CAMBRIDGE MATTERS

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

swrideout@aol.com

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Monday’s City Council Meeting was an interesting one. I was not feeling well so kept my participation to a minimum. The first order of business was a public hearing on the proposed Property Tax Increase. The City Manager made a detailed presentation on where Cambridge stands with regard to our tax rate and the assessed value of property in Cambridge and other similarly sized cities in Maryland and on the Eastern Shore.

There are 3 parts of the city manager’s proposal. The first is a small increase in the rate to allow the city to receive a “constant yield” or the same amount of taxes this coming year as we are receiving this current year. Because the assessed value of real estate in Cambridge went down 2.3% (some went up and some went down), in order to receive the same amount of taxes for the coming year, the tax rate would need to increase from .007989 to .008179.

In addition the city manager was proposing tax increases to address two significant issues that face the city. The first is housing blight in Ward 3 and the second is the need to repair the 300 block of High Street. To fund those two projects over 2 years the city manager proposed increasing the tax rate an additional .0699, which would generate approximately another $1 million in taxes.

Prior to the public hearing, the commissioners were able to ask questions and make comments. We were informed that there are going to be some increases in costs for such things as increased health insurance and a greater expense for the city attorney position. There are also some cost savings that come from such things as moving the 911 system over to the county. At the public hearing a number of citizens rose to speak in opposition to the proposed tax increase.

The city manager was seeking a vote from city council to conceptually approve maintaining the personal tax at the rate of 1.69 per $100 which was done. The motion to conceptually approve increasing the property tax rate from .007989 to .008878 did not receive a second so was not approved. That means we are in limbo regarding the tax increase proposal, but there is plenty of time to address this challenge.

Following the public hearing and vote, several items were taken up on the consent calendar and approved. These included approval of the meeting minutes of March 13th, the request of the Dorchester y to hold their Heart of the Chesapeake Bike Tour on July 22nd, the request from Kingdom Family Worship Center to hold their “Unity in the Community” event on April 15th on the lot at Cedar and Race Street, and the appropriation of a donation to the Cambridge Police Department. The request by the American Legion for a letter of support was approved separately.

We then took up two Ordinances that are text amendments to the UDC to help make it clearer.

The next topic for discussion was the proposal by the city manager who asked for guidance for her recommendations regarding a granting process that staff had developed. The idea is for the city to set aside $25,000 for nonprofits, churches, and possibly other government agencies to seek funding that will help address child and youth development, housing repairs, services to low income people, Chesapeake Bay water quality or other demonstrated needs. While the amount is relatively small, this is the first time in many years that the city has considered these type requests.

I contributed my thoughts that collaborative applications (2 or more organizations) should be given a preference and that the city grants should be matching other monies raised from other sources. Others felt the application process might be too complicated for the amount of money that is available. The city manager is going to revise the proposal based on the discussion and bring back a modification at the next meeting of city council.

Under New Business was a recommendation that the city enter into a contract with a landscape architect company in the amount of $30,000 using no city money. The Working Waterfronts Project is funded by the Maryland Department of Resources and is intended to prepare an implementation plan to help the city seek funding for projects related to the city waterfront. This grant was previously approved by city council but was voted down on a vote of 2-3 the basis of which is a mystery to me. Its defeat does not seem reasonable given the need to address waterfront issues in the future.