



Building a Better Baltimore

An Interview with
The Honorable Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, Mayor of the City of Baltimore, Maryland

EDITORS' NOTE *Stephanie Rawlings-Blake was sworn in as Baltimore's 49th mayor on February 4th, 2010. In November 2011, she was elected to her first full term as Mayor. Rawlings-Blake was elected to a top leadership position in the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to serve as Secretary, following the reelection of President Barack Obama. Rawlings-Blake also serves in key leadership positions in the U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM). In 2010, she was*



The Hon. Stephanie Rawlings-Blake

elected by her fellow mayors to the USCM Board of Trustees. She is also a member of the Mayor's Water Council, and the Criminal and Social Justice Standing Committee. Rawlings-Blake served as City Council President from January 2007 to February 2010. She was first elected to the City Council in 1995, at the age of 25 – the youngest person ever elected to the Baltimore City Council. She represented the council's 5th District from 1995 to 2004 and the 6th District from 2004 to 2007, serving communities throughout West and Northwest Baltimore. As Council President, she chaired the City's Board of Estimates. Earlier, Rawlings-Blake was an attorney with the Baltimore Office of the Public Defender. She was selected by The Daily Record as one of "Maryland's Top 100 Women" in 2007 and 2011. Rawlings-Blake earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Oberlin College and her Juris Doctor from the University of Maryland School of Law. She is a member of the Federal Bar Association and the Maryland State Bar Association.

How strong is Baltimore today?

Part of being a good leader is recognizing achievement and accomplishment while being more consumed by what still needs to be done.

When I look at the \$1 billion I advocated for on-school reconstruction as a historic investment in education that hasn't been achieved by other big cities, I'm pleased because I know how a community is transformed for generations by having high-quality schools. We have made a lot of progress in the classroom, and now we'll be making progress on the classrooms themselves by rebuilding our school system. At least 14 brand new schools will be built and more than 30 will be fully renovated in the first phase alone.

I do know, however, there are areas in the city where we're not doing as well; but it's a priority for young people, regardless of where they grow up, to have access to a quality education.

For Baltimore and more broadly, why can't more progress be made to truly reform our educational system?

Every school system and jurisdiction faces their own complicated history, and you have to find a solution to create progress for that district based on that history, but always with a focus on what is best for the kids.

My history has always been working in collaboration with the unions, so we were able to produce a teacher's contract that, for the first time, didn't focus on tenure but on achievement in the classroom.

It wasn't acrimonious – it was collaborative, because I know what it takes to be a teacher. I approached the negotiations and my support of the contract as collaboration with other public servants who wanted the best for Baltimore's young people. We might not have agreed on how we were going to get there, but we also knew that we couldn't just do what we'd done before.

So with respectful collaboration and honest negotiations, we were able to get something done.

How important is it to have metrics in place to track the impact of these programs?

We have made progress, and we're able to now track to the student and classroom levels. This has enabled the school system to make some critical decisions about which schools need to stay open and which need to close.

We are holding schools accountable for performance and for how they're using the resources they have been given to teach our young people.

I'm proud of the progress we have made, but I always say, we can do more. However, if you aren't tracking it, you don't know if you're making progress.

What results have you seen as a result of your heavy focus on public safety?

Over my time as Mayor, we have continued to reduce violent crime. I'm disappointed that our homicide rate remains persistently high. But I'm optimistic and pushing hard for collaboration with the community to create the type of transformation I believe is possible, and that the people of Baltimore want.

We have been able to focus on the most violent offenders in a way that allows us to build bridges of trust with the community – we're not focusing on how many arrests we're making year over year but on the quality of arrests.

Last year, we took more than 2,000 guns off the street. Outside of the homicide rate, we were able to show progress in every other metric of crime.

In 2014, we're bringing new initiatives and collaboration to Baltimore that will move us in the right direction.

What impact has the Vacants to Value program had on the city of Baltimore?

Vacants to Value is my effort to find ways to strategically invest the resources we have to create the incentives I know will strengthen and stabilize our communities.

We know that when we offer home-buying incentives, we can create opportunities for people who want to stay in Baltimore to purchase their homes.

We're giving people an opportunity to come here and stay here while, at the same time, strengthening our community.

We have a strategy on incentives and on code enforcement to get absentee landlords to do better when it comes to maintaining and investing in their properties. We also cut the red tape for selling city-owned vacant properties. Many people had been walking away from the table because it had been taking so long to get to closing for some buyers, while others could get a deal done quickly because they knew someone. That is not how you grow support and trust.

We also acknowledge that there are some communities where we won't see that market demand in the near future, so part of the strategy is figuring out the options when you have a property that will be vacant for a while. This is our Power in Dirt initiative, where we have converted many vacant lots throughout the city into community green spaces and urban gardens, which has activated an urban agriculture community in Baltimore.

Do you ever stop to appreciate your many achievements as Mayor?

One of the things I'm most proud of is the work we're doing to reduce the structural deficit in the city, because it's about the legacy we leave to our children. I've reduced it by almost \$400 million since we started our 10-year financial plan, and I'm very proud of that. ●