

## Dixon charges could chill business climate

By Aaron Cahall  
*Examiner Staff Writer*

The hint of Mayor Sheila Dixon's alleged impropriety with a city developer could dampen the city's business environment and could represent a breach of commonly accepted business ethics, several ethics experts told *The Examiner* on Tuesday.

Dixon is charged with 12 counts of felony theft, perjury, fraud and misconduct in office on suspicion of failing to disclose gifts from developer and ex-boyfriend Ron Lipscomb, and of misusing gift cards donated to her office by developers and intended for needy families. Lipscomb, president of Doracon Contracting Inc., is also charged with bribing a public official.

"In politics, like sports, you have to have some parity, to have a level playing field," said Fred Guy, director of the Hoffberger Center for Professional Ethics at the University of Baltimore. "I think it's the idea that someone is big enough or wealthy enough to curry favor. ... Obviously it has a demoralizing effect on the rest of the business community."

Much of that community has so far reserved judgment on Dixon and Lipscomb, said Don Fry, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Baltimore Committee, a membership organization of prominent local businesses.

"The business community has been through and understands the legal process and how those things take time, and at the same time, we need to keep moving forward," Fry said. "I think a lot of it is wait-and-see."



EXAMINER FILE

Mayor Sheila Dixon takes the oath of office from Baltimore Clerk of the Court Frank Conaway at her inauguration in January 2006 at the War Memorial Plaza. Dixon is charged with 12 counts of felony theft, perjury, fraud and misconduct in office.

Fry said the chilling effect on Baltimore's business climate may be limited, given that the investigation into Dixon has been public knowledge for months, and the indictment against her revealed few new details.

Most companies maintain strict ethics policies, said William Smith, a business expert at Towson University. Smith said business gifts can represent serious conflicts of interest, are commonplace and offer great potential for abuse.

"Gift and business courtesies are one of the most common topics addressed by company ethics policies," Smith said in an e-mail. "The policies tend to be even stricter when

dealing with public officials, usually because those officials are supposed to adhere to a public interest, as opposed to a stockholder interest, which is narrower."

City developers generally stick to those standards, Guy said, and likely greet news of Lipscomb's indictment with some measure of disapproval.

"[Developers] have to be tough, they have to play hard, but I've found that largely they adhere to the belief that good ethics is good business," Guy said. "Generally speaking they would frown on it, and maybe they roll their eyes and say, 'Here we go again, another person giving us a bad name.'"

[acahall@baltimoreexaminer.com](mailto:acahall@baltimoreexaminer.com)

