CAMBRIDGE MATTERS

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

swrideout@aol.com

February 7, 2018

Having people upset with questions that I ask or decisions that I have made is not new to me. As a former judge of juvenile and family law cases, I expected at least half of the people in the courtroom to disagree with my decision. Asking questions and making what can sometimes be difficult decisions are what the elected leadership of any city or county are called upon to do as part of their jobs. One important reason is that the passage of an ordinance or a budget can benefit some people in a community and potentially hurt others. From my experience here since 2010, too much legislation has been passed without thinking about the consequences.

You elected us to make decisions based on the information (evidence) before us that is for the good of all of the community to the extent possible. That is my job, and I intend to continue to do it that way.

One of my duties as a Commissioner in Cambridge is to be on the Ordinance Committee. That duty calls upon the committee membership to look at upcoming proposals including legislation, consider a variety of things related to it, and to ask questions in order to obtain clarification of issues and, possibly, to make suggestions that might improve or make clearer the decision we are being asked to make.

That is what is happening as part of the legislative process regarding the request to allow breweries in the industrial zone in Cambridge. What the Ordinance Committee did was ask questions and seek answers to issues that were raised. What we proposed was what we thought might be possible solutions to concerns that were raised. What the Planning and Zoning Commission did in a very professional way was to consider the suggestions, ask and answer questions, and make their decision.

What RAR did was blow the process up on Facebook and make it about perceived wrongs and threats to move out of the city if they did not get their way. We all know the value of RAR to Cambridge. I wrote about it in my **Cambridge Matters** end of the year report. I was delighted by the turnout on Tuesday evening. I wish that more of those who attended would attend City Council meetings and be interested in the other important issues that the city addresses that seem to receive little or no attention by the public.

At the meeting of the Planning and Zoning Commission on Tuesday, a number of matters were cleared up. We learned that RAR had no intention of holding tours of their proposed facility or events that are permitted by state law under their proposed category of brewery. Those were two concerns that had been brought to our attention as those events, apparently under state law, could be held without limitation any evening of the week up to 10 p.m., and the potential events were of concern to some of the nearby residents.

We also learned that breweries in the past had been a permitted use in the city industrial zone but through an error were not included in the Uniform Development Code (UDC) that was passed a few years ago. For those who have not been paying attention to city government, the city Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council have been asked to correct any number of past mistakes in the UDC such as this mistake, and city staff has been required to spend time identifying the errors and bringing them to the appropriate governmental authority in order to make needed corrections.

What this means to me is that when the UDC was being developed and passed into law the people in authority were not asking the right questions or possibly not asking questions at all when they should have been and enough citizens were not engaged in the process. If everyone had done their job back then, breweries would have been included in the UDC, and there would not have been the need for last night’s hearing or a future hearing before City Council to correct the mistake.

For those who jump on the bandwagon because of a Facebook post, please take time to learn what the issue is before accepting the post as the gospel and then reacting or engaging in name calling. Dave Cannon is not the person to blame, as some have done. He is someone you should thank, as he is doing what a conscientious Commissioner should do – make sure that the decision, whatever it may be, is best for the community.

Understand that your Commissioners for the City, the Planning and Zoning Commission, the Historic Preservation Commission, and otherwise are not in those positions to be a rubber stamp for the person, business, or organization that is the loudest or the first to take a “righteous” position. You may recall the effort last fall to establish a “Street Closure and Events Policy” that came before City Council that the business community opposed.

That proposed policy was sent to the same Ordinance Committee to review and make suggested improvements. That work has been done and sent back to the City Manager to consider and discuss with the business community as part of an effort to achieve a reasonable compromise that works for everyone, or almost everyone. When that matter came before City Council last year, I did not hear any requests to hurry up and adopt the first version that was proposed. On the contrary the request was to slow things down and address the concerns of the business community. That is what the Ordinance Committee tries to do.

The process that is taking place regarding the zoning issues relevant to breweries and auction houses is in the normal and ordinary course of the city’s business, and the fact that questions are asked or suggestions are made does not mean anything other than the people you have elected or the people appointed to committees or commissions are simply doing their jobs. Any other reaction is simply unwarranted.