UPCOMING MEETING DATES AND LOCATIONS

Saturday, November 18, 2017, Dorchester County Public Library (303 Gay St), 10:00 am

Saturday, January 13, 2018, Dorchester County Public Library (303 Gay St), 10:00 am

Saturday, March 10, 2018, Location To Be Determined, 10:00 am

Thursday, May 10, Location To Be Determined, 7:00 pm

Thursday, July 12, Location To Be Determined, 7:00 pm

Thursday, September 13, Location To Be Determined, 7:00 pm

Saturday, November 10, Location To Be Determined, 10:00 am

**CAN BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING**

**September 14, 2017**

**MINUTES**

**Open to the Public**

**Board Members Present:** Chuck McFadden (President), Judd Vickers (Vice President), Mary Ellen Jesien (Treasurer), Michelle Barnes (Membership Director), Tom Puglisi (Secretary), Jackie Vickers, Roman Jesien, Frank Cooke, and Dave Thatcher, constituting a Quorum of the Board under Bylaws Section 11 (nine of ten members being present)

**Board Members Absent:** Sharon Smith

1. **Welcome and Approval of Minutes.** CAN President Chuck McFadden opened the meeting at 7:00 pm by welcoming the members of the Board, as well as approximately 20 members of the public in attendance. Chuck indicated that Cindy Smith is looking for volunteers for the community jazz event tomorrow and Judd Vickers needs volunteers for the Community Cleanup on Sept 30. Chuck introduced the minutes of the July 27, 2017 meeting, which were distributed via email earlier this week. It was moved and seconded that the Board approve the July 27 minutes as distributed, and the motion was approved by a 9-0 vote of Board members present.
2. **Treasurer’s Report.** CAN Treasurer Mary Ellen Jesien reported that CAN now has a total of 70 members and 48 others have expressed interest in joining. Mary Ellen will send CAN postcards to the 48 persons who have not yet formally joined.
3. **Code Enforcement.** CAN President Chuck McFadden stated that he has recently learned that the City of Cambridge performs no proactive code enforcement. He expressed concern that most Cambridge residents may not be aware that code enforcement in Cambridge is almost entirely driven by individual citizen complaints, and that the preferred method for registering complaints and concerns is through the City website’s new “COMCATE” system, which ensures that citizen concerns are systematically recorded, tracked, and resolved.  Chuck then introduced City Council Commissioner Steve Rideout to describe the City’s current code enforcement practices.
4. **Commissioner Rideout.** Stressing that CAN represents an embodiment of the kind of community involvement that is critical to the growth of Cambridge as a viable city, Commissioner Rideout encouraged CAN to intensify its efforts to recruit and engage residents from all neighborhoods throughout Cambridge.

**City Advisory Council.** Before addressing code enforcement, Commissioner Rideout briefly summarized his attempts and those of Commissioner Hanson to activate the “Citizens’ Advisory Committee” (which had been authorized by the City Council in 1976, but not implemented in the recent past) by proposing that the City Council appoint Advisory Committee members. While several Commissioners argued that Cambridge lacks enough people to fill its current committees, Commissioner Rideout countered that Cambridge currently has too many inactive committees or committees that could easily fall under the Citizens’ Advisory Committee umbrella, that active members of existing committees could be appointed to the Citizens’ Advisory Committee, and that the genuinely meaningful Committees could become subcommittees of the Advisory Committee. Nevertheless, the City Council rejected the proposal by a 3-2 vote. Commissioner Rideout had also proposed Operating Procedures for the City’s current committees that provide more structure to city committees and allow members to be removed when they chronically fail to attend meetings. These Operating Procedures adopted on September 11th.

**Code Enforcement.** Commissioner Rideout noted that Cambridge is over 300 years old and has experienced evolving housing standards over that time. For many years, however, Cambridge has relied upon the standards of the BOCA National Building Code as adapted with appropriate amendments to serve local needs. He acknowledged that code enforcement has been a serious area of concern for a significant number of Cambridge residents, including himself, for many years. For some months now, Commissioner Rideout has been talking with the City Manager to find ways to make code enforcement more effective, consistent, and objective. He indicated that the City Manager recognizes that the City currently lacks the staffing to accomplish everything that needs to be done and that she is conducting a Management Study of code enforcement procedures to determine root causes and identify solutions. She wants to find out if the problems are simply due to under-staffing or if there are also systemic problems.

Commissioner Rideout emphasized that citizen involvement is needed at this time to ensure that code enforcement becomes more effective and consistent. Both he and Commissioner Hanson have sought improvements, but hard numbers from citizens about code enforcement are needed to inform the City Manager’s Management Study, without which the perspective of the Department of Public Works could hold sway. Commissioner Rideout indicated that the “COMCATE” tool on the City’s “Choose Cambridge” website is the most effective way to register complaints, suggestions, and compliments and ensure that all complaints are tracked to resolution.

In discussions with the City Manager, Commissioner Rideout has learned that the City acts on code enforcement complaints, but does not conduct proactive code enforcement. The City Manager needs valid complaint data to include in her Management Study to justify any changes that might take place. It is important that citizens not give up on code enforcement, especially at this time. The City Manager receives a copy of all complaints, and she monitors responses; but substantive citizen complaints (i.e., hard data) are needed to substantiate the need for change. The City Manager understands that there has been lack of consistency (and perhaps favoritism) in the past, and she is committed to fair and even enforcement.

In addition to inconsistency and the lack of adequate staffing, the court process needs to be addressed. Historically the practice of issuing repeated citations and fines for the same code violation have resulted in the some of the citations being dismissed by the judge. Commissioner Rideout also noted that issuing citations is an ineffective enforcement technique for many owners, especially less responsible landlords, as they just result in liens against the property, which are not addressed until the property is sold. It may be that the City Council needs to change the code so that landlords who do not comply with City requirements loose their license to rent.

Commissioner Rideout noted that Salisbury University students are preparing a report on housing conditions in Cambridge, and that many citizens may not have the financial resources to make the repairs necessary to bring their houses up to code. Although the full report about the entire City from the Salisbury University study is not yet complete, the City has received a $200,000 grant from the State to help Ward 3 home owners in the Pine Street Area improve their houses, and 68 people attended a meeting and have applied for that assistance. Another $100,000 for home improvements will become available from the City when the Beazer lawsuit is settled. Commissioner Rideout has advocated for the City to hire an outreach person who could help people find needed resources and resolve problems early. Failing the willingness of the property owners to work on solutions, stricter code enforcement would come into play.

**Questions and Comments from Attendees.**

*NOTE: CAN TAKES NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR VERIFYING THE ACCURACY OF ATTENDEE COMMENTS*

* Although it is possible submit complaints anonymously to COMCATE, it is not clear whether there is a way for anonymous complainants to track resolution of their complaints.
  + Commissioner Rideout will follow up with the City to obtain the answer. See follow-up note from Commissioner Rideout below.
* If a complainant identifies her/himself in submitting a complaint to COMCATE, does the City identify the complainant to the relevant property owner in following up on the complaint?
  + Commissioner Rideout will follow up with the City to obtain the answer. See follow-up note from Commissioner Rideout below.
* Can the property owner find out who has submitted complaints about their property (for example under a Maryland Freedom of Information request)?
  + Commissioner Rideout will follow up with the City to obtain the answer. See follow-up note from Commissioner Rideout below.
* Isn’t it the City’s responsibility to protect the identities of persons who make valid complaints?
  + Commissioner Rideout understands that identities of citizens in the possession of the City may be subject to Freedom of Information requests but will seek further clarification on this issue. Commissioner Rideout indicated that he would be happy to file legitimate complaints in the event a citizen was concerned about doing it about a neighbor for fear of damaging a relationship. Chuck McFadden also indicated that CAN would also be willing to file complaints. See follow-up note from Commissioner Rideout below.
* Actual numbers about code enforcement complaints and their resolution should be required from the City staff by the City Council on a regular basis. There should be regular reports required from the Department of Public Works, much like regular reports are required from the Police Department.
* Public Works Reports and Policy Reports would be posted prominently on the City website.
  + Commissioner Rideout will explore this possibility. See follow-up note from Commissioner Rideout below.
* People do not know about lack of proactive enforcement or how important it is to make complaints. CAN needs to get the word out to people.
* The most obvious link for complaints on City webpage does not work.
  + Commissioner Rideout will follow up with the City to fix this link. Following the meeting, he went on the City webpage and found that the link does now work.
* Maybe we have so many substandard rental properties because there is no annual inspection and no proactive code enforcement.
* The City’s rental registration requirement is not effective because it is a self-report system.
* Letters have gone out to non-owner occupied properties in Dorchester County. Annual inspections at the County level are also being considered. The City and the County need to form a partnership and work together on this issue.
* Good landlords should get incentives for compliance.
* The City needs a code enforcement process that works more quickly and effectively, perhaps including having police and EMS report obvious violations.
* Cambridge has more than 50% of housing in rental property – and landlords have all the power in that they could de-populate the city if they decided to act together.
* Section 8 housing requires an annual inspection – the State is supposed to conduct these inspections annually, but results and effectiveness are unknown.
  + Commissioner Rideout will investigate this.
* The City currently has one full-time employee inspector and one full-time contract inspector. The City has had significantly more inspectors in the past.
* In the past there were 5-6 code inspectors, but it was reported that they ignored landlords who had chronic problems.
* In the past, a landlord spokesperson objected to a City Council proposal to increase rental fees by $5 yearly to improve enforcement, and the Council voted down the proposal. Perhaps this proposal should be reconsidered.
* Many renters are being exploited by substandard rental conditions – the quality of life for these residents is also an important concern.
* Is it possible to cap the number of rental registrations in the city? Do we have an over-supply of cheap rental housing that draws people to Cambridge from elsewhere?
* The City Manager should consider that once people realize there is no proactive code enforcement, the City could be flooded with complaints in excess of what they would have to deal with if the City did systematic enforcement.
* Good landlords know that it is better economically to keep their properties well maintained.
* Annual renewal of licenses should be contingent upon code compliance.
* We need to go to City Council meetings to raise the code enforcement issue before the Council. Silence is acceptance.
* COMCATE can also be used to thank the city for a quick and helpful response, so be sure to do that when responding to any report back by the city to your complaint.

CAN President Chuck and the audience thanked Commissioner Rideout for spending time with CAN and for listening seriously to attendee’s complaints. Chuck reiterated that CAN needs more volunteers to help residents who can’t afford to maintain their properties.

**USING COMCATE**

CAN Vice-President Judd Vickers reviewed use of the COMCATE system, available on the City website at [www.choosecambridge.org](http://www.choosecambridge.org). See Handout attached. Judd would appreciate it if CAN members would report to the CAN Housing Quality Committee any complaints they make through COMCATE (or by other means) and their success in hearing having those complaints resolved.

1. **Adjournment.** Chuck McFadden made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Tom Puglisi seconded the motion, and the meeting was adjourned at 7:40 pm.

**Follow-up Note from Commissioner Rideout:**

There were some questions that came out of the CAN meeting for which I did not have answers. I sent them along to the City Manager, and her responses **in red**are below. I hope that these help clear up some of the concerns from the meeting.

1.  Although it is possible to submit complaints anonymously to COMCATE, it is not clear whether there is a way for anonymous complainants to track resolution of their complaints. Can you tell me if anonymous complaints can receive feedback?  When the complaint is anonymous, we do not have a person to respond to, so no.  We respond to anonymous complaints, based on seriousness of the issue.  Keep in mind that sometimes Comcate “complaints” are more comments than requests that we do something specific.  An example:  trash collectors should be paid more.

2.  If a complainant identifies her/himself in submitting a complaint to COMCATE, does the City identify the complainant to the relevant property owner in following up on the complaint? No, we do not reveal the identity of the complainant.

3.  Can the property owner find out who has submitted complaints about their property (for example under a Maryland Freedom of Information request)?  We are not sure, but tend to think they can. We will try to add a disclaimer that the complainant’s identity may be subject to disclosure under the Maryland Public Information Act or other applicable law and that the complainant may file an anonymous complaint if he/she desires.

4.  Actual numbers about code enforcement complaints and their resolution should be required from the City staff by the City Council on a regular basis.  There should be regular reports required from the Department of Public Works, much like regular reports are required from the Police Department. Would this be possible? For instance the number of complaints filed. The number of valid complaints. Complaints resolved and pending. Complaints resulting in citations or action by the City such as cutting grass. Maybe separate the building complaints from tall grass, etc.  If you or any Council member wants to see the reports on number of complaints, types and resolutions, they can come to my office.  I have access.  Not all you list here is available, such as “valid/invalid” and complaints resulting in citations.  That data has to be hand compiled.  Keep in mind that before a citation is issued, we send a letter asking for correction, and sometimes we extend the correction period, working with the property owner.

*Steve*

**How to File a Concern, Suggestion or Complaint with**

**Cambridge City Government**

1. Navigate your web browser to [www.choosecambridge.com](http://www.choosecambridge.com)

2. At the top of the City website, move your mouse to the topic “City Services” and click on the option “Report a Concern.” This will take you to the “COMCATE” page. You can also go the “Citizen Concern and Feedback” button on the left side of the City website. This button will take you to the “COMCATE” page as well.

3. The “COMCATE” page will provide you with a list of topics. For this example, let’s select “Code Enforcement.” A dropdown list will provide you with several additional options and for this example, we’ll choose “Overgrown Weeds and/or Landscaping.”

4. After selecting “Overgrown Weeds and/or Landscaping,” click on the “Next” button, which will take you to a page where you “Provide Contact Information.” Here, you would register as a “New User” or “Existing User,” or choose to “Remain Anonymous.”

5. This is the final “Enter Your Request” page. You will want to summarize the issue and provide the address

* If you have registered, you will be able to log on and see the issues you have reported.
* Sometimes, City staff will reach out to you directly by email for more information.

6. When you register, you will receive a password. Once you have logged on, you are able change the password to one that is easier to remember. That is totally up to you.