CAMBRIDGE MATTERS

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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Yes, Cambridge does matter, and the importance of your engagement in all aspects of this community is critical to its success. Allow me to tell a short story from my past experience that, hopefully, will help set the stage for what follows.

In 1989 when I became the juvenile court judge in Alexandria, my work day started at 8 a.m. and usually went to 6 p.m. with a few short breaks during the day and 15 minutes for lunch. Our docket was so full there was no time to figure out why that was the case; and I did not have the time because I was the only person available to hear the cases. I knew, however, that if I did not change what I did and how I did it, things would only get worse with more cases coming in to be heard.

So I set aside short periods of time from a heavy docket to see what was causing so many cases to come before the court. My thought was to see how our community and local agencies might address the challenges we faced with preventive services and early intervention services. In time the docket for the court lightened, and we became one of only two communities in the entire state of Virginia whose caseload was going down rather than up. Our delinquency rate was cut in half, and the number of youth we sent to state custody went down dramatically. We, as a community, accomplished this by volunteerism, reallocation of existing resources, addressing school, crime, and neighborhood challenges collaboratively, and finding new resources to address problems that had been ignored in the past. As a community Alexandria stepped up to the challenges we faced and addressed them in cost effective and responsible ways. I see here in Cambridge too few people doing most of the work and contributing most of the financial support for nonprofit efforts. More people need to become engaged in helping to be a solution.

During the past two weeks since the city manager introduced some possibilities for needed infrastructure improvements for Cambridge as part of a proposed increase in the city tax rate, the drum beat of “do not raise taxes” has been clear and heard. The idea of fixing the 300 block of High Street is no longer part of the proposed budget. The idea of improving substandard housing in Ward 3, which has the most challenges in a city with many housing challenges, is no longer part of the proposed budget.

Have these challenges miraculously been solved? No. Have they fixed themselves? No. Do they continue to exist? Clearly. But your city government is not going to raise your taxes to fix those problems. At least not this year.

At some point, however, the infrastructure in the 300 block of High Street and elsewhere within the city, much of which approximates 100 years will fail and will need to be replaced. When that happens, those who live here will see their tax rates increase even more than was considered this year. The money to fix all of our infrastructure challenges does not exist in a savings account or reserve fund. Prior city leadership has done what the federal government and many states and localities have done – They have kicked the can down the road for someone else to take care of at a much greater expense. That is what we are doing right now as part of the current budget process.

While I was initially in favor of an increase in the tax rate to take care of the two specific items that are high on the city list of priorities, I came to understand a number of things:

1. City Council cannot successfully address the multiple problems that the city faces without bringing the community into the conversation and helping all of you understand what we are facing and obtaining your support for next steps.
2. There are other ways to address some of the infrastructure and service challenges in small bites and at less expense. This will not solve the big problems but will start us on the right path of systematically addressing needs and making improvements. Examples include evaluating the condition of the city streets and prioritizing the most effective and least costly way to fix them. We are going to look at trash collection and recycling services and see if they can be done less expensively.
3. City leadership has been unsuccessful in providing the tax payers with a clear picture of what needs to be done while maintaining essential services for the citizens. We need to do better so that you understand what challenges face us, both long standing and new.
4. City leadership needs to help the community understand that past actions by previous city councils have given us low and moderate income housing that, while essential, important and present in every community, does not pay through its taxes or PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) payments enough money to support the essential citizen services that government provides such as police, emergency, fire, and public education. As a result every other homeowner, property owner, and renter in the city is paying more for their residence because the owners of some multiunit housing are not.
5. The city has failed as well to effectively and consistently enforce compliance with the housing maintenance code so that our housing stock has dramatically deteriorated and helped in reducing home values within the city.
6. A tax differential exists between the city and the county. We are looking to see what that differential currently is for Dorchester County and Cambridge and other cities and towns in Dorchester County but also how we compare to the rest of the state. The last time this was done, Cambridge was way out of line compared to other cities in other counties. The tax differential should be based on what services that the city provides that the county does not have to provide. Examples would be police services that the county sheriff does not have to provide in Cambridge. Other services include sewer and water, trash collection, and planning and zoning services all of which the city provides and county does not have to provide. Efforts by former Commissioner Cooke and Commissioner Hanson a couple of years ago to engage the city residents in protesting this tax differential received a widespread yawn by city residents, who apparently could not have cared less.
7. Helping children succeed in school helps everyone. It helps reduce juvenile delinquency and ultimately adult crime. It helps reduce use of illegal substances by youth. It helps teachers be able to teach more effectively and want to stay here to do that work. I have a study from Milwaukee, Wisconsin that shows that that community paid 1/3 more to replace a social worker than it did to retain him/her. If that cost translates to teachers in Dorchester County, just think of the cost we as tax payers are bearing with all of the teachers, who are recruited to come here, stay for a year or so, and leave because of their experiences here. You as a volunteer can help a child and help our collective pocket books by helping out at a local school.

And the list can go on. What we need from you, at the very least, are good ideas to help solve problems that the city faces and less complaining, which solves little and only helps us kick the can further down the road.

At our city council meeting on Monday evening, there was a lot on the agenda and much was accomplished. At the same time, much time and effort was wasted. Some would say that that is how democracy works. I would say it happens when city commissioners fail to do their homework and inadequately represent the citizens of this city.

After a closed meeting to discuss the hiring of a city attorney to replace Rob Collision, Esq., whose last work day for the city will be April 17th, the resignation of Chief Dan Dvorak and the appointment of Major Lewis as the interim Police Chief, and an ethics matter raised by Commissioner Foster, The city council returned to public session to begin the regular agenda.

After hearing from citizens regarding the proposed increase in the tax rate (see the attached document prepared by Mr. Glenn Bramble) and issues concerning the city ethics commission, during which Commissioner Sydnor sought the resignation of Chuck McFadden from the ethics commission, the agenda was approved. For those of you who do not know Chuck, he was a leader and former chair of the Cambridge Ethics Commission for a number of years and was one of the drafters of the Cambridge Ethics Ordinance that passed city council in 2011.He is and has been for years an advocate for open meetings and ethical behavior for all city employees including elected officials. His forced resignation from the Ethics Commission Monday evening was just one of the disgraceful things that took place during the meeting.

The Consent Calendar included the approval of the March 27th meeting

Minutes; A noise variance for Movie Night on May 5th between 8-10 p.m. at

Sailwinds Park Amphitheater; A WECA picnic on June 4th; the Juneteenth

Festival on June 17th from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Pine Street; Two beer

Festival events for the High Spot Restaurant; a date change for the

Cambridge Sail and Power Squadron for its flare demonstration to May

21st; the Fair Housing Month Declaration for April; and the Fair Housing and

Equal Opportunity Plan and related plans.

The next order of business was the introduction of Ordinance 1097 to set

The tax rates for personal property and real property for FY 2018 as the

basis for setting the city budget for the coming year. The public hearing on

that ordinance will be held on April 24th prior to the second reading and final

adoption of the tax rates for the coming year.

Next was the discussion of and approval of a process for screening and

awarding Human Services Grant requests. The city is starting this

initiative with a small amount of money this year, but my hope is that

everyone will see the benefit of these grants on our community. This is

something that I have been advocating for years. As an example of how

spending money now will help reduce costs later and improve the quality of

life in Cambridge, my experience as mentioned above has shown me that

investing in early childhood education and parental engagement and

mentoring programs for older youth will have a positive impact on school

readiness, reduction of substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and

ultimately adult crime and the cost of incarceration.

I have seen direct correlation with programs such as this improving school

systems, helping to retain good teachers, improving academic

achievement, and reduction of crime and delinquency. If we do not engage

in some of these programs, the hope for a better Cambridge will never be

achieved, and tax rates will never go down.

Under new business the Commissioners received and adopted the 2018

proposed budget adoption schedule and the 2018-2022 Five-Year Capital

Improvement Plan. City staff also sought permission to issue and RFP for

Privatization of City Sanitation Services, which was approved by City

Council.

Staff will bring back the results of the RFP to see what might be done to

improve these services at a lower cost to the residents. The transient boat

slip fees for the City Marina were suspended for weekends in May as well

as Memorial Weekend in an effort to entice more boaters to visit

Cambridge and possibly return later in the summer as paying customers.

The city council approved the ownership interest transfer of a portion of

Cambridge Commons, a low and moderate income housing project here in

the city. The city manager also announced that staff will be providing at

least annual and possibly semi-annual reports to city council about this and

the other subsidized housing projects in the city to help city council and city

residents understand the ongoing status of those projects and their cost.

Another item of business was the approval of a contract for seawall

improvement design for Choptank and West End Avenues and Willis and

Oakley Streets. I raised the issue of the need to address Belvedere Street

as well and was advised that city staff believed that information gained from

the contract will help staff to address Belvedere Street improvements as

well in overall corrective efforts.

A matter that was defeated on a 2-3 vote at the last city council meeting

was brought back for reconsideration. This was the Working Waterfronts

Implementation Grant Proposal selection of a company to provide contract

services. After the matter was reconsidered, the city council approved the

contract 5-0. Why this was not accomplished at the last city council meeting

remains a mystery to me, especially since it past on Monday evening 5-0.

A final topic of discussion and consideration by the commissioners was a

request by Commissioner Foster to amend the current Cambridge Ethics

Law in several aspects and to accept the resignation earlier in the meeting

of Chuck McFadden from his membership on the Ethics Commission. The

effort to refer the proposed changes of the Ethics Code to the Ordinance

Committee was defeated 3-2, with the Mayor casting the deciding vote after

Commissioner Cannon recused himself. The vote to accept Chuck

McFadden’s resignation from the Ethics Commission was approved on a

vote of 3-2 with Commissioner Hanson and myself voting in the negative.

Aside from some other administrative actions, the members of city council

and the Mayor provided their final comments to Rob Collison, Esq. who

was attending his last city council meeting as City Attorney. Rob’s contract

was ended without cause by a 2-1 vote of city council earlier this year.

Dave Cannon and I had recused ourselves from consideration of this

matter due to a possible conflict of interest on Commissioner Cannon’s part

and an actual one in my situation because I rent office space from Rob.

That left three Commissioners to decide the issue of Rob’s continued

service to the city, and Commissioner Sydnor and Commissioner Foster

voted to terminate his contract while Commissioner Hanson voted against

it. This termination without cause will have consequences to the city in

several respects that I am not allowed to discuss at this time.

The Mayor, the City Manager, and everyone on council, except for

Commissioner Sydnor, were gracious in their comments and thanks to Rob

for his over 21 years of service to the city. While I have had to recuse

myself from involvement in this issue, I still have an opinion. The action of

those voting to terminate Rob’s contract was not in the best interests of the

City of Cambridge.

Until next time,

Steve Rideout