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Can Cockrel survive to stay Detroit mayor?

He's praised for openness, but critics see missteps

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From an exploding deficit to untangling the city's archaic financial books to a mini-scandal to an already bad economy drifting toward disaster, Detroit Mayor Ken Cockrel Jr. has confronted an even more challenging task than he anticipated since taking office 100 days ago.

Cockrel said this week that he expected to find dysfunction in city government, but the problems have proven even worse than he anticipated -- to the point that any solution likely will include laying off city workers.

"Nor did I anticipate becoming mayor under these circumstances in the middle of an economy which now is in shambles pretty much globally," he told the Free Press. "You go from high to low in like 60 minutes. Or from low to high."

Cockrel is on what amounts to a tryout as he runs to fill the remaining portion of former Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's term. Voters will winnow a star-studded 15-candidate field to two in a Feb. 24 primary, and then in May elect a mayor to serve through December 2009.

A different mayoral style

During those 100 days as mayor, Cockrel has won praise for many of the appointments he made to key posts, ending the scandal-plagued drama that dominated the mayor's office in 2008, refusing the trappings of the office that Kilpatrick embraced and essentially not being Kilpatrick, whether in style or substance.

He travels in a Police Department-owned Chevrolet Suburban, not the free Cadillac Escalade that General Motors Corp. provided Kilpatrick. He uses a smaller executive protection unit than Kilpatrick. And he said he hasn't even seen, let alone used, the taxpayer-funded credit card on which Kilpatrick racked up hundreds of thousands of dollars of expenses.

So far, Cockrel has run a much more transparent administration, advising the news media of his travel plans and responding to public records requests that Kilpatrick's administration often ignored. He also shepherded the city through the Angels' Night campaign, which saw fires drop from 2007.

"Mayor Cockrel took office under difficult circumstances and has done a good job over the past few months working to bring normalcy to the city," said Richard Blouse Jr., president and chief executive officer of the Detroit Regional Chamber. "We appreciate the mayor reaching out to the business community for input and to get executives on loan to help move Detroit forward."

100 days not without criticism

But Cockrel also has been criticized for keeping too many of Kilpatrick's department directors and other appointees on board and for a lack of communication with his former City Council colleagues.

He triggered a criminal investigation of himself when he signed a sworn statement that he was in compliance with election laws when he actually owed $42,000 in late fees.

"We were expecting a new day, a breath of fresh air," said Leamon Wilson, president of the AFSCME local that represents city bus maintenance workers. "Instead, we end up with the same old stuff."

And Freman Hendrix, one of Cockrel's main challengers in the mayoral election, called Cockrel's mayoral tenure "lackluster."

Although Cockrel had a handful of impressive appointments, there's no substitute for leadership at the top, Hendrix said.

Hendrix questioned the city's response to the Dec. 19 snowstorm, which dropped 8 inches of snow on the city. Though the city did activate its plan to plow residential streets, there were complaints that it took several days for crews to adequately service some areas.

Hendrix was deputy mayor to Dennis Archer when a 1999 snowstorm crippled the city and prompted Archer -- after scathing criticism -- to change city policy to plow residential streets.

"As impressive as appointments can or may be in an administration, the mayor needs to lead," Hendrix said. "I think it goes to the lack of experience that Ken Cockrel has in the executive branch of city government."

Cockrel's appointments of attorney Saul Green as deputy mayor, James Barren as police chief and Joseph Harris as chief financial officer have won the most praise.

But Debora Chambers, vice president of the Fitzgerald Community Council, a west-side neighborhood, said she hasn't seen needed changes yet in police response and quality of life.

"It's pretty much the same," she said. "I was hoping to see better policing, cleaner neighborhoods and to alleviate a lot of the drug trafficking."

Still, Chambers said it's too soon to judge Cockrel and is leaning toward voting for him because of his nearly 11 years in city government.

Councilman Kwame Kenyatta said he would give Cockrel a C-, praising his appointments but criticizing the retention of other Kilpatrick appointees and lack of communication with the council on issues such as Cobo Center.

"He has carried the same pattern of noncommunication" as Kilpatrick, Kenyatta said.

Facing a tough economy

A financial crisis, which began in earnest five days before Cockrel was sworn in, turbocharged an already bad economy in Detroit, bringing the Detroit Three to the brink of ruin.

Cockrel said that when he got a call from the White House advising him that President George W. Bush would extend loans, he wondered if it would be enough.

Earlier this year, the automakers announced across-the-board job reductions. This fall, Starbucks shuttered two of its three downtown locations, developers postponed plans for a new office building in Cadillac Square, the 2009 Detroit Belle Isle Grand Prix was canceled and the annual Winter Blast festival is being scaled back.

Cockrel is quick to point out that a Tim Hortons quickly replaced the Starbucks in the Millender

Center but acknowledged the challenges in a city with an unemployment rate of more than 16%.

"When I'm out and about, there are a couple of issues that keep coming up. One is crime. ... Second is jobs," he said.

After first estimating a deficit of at least $100 million, Cockrel's administration now says it is close to $300 million. Cockrel said his administration is on its third draft of a deficit elimination plan and it will include layoffs, although he refused to say how many.

"It is a very painful, very difficult process," he said.

Cockrel's election foes have questioned why, as council president, he didn't know more about the depth of the red ink.

Cockrel said his opponents should remember Kilpatrick's history of dishonesty -- lying under oath and covering up his wrongdoing by approving an $8.4-million taxpayer-funded settlement.

"When you're dealing with somebody like that, I don't think it should be considered hard to believe that he just didn't give us the information," he said.

The city's finances

The city is almost a year late in submitting its 2006-07 fiscal year audit to the state, and the state is withholding $33 million in revenue sharing because of the delay.

If the city doesn't turn in its audit before the end of the month, the state will withhold a portion of its December payment, said Terry Stanton, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Treasury.

Harris said he had to visit city departments to inspect their records because of the lack of electronic data.

Cockrel said upon taking office that he would seek to finish the audit by the due date set by Kilpatrick's administration -- Nov. 30.

But that proved impossible, and he now says the audit won't be finished until February. Cockrel called that the low point of his short tenure.

"I realized I'd made a promise that we weren't going to be able to keep," he said. "When Joe came to me and told me ... it was rough."

Cockrel said the high points were working out the deal in Lansing to position Cobo for a $279-million expansion -- though he cautioned that council approval still is needed -- and opening new police mini-stations.

But in the end, Cockrel's stint as mayor will be defined by his team's handling of the budget crisis. And he knows any cuts could prove politically unpopular and possibly cost him the election.

"The reality is it could play out that way," he said. "I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure it doesn't."

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