funds” to cover 60% of the operating budget of the three rec centers he wishes to manage.

Mayor's Approach Defended

Councilman William H. Cole IV (11th District) said he found the discussion over rec enters “painful but necessary due to the reality of the budget situation.”

He said Rawlings-Blake was taking the right approach by exploring creative solutions like privatization and consolidation to make the city's rec program more sustainable.

“We cannot do business as we have,” he said tonight in an interview. “In recent years, we saw great population loss, saw our tax base erode dramatically and have seen it become more expensive to do business.”

While disappointed with the response to last week's RFP, “I hope we do another round and get a better sense of what's out there. Some of [the bidders] may have been hanging back the first time around to wait and see the lay of the land.”

Cole said public-partnerships, while not a panacea, were worth exploring. “I will be prepared to fight against rec centers closing. At the same time, some reality has to enter in here,” he said.