

## ‘That’s all they’ve got?’ Rising to her defense

BY **STEPHEN KIEHL**  
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Sheila Dixon looks far from finished.

The Baltimore mayor dug in yesterday after being indicted on a dozen counts related to gifts she allegedly received, and the city’s political establishment, so far, is standing firmly behind her. Many said they don’t see anything in the state prosecutor’s 31 pages of charges that would deter Dixon’s base of political support — African-American women.

The developers who have fueled Baltimore’s renaissance are expected to remain on board, and more affluent city residents may also stick by a mayor who has been seen as successful at reducing crime, improving schools and cleaning up streets and neighborhoods.

“The general opinion is she’s done a good job,” said Matthew Crenson, a professor emeritus of political science. See **ANALYSIS**, page 9

### who’s who?

#### **SHEILA DIXON**

- Baltimore’s first female mayor, she assumed the position in January 2007 after Martin O’Malley became governor. She was re-elected later that year.
- The single mother of two became the first African-American woman elected Baltimore City Council president in 1999. She was first elected to the council in 1987.
- She began her career as a kindergarten teacher at Steuart Hill Elementary School and spent 17 years as an international trade specialist with the Maryland Department of Business & Economic Development.

#### **ARNOLD M. WEINER**

- Dixon’s lawyer is one of Baltimore’s top defense attorneys.
- He served as lead defense attorney in the prosecutions of Maryland Gov. Marvin Mandel and Rep. Edward Garmatz. Mandel’s conviction on mail fraud and racketeering charges was vacated in 1987. Bribery charges against Garmatz were dismissed because the prosecution was based on forged evidence.
- The former assistant U.S. attorney and Maryland assistant attorney general was referenced in the Laura Lippman novel *Butchers Hill* as a top Baltimore attorney. His daughter, Deborah Weiner, is a

reporter for WBAL-TV.

#### **ROBERT A. ROHRBAUGH**

- The Maryland state prosecutor has led a three-year investigation into City Hall corruption, culminating in this week’s indictments of Mayor Sheila Dixon, developer Ronald H. Lipscomb and City Councilwoman Helen L. Holton.
- The former assistant federal prosecutor and private Montgomery County attorney was appointed to his current post by Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. in 2004.
- He took a leave from his law practice in 1997 to assist a congressional investigation into allegations of illegal contributions to former President Bill Clinton’s re-election campaign and is the former president of the Montgomery County Republican Club.



**Lipscomb**



**Holton**

#### **RONALD H. LIPSCOMB**

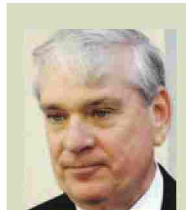
- The prominent Baltimore developer had a romantic relationship with Dixon in 2003-2004.
- As head of Doracon construction company, he helped develop the Four Seasons hotel and

condominium tower and the \$90 million Spinnaker Bay residential tower in Harbor East.

#### **HELEN L. HOLTON**

- The city councilwoman from the 8th District has served since 1995.
- She is a certified public accountant and chaired the council’s Taxation and Finance Committee until this week, when she was removed pending the

resolution of charges against her.



**Rohrbaugh**



science at the Johns Hopkins University. "Baltimore, until the recession, seemed to be on the brink of recovery ... and people don't want to see that go away. So I think they will stand by her — not just for her, but for the city"

Dixon has built up a store of good will by outperforming expectations as mayor, and that will provide her a cushion from those who might be troubled by the charges, city political observers said. She won the Democratic primary in 2007 with nearly two-thirds of the vote, though no public polling has gauged her standing with voters since then.

"I think everybody agrees she's doing a pretty good job," said political analyst Frank A. DeFilippo. "But that doesn't excuse what's been going on, because some of this is pretty tawdry."

But others were underwhelmed that nearly three years of investigation did not lead to the bribery charges that were widely expected and turned up gifts of a relatively small scale. According to the indictment, the total value of the gifts Dixon accepted or misappropriated is under \$25,000. The amount includes clothing, electronics, travel and lodging.

"That's all they've got?" asked Ronald W. Walters, a government professor at the University of Maryland, College Park. He said the charges against Dixon didn't approach the level of misconduct alleged against Illinois Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich, who prosecutors say attempted to sell a U.S. Senate seat.

"We're witnessing a situation going down in Illinois, and this is nowhere near anything like that," Walters said. "The substance of it, on its face, would appear to be minor."

State Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden publicly stated his support for Dixon yesterday and predicted she would be cleared of all charges. State Sens. Joan Carter Conway and Lisa A. Gladden also backed the mayor. All three are influential leaders in the city's black community, the support of which is essential to Dixon's political survival, experts said. But she needs

broader support, including from developers who invest in the city.

"The question is whether the white community in Baltimore will continue to support her or go looking for someone else," Walters said. "That's really the key to this. There is a very strong group there that has to do with mayoral legitimacy. ... If they stay behind her, she's going to be difficult to defeat."

Major developer C. William Struever and Donald C. Fry, head of the Greater Baltimore Committee, declined to comment.

There's no question the indictment will be a distraction for Dixon, Crenson said. Questions about Dixon's ethics have been raised by the media for years and were well-known when she was elected in 2007. But an indictment brings those doubts into stark relief.

"Unarticulated suspicions are now down in black

and white," Crenson said. "So the attention is going to be focused on certain aspects of her past behavior, and that's got to impair her ability to function, and she's got to prepare her defense, which is going to take a lot of time."

Development slowed in Detroit when Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick was indicted on eight felony counts and caught up in various scandals involving the use of city funds. He resigned in September as part of a deal in which he pleaded guilty to two felonies.

"The mayor's indictment was a major distraction for the city, and it seemed to essentially neutralize the mayor in terms of any initiatives that might have been undertaken," said John E. Mogk, a law professor at Wayne State University in Detroit. While that city faces problems beyond its mayor, such as the collapse of the auto industry, Kilpatrick's troubles disappointed civic and corporate leaders in the region.

"The city is troubled in the case of Detroit, and its revitalization depends on the confidence of private investors," Mogk said. "As the mayor loses his control and focus, it's a chilling effect on investors. They tend to back off."

The charges against Dixon, though, are underwhelming given that the investigation took nearly three years and combed through so much of the City Council's business, said Larry Gibson, a professor at

## what they're saying

"I am very saddened to hear about the indictments that have just come down against Mayor Sheila Dixon. My prayers go out to her and her family. I am confident that she will be found not guilty of all the charges that have been brought against her. During her tenure as Mayor, she has done a remarkable job in continuing the renaissance of the City of Baltimore."

**State Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden,**  
chairman, Baltimore Senate delegation

"Mayor Dixon is an effective public servant who has worked tirelessly for the citizens of Baltimore. I wish Mayor Dixon the best as this difficult case continues and allegations are answered as part of the legal process. My prayers are with the Mayor and her family during this challenging time."

**Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake,**  
City Council president

"The City of Baltimore has made solid progress under Mayor Dixon. This is a tough day for all of us who care about Baltimore's progress, and for Mayor Dixon and her family. It is my sincere hope that all of these long drawn out matters will soon be resolved in a court of

law once all the facts are known.”

**Gov. Martin O'Malley**

“This is a sad day for Baltimore City Mayor Sheila Dixon and a sad day for Baltimore. We must allow the legal process to run its course and remember that Mayor Dixon is innocent until proven otherwise. Sheila Dixon has been an excellent Mayor. She's been a good steward for Baltimore with a reputation for a can-do attitude and follow-through.”

**Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski**

“Once again the culture of corruption is rearing its head amongst Maryland Democrat politicians. Of course these two are innocent until proven guilty, but the loose ethics of that we have seen exposed this past year. Maryland needs leaders that will hold themselves to a higher standard and not abuse the public trust. Change is definitely in order for Baltimore, Annapolis and Maryland as a whole.

**James Pelura, chairman,  
Maryland Republican Party**

“Everybody needs to remember that this is an indictment, not a conviction. Sheila has done a commendable job as mayor and the city and the region are better for it. Special prosecutors have a mixed record getting convictions and it is not easy.”

**George from Bel Air,  
commenter on baltimoresun.com**

“Ms. Dixon was ethically challenged long before she became mayor. It appears that she's been cleaning up her act recently, now that the spotlight is on her and she has more to lose. Although she has turned out to be a pretty good mayor, no one is above the law and she should pay the price for the tricks she pulled when she thought no one was watching.”

**Debbie from Baltimore,  
commenter on baltimoresun.com**

“I think the Prosecutor should be run out of town if this is all he has come up with after 2003. ... Pathetic.”

**Buz, commenter on baltimoresun.com**

“[Dixon was never] a favorite of mine, and never cast a vote for her. But I give the lady credit: she's made some good choices for city government priorities, and hired some very skilled people to implement solutions. I'm sorely disappointed by the behavior the indictment describes, but as a city taxpayer, I'm also sorry to see her leadership crippled.”

**CharlotV, commenter on baltimoresun.com**



**Rawlings-Blake**

the University of Maryland law school and former U.S. associate deputy attorney general.

“Considering how long the investigation has gone and how comprehensive it has been, it almost gives Baltimore government close to a clean bill of health,” Gibson said. “If this is the totality of the believed criminal conduct that they have come across, it's pretty minuscule.”

A top official's indictment can have a range of effects, depending on how accustomed a city is to corruption, said Donald Kettl, a professor and former director of the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania. In Philadelphia, the FBI revealed just weeks before the 2003 mayoral election that it had wiretapped Mayor John F. Street's office as part of a corruption investigation.

But instead of generating suspicion, the news made Street, a Democrat, look like the victim of a politically motivated investigation. He cruised to reelection.

“It created a sense of him as a victim,” Kettl said. But the endless controversies also left voters fed up with the status quo and created an opening for a reform-minded candidate to be elected mayor in 2007.

Gladden, a public defender who represents Baltimore in the General Assembly, said she doesn't believe Dixon must step down. She noted that “you're innocent until proven guilty” and that much of the alleged wrongdoing happened when Dixon was City Council president, before being elected mayor.

“The challenge is going to be keeping the momentum for Baltimore moving forward,” Gladden said, as she watched a breaking television report on the indictment and her phone rang repeatedly. “Baltimore is on an upswing. We're doing great except for our murder rate this year. A cleaner, greener, healthier and safer city, that's what she's about. I love what she stands for. I'm just disappointed we're here.”

*Baltimore Sun reporter Laura Smitherman contributed to this article.*

## timeline of allegations against Dixon

Date	Item/amount	The allegation
Jan. 15, 2004	Fur coats \$2,000	Mayor Sheila Dixon uses a \$2,000 gift certificate for a furrier, purchased by an employee of "Developer A," to buy a Persian lamb coat and burnt umber mink coat.
Jan. 23, 2004	\$257.94	Developer A, while at the Ritz Carlton in Avon, Colo., uses his American Express card to pay for \$257.94 in expenses incurred by Dixon and charged to the developer's room.
Feb. 18-20, 2004	NYC travel expenses	Developer A uses his credit card to charge more than \$3,200 in travel, meals, lodging and other expenses while he and Dixon are in New York City. The charges are paid by Developer A's company.
March 16, 2004	Plane ticket: \$1,518.20	An employee of Developer A charges on his personal credit card \$1,518.20 for a plane ticket from Baltimore to Chicago for a passenger listed as Sheila Dixon.
March 24, 2004	Personal care products	Developer A charges \$371.88 in toners, brushes, facial cleansers and moisturizers at Saks Fifth Avenue in Chicago.
March 25, 2004	Store charges \$7,853.17	Dixon uses her American Express card to charge \$7,853.17 at Chicago stores including Saks, Giorgio, Coach and St. John Boutique, as part of more than \$9,500 in charges during the trip.
April 2, 2004	\$15,000	Minutes after the last of three calls between Dixon's cell phone and Developer A's cell phone, another of the developer's employees cashes a corporate check for \$15,000, which he gives to the developer.
April 9, 2004	\$6,000	\$6,000 in cash is deposited by ATM into Dixon's checking account.
May 6, 2004	\$4,000	Dixon hands 40 \$100 bills to a city employee and asks him to deposit the money into his personal bank account and write a \$4,000 check toward her American Express bill. Three hours after the employee makes the deposit, Developer A calls Dixon's private number.
May 7, 2004	\$4,000	The city employee writes a \$4,000 check on his account for payment of Dixon's American Express bill.
May 8, 2004	\$4,000	Dixon writes a \$4,000 check payable to American Express.
May 10, 2004	\$2,000	\$2,000 in cash is deposited into Dixon's savings account. A call is made from Dixon's cell phone to Developer A's cell phone.
Dec. 16, 2004	Gift cards	An employee of Developer A cashes a \$2,000 corporate check, listed in the stub entry as "cash donations for needy families." That afternoon, Dixon twice calls Developer A. That night, 15 Best Buy gift cards for \$50 each are bought with cash, and two of them are later used by Dixon toward the purchase of a video game, CDs and DVDs.
Dec. 13, 2005	Gift cards	Another employee of Developer A cashes a \$1,500 corporate check for "Christmas gift card." Dixon asks "Developer B" to buy gift cards for needy Baltimore families, and the developer uses a personal credit card to buy \$500 in Best Buy gift cards and \$500 in Target gift cards.
Dec. 14-15, 2005	Gift cards \$950	Amid calls between phones connected to the Developer A employee and Dixon, \$950 in Target gift cards are bought with cash.
Dec. 18, 2005- Jan. 29, 2006	Gift cards	In a series of shopping trips to Best Buy and Target, Dixon uses 21 gift cards bought by Developer B, along with the gift cards bought with cash, toward merchandise including a digital camcorder, a PlayStation 2 controller and other electronics.
Dec. 21-23, 2006	Gift cards	Dixon uses gift cards that had been bought by an employee of Developer A toward electronics and clothing. A city employee uses gift cards bought by the Developer A employee to buy a video game system, using Dixon's address and home phone number. At a holiday office party, Dixon gives another city employee a video game system, and distributes various gift cards to her staff and others.
Dec. 12, 17, 2007	Gift cards	A city housing employee buys Toys "R" Us gift cards for distribution to underprivileged children during the Mayor's Holly Trolley event Dec. 20.
Dec. 21, 2007	Gift card	Dixon gives to a member of her staff a Toys "R" Us gift card purchased by the city housing employee.
June 17, 2008	Gift cards	Five of the Toys "R" Us gift cards bought by the city housing employee are found at Dixon's home.

### what's next

- Dixon will enter a plea at her arraignment in Baltimore Circuit Court in the next few weeks.
- The mayor's attorneys say they will ask a judge to dismiss all charges.
- Dixon will remain in office, continuing to oversee the powerful Board of Estimates spending panel, unless she is convicted.

## Mayor Sheila Dixon's statement

There is something I want to tell the citizens of this great city about the charges that the State Prosecutor has brought against me today.

For the past two years, I have done my best to serve the city of Baltimore as mayor, and I will continue to do so. I will not let these charges deter me from keeping Baltimore on the path that we have set, or from carrying forward the significant progress we have made thus far.

I am being unfairly accused. Time will prove that I have done nothing wrong, and I am confident that I will be found innocent of these charges. But, for the moment, I cannot comment further on the allegations that have been made against me. Instead, my attorneys will address these matters on my behalf.

I want to make it clear, though, that I will continue to put all of my energies into running the city of Baltimore during these perilous economic times. And with God's grace, I am confident that the city, my family and I will weather this storm.