CAMBRIDGE MATTERS

**Planning and Zoning**

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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Tonight I filled in for Commissioner Dave Cannon as liaison to the City Planning and Zoning Commission. Dave had a meeting conflict, so I was happy to go and observe the meeting and provide my recollections of what took place. I was very impressed with the professionalism and care that the commission members and staff took with regard to each of the matters that came before them.

Even with a few matters on the agenda, the meeting took almost 2 hours. Commission members Gene Lauer, Marshall Rickert, Jerry Burroughs, Mary Losty, Chan’Tay Nelson, and Herbert Trego and Commission Chair Bill Craig as well as staff members Pat Escher and LaSara Kinser immediately got down to work and remained focused during the entire meeting.

After a moment of silence, the agenda was approved with some changes and the meeting minutes for April 4th and May 2nd were approved with some minor modifications. The hearing on the Preliminary Plan for Phase 2 of Cambridge Market Place was continued to the July 11th meeting and a 2nd June meeting was set for June 18th to review the application regarding the Taco Bell Restaurant at Cambridge Market Place.

The next matter for consideration was the request by Thomas Bradley, the owner of 811 Locust Street, to permit a commercial retail store at that location. Ooh La La Hair Salon had been located in this building but was reported to have recently moved out. Mr. Bradley and his wife are planning to open a women’s dress and apparel store in the building and are also looking for a new tenant for the hair salon space. The members of the Commission had a number of questions to clarify the nature of the business which were satisfactorily answered by Mr. Bradley.

As the Board of Zoning Appeals has the authority to approve or deny this request, the Planning and Zoning Commission role is to recommend, not recommend, or recommend the application with conditions; in this instance they unanimously recommended approval of the application.

Next on the agenda was the application of James Schneider to allow 7 apartments and a business to be housed at 421 Maryland Avenue. This building is at the corner of Dorchester Avenue and Maryland Avenue and previously had been two properties combined into one that had a Chiropractor Office downstairs and apartments upstairs. There was disagreement as to how many apartments were in the building, but sufficient evidence appeared to be presented to the Commission that there were only 2 legitimate apartments upstairs while at times in the past more people may have lived there than were allowed.

The building had been bought by Mr. Schneider about a year ago after having been vacant for 10-15 years. Some members of the Commission were very knowledgeable about the property as were a number of neighbors who came to speak in opposition to the application.

After a lengthy presentation, questions, and discussion and at the request of staff for some guidance from the commission, the commission declined to make any recommendation to the Board of Zoning Appeals and referred the applicant back to staff to further work on possible alternatives. In addition staff was going to look at other properties in the area to determine how many legal apartments were permitted in the neighborhood.

Based on the evidence presented there were only 3 water meters for the building, which was consistent with a business on the ground floor and 2 apartments on the 2nd floor. That is how the zoning for the building was established when the Unified Development Code (UDC) was enacted in 2014.

In sum, it appeared that the Commission found that

1. The proposal was not acceptable in its current form and would not move on to the Board of Zoning Appeals.

2. If the applicant wanted to talk with the owner of a neighboring lot for possible parking for the building, he was free to do that but possibly should make any purchase contingent on obtaining final approval of his plans for the building

3. The applicant may work with city staff, which will be gathering information on other rental properties in the area, and come back with some modified proposal for consideration by the Commission.

4. The property is required to be mixed use – business and residential – and all residential in the building would not be allowed.

Any final recommendation by the Planning and Zoning Commission will be made at a future meeting, if requested by the applicant.

The final matter on the agenda for decision involved the Farmer’s Market that moved this year from Long Wharf to open space on Race Street at Cemetery Avenue. This had been done without proper approvals of the Planning and Zoning Commission and the Board of Zoning Appeals but was allowed to continue in operation pending application and approval process.

Cambridge Main Street is the applicant, and city staff was recommending that the Planning and Zoning Commission recommend to the Board of Zoning Appeals approval of the application for a Special Exception Permit with certain conditions for a period of 5 years. After presentation by staff of the current situation and answers to questions by members of the Commission, the Commission made the recommendation for approval of the farmers’ market for 5 years from April 1st to October 31st each year from 3-6 pm. In addition the applicant needs to attend the next traffic and safety committee meeting for comments and any discussion of this use with the police department. This matter will move on to the Board of Zoning Appeals for a final public hearing on the application.

The move to this new location has had some expected bumps but is experiencing more foot traffic than occurred when it was at Long Wharf. Several of the Commissioners asked why the farmers’ market was not returned to the parking lot that it used before going to Long Wharf. They were informed that that location was considered and was felt to be another good possibility in the event the current location was found not to be suitable. With a Special Exception Permit, the city has the right and ability to review the farmers’ market at any time and modify the Permit if circumstances require.

With the close of the business agenda, two items were taken up on the discussion agenda. The first was regarding the food truck legislation that had been brought through the Planning and Zoning Commission to City Council. At the first reading of the proposed ordinance at City Council, the motion to move it on to a second reading and public hearing was defeated on a 2-3 vote. As the Commission and staff believe that the city should have legislation that regulates food trucks in the city as do I, the decision was made to bring the matter to the Ordinance Committee of City Council for further discussion. Two members of the Commission – Gene Lauer and Mary Losty – were appointed to represent the Commission in those discussions.

The next item for discussion was a report by LaSara Kinser regarding the GIS Housing Survey Study Program that started June 6th through Salisbury University students who will be surveying every property in Cambridge. They did 93 properties today with a computer survey application that was developed by a member of city staff. The aim is to determine the level of housing standards for property within the city limits. This is a follow up to an initiative last fall in Ward 3 that found a significant number of homes that were in substandard condition.

After the survey of the properties in completed in the next 2-3 weeks, a report will be prepared for consideration somewhere near the end of the summer.

With the conclusion of that report and comments and questions from members of the Commission, the meeting was adjourned at around 7:50 p.m.