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HEADLINE: Talks between Ehrlich allies, mayor's rivals raise suspicions;
O'Malley's possible run for governor is at issue

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BODY:

Two of Mayor Martin O'Malley's potential challengers in the September Democratic primary have met with allies of Republican Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., prompting speculation by the mayor's friends that GOP campaign money might be used to undermine a rival of the governor's.

Carl Stokes, a Democrat who lost to O'Malley in 1999 and is planning to challenge him again this fall, said he recently called Richard Hug, the chief fund-raiser for the governor, and had breakfast with Gene Raynor, a member of Ehrlich's transition team, to ask them for help in raising campaign contributions.

Neither Raynor nor Hug promised any help, Stokes said.

But they also have not ruled out personal contributions to O'Malley's political rivals in the future, according to Hug and Raynor.

In addition, state Sen. Joan Carter Conway, also a Democrat, had a lunch meeting with Hug at Dalesio's restaurant in Little Italy last month. The two talked about Conway's possible challenge to O'Malley, among other political topics, Hug said.

Conway considers run

"We talked about her position on slots, which she is opposed to," said Hug, who added that Conway's allies arranged the meeting. "And we talked about the possibility of her running for mayor, and she said she would have a decision on that in mid-May."

When questioned by a reporter, Hug said he will "absolutely not" raise funds for Conway. "I am raising funds for Bob Ehrlich, and one is enough. ... She and I are almost 180 degrees opposed on almost everything - except for our love

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of Baltimore."

Despite the denials, some of O'Malley's supporters find the meetings suspicious. They wonder if Ehrlich supporters will contribute to whoever challenges the mayor, in an effort to force O'Malley to use more of his \$2.6 million campaign fund so he can't save it for a challenge to Ehrlich in 2006.

"I'm glad that the governor and his fund-raiser are taking an interest in the city, although it would be better if it was in the city's interest and not the governor's political interest," said Colleen Martin-Lauer, O'Malley's chief fund-raiser. Alliance denied

Conway, who has not yet announced whether she'll run for mayor this fall, said that she has not formed an alliance with the Republicans.

"I'm a die-hard Democrat," said Conway. "If there is a conspiracy going on, they'd have to tell me about it."

Raynor, a friend of and adviser to state Comptroller William Donald Schaefer, confirmed that he had breakfast not long ago with Stokes - at Stokes' request - at Jimmy's Restaurant on Broadway in Fells Point. Raynor said he would like to support a candidate who could beat O'Malley, but that he hasn't decided whom to support. He said he turned down Stokes' request for money to conduct a poll.

"The fact that I'm not a fan of O'Malley's is not because of Ehrlich or Schaefer or anybody else. I just haven't seen any improvement in the city," said Raynor. "I think he (O'Malley) has done rather poorly. We've had like nine police commissioners in the last three years, three school superintendents. I don't think the streets are cleaner."

Meanwhile, another potential challenger to O'Malley, car dealer Scott Donahoo, said yesterday that he will not challenge the mayor in the September Democratic primary.

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