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Tuesday, March 25, 2008

Detroiters have mixed feelings

Gordon Trowbridge / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's supporters are still supporters. His critics remain critics. The city's business elite largely remains on the sidelines. And the city's residents remain worried, and baffled.

Despite the eight criminal counts, the fiery accusations from Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy before a national television audience and the legal and political questions Kilpatrick now faces, few of the community figures who had spoken publicly before Monday's announcement were changing their positions afterward.

If there was a common theme running through the reactions, it was sadness.

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"A tragic day for the city," said City Council President Kenneth Cockrel Jr.

"A sad day for Detroit," was the verdict from the Rev. Nicholas Hood III of Plymouth United Church of Christ in Detroit.

"The 21st century rerun of a classic Greek tragedy," said Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson.

Ordinary Detroiters were no less sad.

"I hate to have them go through this," said Marvin Douglas, 66, about Kilpatrick and former aide Christine Beatty. "But if you're wrong, you're wrong."

"I feel bad for them," said 83-year-old Eola Wells. "But people have minds to think, and they should

think before they act."

Some among the city's influential clergy were less willing to blame the mayor. The Rev. Horace Sheffield, a Kilpatrick supporter, was planning a Thursday rally to buoy the mayor.

"My support is unshakable," said Sheffield, of New Galilee Baptist Church. "The mayor is charged, not convicted. This is what the prosecutor had to say. There is still the evidence, there is still a trial by peers, there is still a judge that has to make decisions."

Another Kilpatrick supporter, African-American activist Malik Shabazz, saw the same racial motives in Monday's announcement that the mayor himself has suggested in the past.

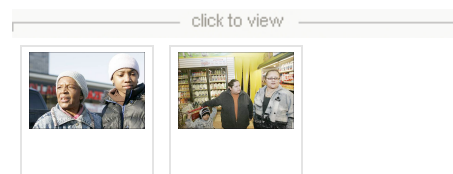
"The prosecutor has major discretion. She did not have to do this," he said. Worthy, he alleged, was courting "racist institutions like (the Detroit media) and those who control the suburban, capital and corporate interests who want to take control of Detroit."

Shabazz said outside suburban interests want to reclaim the city and control the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department along with future city development.

The corporate interests of whom Shabazz is so scornful were largely silent publicly Monday. Privately,



Detroit resident Eola Wells, 83, with grandniece Akilah Ransom, weighs in on charges against Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and Christine Beatty. (Velvet S. McNeil / The Detroit News)



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company leaders questioned whether Kilpatrick is trustworthy and can still run the city.

The business community has often forged high-profile bonds with the mayor, who shared their belief in reviving the city's core with housing, retail and corporate relocations such as the Quicken Loans' plans to move to the city.

But Monday there was dead silence -- at least publicly. The Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce released a carefully worded statement focusing on the need for the city's economic rebuilding to continue.

"We're just going to keep our eyes set on the larger picture, and that's growth and economic development in the city," General Motors Corp. spokesman Greg Martin said.

Chrysler LLC released this statement: "Chrysler has been a long-standing community partner of the City of Detroit, through challenging times and successful endeavors. (Examples include the Winter Blast, the Chrysler Firehouse, the 2006 Super Bowl, among others.) The Company will continue to support outreach efforts that enable growth for the City and the region as a whole."

Withholding comment were the heads of Compuware Corp., DTE Energy and Ilitch Holdings, and industrialist Dave Bing -- all once major Kilpatrick boosters. Public relations business academics experts said that suggests waning support for the mayor.

"Oh, it's a turning point. It went from a watching a car wreck to being at a funeral," said Kelly Rossman-McKinney, CEO of the Rossman Group public relations firm in Lansing.

Michael Bernacchi, a professor of marketing at University of Detroit Mercy, said the business leaders' silence says they've "likely gone onto Plan B."

For weeks, Bernacchi said, many business leaders have given vague statements saying that downtown momentum cannot be killed and the legal process should run its course. Privately, he said, he'd suggest they are more pointed.

"At this point, if you're Mike Ilitch or Pete Karmanos or Dan Gilbert, you get the mayor behind closed doors and tell him he's got to leave office," Bernacchi said.

Oakland Executive Patterson, who rarely withholds criticism of Detroit's leaders, has been largely quiet as the text message scandal unfolded. On Monday, his comments remained tempered. In a brief statement released from his office, Patterson said, "It is the responsibility of us in leadership roles to stay focused at this hour on the important work before us."

But for some, Kilpatrick's ability to maintain that focus is in question.

"So he is not going to resign," said the Rev. V. Lonnie Peek of the city's Greater Christ Baptist Church.

"But can he do what is needed to move the city forward while dealing with his situation?"

Detroit News Staff Writers Karen Bouffard, Catherine Jun, Louis Aguilar, Sharon Terlep and Oralandar Brand-Williams contributed to this report.

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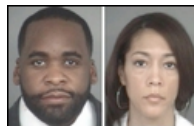


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