

Primary over, now it's time for work

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Mayor Sheila Dixon and City Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake don't have much time to bask in their victories from Baltimore City's Sept. 11 primary. The business community believes it's time for them to get to work.

With neither facing any serious Republican challengers in the November general election, they're free to start assembling their teams and addressing the serious problems facing Baltimore, business leaders say.

Many said combating violent crime, developing and maintaining an educated work force, improving regional transportation and reducing the property tax should be among the leaders' first acts in office. But overwhelmingly, crime remains on the minds of most businesspeople interviewed for this story.

"The campaigning is over," said Donald C. Fry, president of the **Greater Baltimore Committee**, an organization that represents businesses across the region. "It's time to make some difficult decisions."

Fry said he is hopeful that Dixon and Rawlings-Blake will first turn their attention to reducing violent crime and creating a city environment where business can thrive and jobs can be created. John Frisch, managing partner of downtown Baltimore law firm Miles and Stockbridge, agreed.

"Even though the central business district feels very safe to me, I think the crime and the murder rate really tars us," he said.

When executives decide whether to relocate a headquarters — either regional or national — to a new city, they always examine the crime numbers, Frisch said. And with Baltimore on pace to exceed 300 homicides this year, a number not seen since 1999, crime alone could be a deterrent to a corporate relocation, business leaders said.

Fry expects that Dixon will address crime quickly by picking a permanent police commissioner. Acting Baltimore City Police Commissioner Frederick Bealefield and Charles Ramsey, the former Washington, D.C., police chief, are in

the running for the top law enforcement spot.

"I would certainly want to see real creativity and innovation in the selection of a new police commissioner," Frisch said.

Regardless of a new commissioner, many business leaders said they would like to see more police officers on the streets, underscoring the need to hire additional rank and file.

"Obviously, [Dixon] is going to have to make some difficult budget decisions," Frisch said.

Sonny Morstein, owner of Morstein's Jewelers in Federal Hill, said he, too, would like to see more officers on the streets, especially at night.

"We have a policeman assigned to the business district," said Morstein, president of the South Baltimore Business Association. "We'd like to keep what we have, but we'd like to see more of a presence in the evening."

While David Baird, senior managing director of Cushman & Wakefield's Baltimore office, acknowledged the city's crime, he said that the issue has morphed into a problem of perception. "It's as much a public relations battle as it is a tactical battle," he said.

The commercial real estate executive said he would like to see the new leadership concentrate on some outlying areas of the city, including Canton and Patterson Park, where recent incidents of crime have shaken business owners and residents.

Business leaders also pointed to the need for property tax reductions, strong education and regional transportation.

Morstein, for one, said he would like to see a significant cut in the Baltimore City property tax. Considered the highest in the state, the city's property tax rate is \$2.268 per \$100 of assessed property value, more than double the rate in Baltimore County. Like many entrepreneurs, Morstein

owns the building in which his jewelry business is situated and feels the pain of city property taxes. He is also considering moving into the city, but said the property tax is convincing him otherwise.

"If you're buying

an expensive home, you're punished for it," he said.

Baird said he feels like Dixon has already surrounded herself with strong leaders to make the changes necessary. He counted Andrew B. Frank, former executive vice president for the Baltimore Development Corp., among them.

"They have a lot of good momentum to build on," Frisch.

