

DIXON SWORN IN AS MAYOR

Vows to fight crime, help neighborhoods

BY JOHN FRITZE
(SUN REPORTER)

Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon was sworn into office yesterday in an inauguration that celebrated her past year's successes amid the challenges facing the city and her administration.

Dixon — the first woman elected to lead City Hall, and the city's third black mayor — said she intends to use her four-year term to keep chipping away at Baltimore's decades-long battle with crime and to strengthen its most dilapidated neighborhoods.

"It took a long time for a woman to prevail and earn the right to represent this city and its people. Too long," Dixon told supporters who gathered at Morgan State University for the inauguration. "But it won't take me long to make the hard decisions and do the hard work necessary to make our city better."

Dixon, 53, takes office during her most tumultuous period as mayor. Several high-level city government positions are vacant. And an investigation by the Maryland state prosecutor into questionable spending during Dixon's tenure as City Council president lingers.

Dixon became mayor — the city's 48th — in January to serve out the remainder of Gov. Martin O'Malley's mayoral term and ran a successful campaign this summer for a four-year term. She focused much of the campaign on making the city cleaner and slowing a homicide count that soared throughout much of the year and still remains ahead of 2006.

Joined by her 13-year-old son, Joshua, 18-year-old daughter, Jasmine, and dozens of elected officials — from U.S. Sens. Barbara A. Mikulski and Benjamin L. Cardin to members of the City Council — Dixon was sworn in by O'Malley before delivering a 20-minute speech to the sold-out audience at the Carl J. Murphy Fine Arts Center.

Rank-and-file city employees mixed with department heads and longtime political supporters to observe a ceremony that mixed performances of the Frederick Douglass High School Jazz Band with the Morgan State University Choir. Well-known gospel artist Maurette Brown Clark performed a rendition of a song, "Yes," that Dixon said provides inspiration each day. Susan L. Taylor, of *Essence* magazine, served as mistress of ceremonies.

'City will thrive'

"She has been so very good to our city and her dedication to serving the public, as all of you know, has been her lifelong endeavor," O'Malley said. "A city's success depends on the goodness of its people. And I know that our city will thrive under her very capable guidance and nurturing of that goodness."

Also on the stage were the city's other three black female elected leaders, City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake, Comptroller Joan M. Pratt and City State's Attorney Patricia C. Jessamy. The four — putting aside occasional past conflicts — have rallied around the historic nature of their leadership.

Dixon, who lives in the Hunting Ridge neighborhood along the western edge of the city, was first elected to the City Council in 1987 and became its president in 1999. During her time on the council,



her daughter was born — making Dixon the first council member to give birth. She solidified her relationship with O'Malley when the two ran together for re-election in 2003.

The Rev. Frank M. Reid III, senior pastor at Bethel AME Church — Dixon's congregation — noted Sen. Verda F. Welcome, the nation's first black female state senator, and Victorine Q. Adams, a pioneer in African-American politics who was the first black woman to sit on the council, during his invocation.

"We thank you, God, for the women who opened the door of opportunity and would never turn back," Reid said.

Red Line support

During her inaugural address, Dixon said she intends to devote "considerable time and energy" to solidifying the route of a proposed east-west transit corridor known as the Red Line that would connect Woodlawn to the Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center. The state project, which is still in conceptual stages, could include buses, rail or new roads.

She also reiterated a pledge to streamline the process of selling city-owned vacant property — arguing that city government owns roughly a third of Baltimore's 30,000 vacant structures — and said the administration will unveil its 10-year plan to end homelessness later this month. She also vowed to find a summer job for any young person in the city who wants one — urging the city's businesses to get more involved.

"To get where we want to go, we must all come together. We must all do our part," Dixon said. "It is absolutely essential that we stop making excuses and start making a difference."

After switching police commissioners amid a surge in homicides during the summer, Dixon has sought to focus law

enforcement on guns and violent offenders — pledging yesterday to continue along that path.

Donald C. Fry, president of the **Greater Baltimore Committee** who co-chaired a city task force on transportation funding for the administration, said he was pleased to hear Dixon raise the Red Line — a proposal the group has long supported.

"We are certainly delighted to see the mayor commit to devote the time and energy to making that come to fruition," he said. "She can be a catalyst."

But the mayor must first address vacancies among her top staff that have piled up in recent weeks. Her chief of staff, Otis Rolley III, resigned in October, though he attended the inauguration yesterday.

Meanwhile, three departments are without permanent leaders— fire, parks and public works. Dixon and several other officials noted the sudden death of George L. Winfield, a 30-year veteran of city government who died over the weekend after suffering a stroke last month.

'Fearless friend'

During her speech, Dixon mentioned her sister, Janice Dixon, calling her "an irreplaceable friend and partner and a fearless friend." Janice Dixon was the focus of articles in *The Sun* last year — and an investigation by the Maryland state prosecutor — examining city contracts awarded to a company that employed her.

Activity by the prosecutor's office last week thrust the probe back into the limelight. Investigators raided the offices of a prominent developer linked to Dixon and served a subpoena on the Baltimore Development Corp.

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