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Morris gets cautious backing

City leaders question handling of appointment of ex-school board chair to job under Alonso

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A day after the Baltimore school board voted to appoint its former chairman, Brian D. Morris, to a \$175,000 job managing operations inside the district, city leaders said they were willing to give Morris a chance despite their reservations about how the process was handled.

City schools chief Andrés Alonso defended the hiring of Morris, however, saying he asked the board for the appointment so that he will have more time to focus on big-picture decisions. "He will allow me to lead rather than manage," Alonso said.

Morris, who is the founder and CEO of a real estate firm, was to have reached his term limit on the board June 30 and said he resigned Monday from his post. The board, to which he was appointed in 2003 and became chairman in 2005, voted Tuesday to make him deputy chief executive officer of operations, a newly created position that the system did not advertise.

Mayor Sheila Dixon said she supports Alonso's decision to hire Morris but has concerns. "Dr. Alonso has done an extraordinary job, and I think that he is trying to pull together a team," Dixon said. "Of course, it raised an eyebrow."

Particularly, she said, the fact that it appears Morris negotiated his new position with Alonso while chairman of the board "is awkward. I think it can lend itself to probably not the best practice.

"We have high expectations with some reservations with the selection," Dixon said. She said, however, that she is willing to give the system the "benefit of the doubt."

City Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke also praised Morris as a leader but criticized the timing of the appointment.

"Mr. Morris has done a very good job as president of the school board. I find it amazing that he is now a school board employee even as others are being laid off," she said.

School board members are appointed by the mayor and governor and are not compensated for their work on the panel. Alonso said he and Morris never discussed salary for his new job but

that Morris probably assumed that it would be in the range that other top officials in the system are paid. Alonso said there are three other top administrators in the system who make \$175,000, including the chief of staff, the chief academic officer and the head of the human resources department.

Alonso added that he has rarely advertised for his top Cabinet positions because he has generally found the process ineffective. He said that he did not wait to hire Morris until he was no longer chairman of the board because he has always acted immediately when he has found someone he wanted to hire.

"It has the appearance of favoritism, regardless of the qualifications of the person hired," said Donald F. Norris, professor and chairman of the department of public policy at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. In public organizations, he said, positions are nearly always advertised, particularly when they are highly paid.

"You want it to be ethical, and you want it to have all the appearances of being ethical. ... It has the appearance of a backroom deal," he said.

Morris' job description says that he will be responsible for support and services that are provided to the schools, including finance, facilities, health and safety, transportation, food and nutrition, human resources and technology. In addition, Morris will have responsibilities "guiding and directing financial accounting and fiscal management activities for all operating funds."

Alonso said that he recommended Morris for the job because he has come to depend on him and that when Morris' term was ending, Alonso began to have discussions with him about how he could keep him involved in city schools.

"Brian has been an extraordinary partner in the work," Alonso said. He described Morris as having "extraordinary capacity, institutional understanding, complete understanding of my vision and ... a mastery of details of the district that were unmatched."

Alonso said he had been given a lot of authority and support by the board "that has enabled me to push as hard as I have pushed."

Morris encouraged the board to hire Alonso and has helped deliver the necessary votes for Alonso's initiatives.