CAMBRIDGE MATTERS

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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Dear Friends:

Over 20 years ago I was travelling to Alabama to make a presentation to a statewide conference of their Court Appointed Special Advocates Program (CASA). During one of the flights I saw a woman wearing a Dilbert sweat shirt. Above the picture of Dilbert was written “Change Is Good” and below his picture was written “You Go First”.

When I saw it, I chuckled to myself and then started to think more about its meaning. While change is a constant in our lives, we are often reluctant to welcome it. Not all change is good, but some is and some is necessary.

With regard to our city government, and in our lives, I believe that when presented with the possibility of change our task, if possible, is to do our homework, obtain all of the information that is available, and then make decisions that we believe are in our best interest on the issue or challenge that is placed before us.

I see Cambridge, with some hesitation and reasonable questions, starting to do that.

At our meeting on Monday, the main topic was the FY 2018 budget. The public was given the opportunity to come and present their views. None of the few citizens present wished to speak, so the public hearing on the budget was closed. The City Manager and Finance Director then made a summary presentation of the budget that provided information on the process and what is planned for FY 2018. I am attaching a scanned copy of their PowerPoint with some of my scribbles. Members of City Council were then given the opportunity to make suggestions or ask questions.

Commissioner Hanson asked that with future quarterly budget reports staff provide a limited analysis of anything that might be unexpected or of concern to the level of income or expenses that the city was experiencing. There is always the possibility of unexpected costs such as the infrastructure damage earlier this year to the water main that crosses Cambridge Creek or at Woods Road and Rt. 50.

As a result of the recent lowering of real estate assessments on some properties in the city and the results of the blight study that I have mentioned before, I have concerns about how our housing code is enforced and suggested the need to consider increasing our efforts there. My suggestion was to look at hiring by contract or as an employee (full or part time depending on need and available resources) someone who would work with the city’s poor and elderly who may have limited resources as a problem solver to try to help them find ways to fix parts of their homes that have housing code violations. This could be done through available community resources, grants, and/or reduced costs offered by craftsmen willing to provide their craft at reduced prices. The funding for whatever would be possible would not come from increased taxes but from other resources such as reserves set aside for council goals, a small portion of a potential payment from Beazer Properties that is owed and as yet unpaid, or savings that might occur if the city were to move to privatization of residential sanitation services. The city manager will explore this idea to see if it might be viable for the city and helpful in improving homes in violation of the city housing code.

As a result of the questions and comments from the commissioners, the City Manager will start the formal process of presenting and passing the Budget Ordinance for FY 2018 with the first reading and hearing scheduled for May 22nd.

The other item for discussion but no formal decision was the reaction of the commissioners to the work session last Friday on the idea of privatization of city sanitation services. The City Manager opened the discussion with the reminder to everyone that one of the main areas of focus that she was asked to address when hired was how to reduce and limit the expenses of government. She indicated that the idea of privatization, while not without its risks, was one of them.

I raised the concern that I have about going down this road and finding that privatization does not work the way we thought. If we have sold most of the sanitation trucks and have limited staff to do this work, would we not be in trouble in a few years and have significant expenses to restart the service in house? The risks to a great extent can be limited by well negotiated and drafted contracts that limit increased costs, ensure compliance by the contractor, and provide adequate notice of future challenges to allow the city time to address them. They can also be limited by having an ability within city staff to address individual failures by a contractor that impact residents while city management works with the contractor to solve the problem and avoid it happening again.

The commissioners asked questions to help identify the benefits and costs of this possible change. There were concerns about how this change would impact city sanitation staff. As I mentioned previously, there are plans in place to address known issues that the City Manager will bring back to City Council. I asked about the turnover rate with this staff, as the cost of replacing a worker through injury or failing to do the work is potentially significant. We learned that the sanitation staff has a relatively high turnover rate much of which comes from injuries from hand loading heavy trash cans into the trucks.

While the current city code limits the size of cans to 30 gallon, many of the trash cans in the city are larger than that. The proposed privatization will result in every household having a large rolling can that will be lifted by a hydraulic lift onto the trucks, which will remove staff from that task and reduce the possibility of staff injuries, workmen’s compensation claims, and higher insurance costs.

After a full discussion of this topic, the City Manager indicated that she would move forward with more research into this issue and the qualifications and quality of the different potential providers and would report back to city council at our next meeting on May 22nd on her findings and recommendations.

Well that is it for this week. I hope to see you at one of our future meetings.

Steve Rideout

Commissioner

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