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\$730,000 in gifts paid for Dixon gala

Inauguration fund not subject to campaign financing rules

By John Fritze

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A fund created to pay for Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon's inaugural ceremony this month received nearly \$730,000 in contributions, according to a list of donors released yesterday by the mayor's office.

Several of the region's best-known contractors, unions and service companies - from Whiting-Turner Contracting to Constellation Energy - made large contributions to the fund, a practice that is far less regulated than traditional political giving.

Dixon aides said creating a nonprofit to oversee the finances of her inauguration - a common approach for elected officials - was necessary so that no taxpayer money would be spent on the event. The administration voluntarily released a list of donors after receiving requests from The Sun.

"The committee is set up because city government isn't going to pay for inauguration expenses," said Sterling Clifford, a Dixon spokesman. "It's better to use private donations if you can to fund that sort of event rather than [using] city resources."

Dixon was sworn in as mayor Dec. 4 at Morgan State University. About 3,000 people attended a sold-out ball later that evening at the Baltimore Convention Center. Other events - including a small parade - were held throughout the week to honor seniors, families and city workers.

To offset the cost of those events, organizers charged \$50 apiece for ball tickets. A nonprofit was created to accept the money and a private Democratic fundraiser and consultant, Rice Consulting, was used to solicit sponsorship-level donations and handle the logistics of the event.

Heeding the call for financial support were companies such as Whiting-Turner and P. Flanigan & Sons, which each wrote a \$25,000 check, according to the information provided by the mayor's office. Both companies are large contractors that do business with the city.

One of the region's most politically active unions, 1199 SEIU United Healthcare Workers East, also gave \$25,000. The union was one of Dixon's key supporters as she ran for election last summer. Ebs Burnough, the union's political director, said giving to the fund is just another sign of support.

"More than anything, we truly believe that she's the right person to move this city forward," Burnough said. "We believe in Mayor Dixon and we have faith in her."

Constellation Energy, Washington Gas and a company affiliated with the team that is developing the

west-side "superblock" project gave \$15,000 each. Capt. Stephan G. Fugate, president of the fire officers union and an occasional critic of Dixon, gave \$500 on behalf of the union.

"She is the mayor," Fugate said, adding that his members voted to give. "We have the ability to support her and her agenda moving forward. We didn't support her in the election process, but the elections are over, and now she's the mayor."

In all, the committee raised about \$730,000, which includes the \$50 tickets purchased for the ball. That is significantly more than many of her opponents raised in the 8 1/2 months leading up to the Democratic primary. Dixon raised nearly \$1.8 million between January and the September primary, according to state records.

Watchdog groups such as Common Cause Maryland have questioned the use of inaugural funds, in part because they allow donors to make contributions without the regulations typically attached to campaign contributions.

For instance, political donors are allowed to give a maximum of \$4,000 to a candidate running for office in Maryland. But the inaugural committee, which does not fall under the same guidelines, received 50 contributions over \$4,000, including six over \$20,000.

Also, political contributions are a matter of public record but donations to an inaugural fund are not necessarily open for inspection. Certain tax forms required of nonprofits are made public, but they take months to be released and generally do not contain the same level of detail as campaign finance reports.

Rachael Rice, president of the consulting firm that oversaw the inaugural effort, said she believes almost all of the money raised will be spent on inauguration expenses. Any remaining balance, she said, might be donated to charity or held for the next inauguration if Dixon runs for election in 2011 and wins.

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