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### **Budget cuts a threat to peaceful summer?**

#### **Appearing with city officials, clergy criticize reduction in youth programs**

By Peter Hermann

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The leaders of the city's Catholic, Jewish and Muslim faiths have a plan to turn Baltimore's summer into the "summer of peace."

But they complained Wednesday that the mayor is making their efforts difficult because of plans to close recreation centers and pools and curtail library hours.

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien mentioned the issue in passing in his remarks after meeting with city officials on preventing youth crime, but when questioned he openly leaped into the political fray and called for the city's chief executive to reverse course.

Cutting money to youth programs, said the leader of a half-million worshippers of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore, "will make it very difficult for us to follow through" on initiatives to save lives and save children. His auxiliary, Bishop Denis J. Madden, said, "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand that rec centers and pools are going to give kids something to do."

And Bishop Douglas I. Miles, co-chairman of the advocacy group Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development and past leader of a coalition of African-American churches in Baltimore, questioned whether the closings are driven by budget cuts. "This is not a matter of the wallet, it is a matter of will," he said during the meeting at St. Mary's Seminary & University in Roland Park.

This was to be a routine announcement from O'Brien and a diverse group of faith leaders, including representatives from the Muslim and Jewish communities, who are working with the Baltimore Health Department to support Operation Safe Streets, an initiative that uses peer counselors to mediate disputes between rival gangs and has been hailed as a success in East and South Baltimore.

After meeting privately with city officials, O'Brien and the clergy emerged to announce that the group would meet regularly, would work to open school buildings in the summer as havens for youngsters, and would designate June 19, 20 and 21 (a Friday, Saturday and Sunday) as a time in which people participating in religious services will be asked to donate "a dollar for peace" to help fund Safe Streets.

"We have all presided over too many funerals," O'Brien said. "We want to change the entire culture of this city, from one that tolerates violence to one that will not stand for it."

Closing rec centers and folding Police Athletic League Centers into the recreation program has been a contentious issue leading up to a vote on the budget sometime before the end of June.

Miles said the religious leaders asked city officials, including an assistant deputy mayor, a faith representative and a police commander, to step out of the private meeting while they discussed "an issue they obviously disagreed with us on." He said when participants emerged, the city officials were gone and had fled the news conference, which Scott Peterson, a spokesman for the mayor denied.

Either way, the sharp words and willingness by leading clergy to openly criticize a political stand by the mayor demonstrates some discord on the best way to prevent violence. The city recently discovered \$40 million but that money has to be used for bond reduction. Another surplus \$13 million could be used to offset a \$65 million budget shortfall, but some of that money might be given to the Police Department to cover overtime.

Peterson applauded the efforts by the faith leaders but took exception to the idea that budget cuts will imperil lives. "No one wants to shut down a rec center or anything for a kid," he said, though he added that "we're racing a global economic meltdown" and later said the city is facing an "economic catastrophe."

Of the religious groups, Peterson said, "Don't they all have programs for kids? There are still lots of opportunity for kids in this city." He added, "We all want the most peaceful summer ever, but at the same time we have to face fiscal reality."

Neither the religious leaders nor the mayor want more violence and, yes, everyone wants everything and somebody has to choose. And it's not as simple as choosing a rec center, a book or a pool over gunfire. But it does send a message in how the city invests in its future.