

Pastors say Mayor Dixon leaves strong legacy

City pastors who worked with Mayor Sheila Dixon on issues ranging from homelessness to immigration gave the outgoing mayor generally high marks for her performance in office. Yet, as the 56-year-old mayor prepares to step down Feb. 4 as part of a plea deal in a corruption case, priests throughout the city expressed disappointment in her behavior.

A city jury convicted Dixon Dec. 1 of embezzling about \$500 in donated gift cards intended for the poor. The mayor reached a plea deal Jan. 6, agreeing to resign, perform 500 hours of community service and pay \$45,000 to charity.

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, who worked with the mayor on anti-violence measures and other issues, called the mayor's plea and her decision to resign "sad news for the mayor, her family and for our entire city."

He asked the Catholic community to pray for the mayor and her family, as well as for City Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake - soon to become Dixon's successor.

Father Richard Lawrence, pastor of St. Vincent de Paul in Baltimore, praised the mayor for her commitment to helping the homeless. The priest negotiated with Dixon's administration concerning a homeless park the pastor supported near his church. The two sides eventually agreed to close the park two hours a day, allowing the homeless to sleep there but preventing them from maintaining a tent city.

"Even though we fought about our park and ultimately had to reach a compromise, I knew I could make a compromise with her because she was serious about doing something to help the homeless," said Father Lawrence, asserting that Dixon did more to help the homeless than any mayor since William Donald Schaefer.

Father Lawrence said he saw Dixon "grow in office." She became a supporter of inclusive housing, he said, and was trusted in the faith community.

"I could sit down and make a deal with her and if we shook hands on something, I knew it would happen," he said.

Father Lawrence said he's sorry to see the mayor go, but recognizes that taking the gift cards was wrong.

"She shouldn't have done what she did," he said. "I think she's gotten disproportionate consequences for it, but consequences nonetheless."

Redemptorist Father Robert Wojtek, pastor of the Catholic Community of St. Michael and St. Patrick in Fells Point, said Mayor Dixon was committed to making Hispanic immigrants feel welcome in the city. The mayor appointed Father Wojtek to the newly formed Commission for Hispanic Affairs.

"The moment to reach out to Hispanics was there because the amount of Hispanics in the city just blossomed over the past few years," said Father Wojtek, a bilingual priest who serves a largely Spanish-speaking congregation.

"I think she just reacted to that and saw that this was the moment to do something," he said.

The commission makes the concerns of Hispanics more visible and looks for ways of including Hispanics in city initiatives.

Father Wojtek called the mayor a "positive force" in the city, but he was troubled by the corruption charges.

"If it was anyone else, they'd probably be going through worse circumstances than she is with the plea deal," he said.

Vincentian Father Sylvester Peterka, pastor of St. Cecilia and Immaculate Conception in Baltimore, knew the mayor through his work as the former vice president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance and a leader in Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development.

The mayor was always open to the faith community, he said, and was "most gracious" even when she disagreed. The priest's big disappointment in her

performance came when the mayor closed youth centers after promising to keep them open.

Last year, Dixon stood side-by-side with Archbishop O'Brien at St. Veronica in Cherry Hill in support of efforts to lower youth violence. She also embraced St. Gregory the Great's gun buyback program and peace initiatives in West Baltimore.

Monsignor Damien G. Nalepa, pastor of St. Gregory, said the church is losing an ally in the battle against street violence.

"It's a sad day when the reigning mayor resigns, especially after all that she did," said Monsignor Nalepa, whom the mayor once described as a trusted advisor.

The relationship between the church and the mayor was not without clashes. The two recently were on opposite sides over a battle concerning regulations to pro-life pregnancy resource centers. Rawlings-Blake sponsored a bill that requires pregnancy centers to post signs saying they don't provide abortion or contraceptives. Although church leaders said the bill unfairly targeted the centers for discrimination, Dixon signed the measure into law.

Even though Rawlings-Blake's strong support of the pregnancy center bill put her at odds with the church, many pastors are optimistic she will be a good mayor and will champion some of the same issues as Dixon.

"She has a very competent background," said Monsignor William Burke, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi in Baltimore. "I think everyone shares a certain sense of regret that Mayor Dixon is leaving, but I think it's fortunate the person stepping in is certainly equipped to handle the responsibility."

Matt Palmer contributed to this story.