CAMBRIDGE MATTERS

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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Malcolm Gladwell wrote the book “Tipping Point” about how little things can made a big difference. In it he provides a number of interesting examples of how people and places arrive at their “Tipping Point”. If you have not had the opportunity to read the book, I would highly recommend it.

Over these past few years, I have seen Cambridge move in big and small ways from a struggling community to one that is close to or at a “Tipping Point”. That does not mean that everything here is perfect or that everyone is happy or even satisfied with where we are or what is happening; but I hope you are seeing improvement in areas of our community life that were stagnant before, even though other areas of our community life remain a challenge.

This past Monday evening, City Council met in what I thought would be a long, detailed, and fairly uneventful meeting. By the end of the meeting, I found that I was correct that it was long and detailed, as we accomplished many things, but it was certainly not “uneventful”.

We started at 5:00 p.m. in an open meeting, as required by Maryland law, in order to go into a closed meeting to consult with counsel “to obtain legal advice, because public discussion would adversely impact counsel’s ability to provide information which is confidential under attorney/client privilege”. That closed meeting went until 6:00 p.m. at which point it was reopened for the regular City Council meeting. As no decisions were made during the closed meeting and only information and advice were provided, there was nothing to officially report as to what took place during the closed meeting.

Following a moment of silence and the Pledge of Allegiance, the agenda was modified slightly and approved so as to allow two presentations on the agenda to move up on the agenda and occur earlier in the meeting than originally proposed.

First on the agenda was the opportunity y for the public to make comments. Among the issues brought forward by citizens were the following:

* Support for the Historic Preservation Guidelines
* Support for the proposed budget and the recognition of the hard work of staff in preparing it
* Support for the Cannery Park funding request
* Support for the grant request for the Cambridge Gateway project

Next came a request from the Elks Lodge to donate $3,500 to the Cambridge Police Department for new officer equipment, the acceptance by the city of that donation, and the increase of the FY 2018 revenue and the Police Department Budget in the amount of $3,500. After the presentation, the funds were accepted and the budget was increased with the thanks by the Mayor and members of City Council.

The Consent Calendar addressed the following matters, all of which were approved:

* The Meeting Minutes of the April 23, 2018 meeting
* The request from the Pine Street Committee for permission to close Pine Street from Cross Street to Cedar Street on August 23, 2018, from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. for the Empowerment Center Summer Camp Block Party
* The request from the Wine Bar for permission for outdoor alcohol sales at Governors Hall at Sailwinds Park on May 25, 2018 from 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. during their Chillin’ on the Choptank Event
* The request of Cambridge Main Street for permission to hold the Farmers’ Market in the parking lot at Long Wharf on Thursdays (May 3- October 25) between 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. with the exception of September 27th (Ironman) and October 18th (Schooner Rendezvous)
* The request from the Cambridge Association of Neighborhoods for permission to use Long Wharf Park (and pavilion) on Sunday, August 26, 2018, from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. for a Cambridge Family Picnic
* The request from the American Legion Dorchester Post No. 91 to hold a Memorial Day Service at Long Wharf Park on Monday May 28th starting at 11:00 a.m. until approximately 12:30 p.m.
* The request from Relay for Life for a noise ordinance variance during their event at Sailwinds Park on Friday May 18th between 4:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.
* The request from Beat the Rush Delivery for permission to use the Race and Cedar Street open lot for their Cambridge community Supper Event on Saturday September 8th from noon until dusk.

Items 18 and 19 on the agenda that had been moved up were then heard. Item 18 was the presentation on the Cannery Park Design given by Katie Parks of the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy and Dennis Carmichael, a landscape architect with Parker Rodriquez. Upon completion of the excellent presentation that included explanation of the historic, scenic, and use factors considered in the design work, City Council unanimously approved the park design and directed staff to seek funding resources for its implementation.

Item 19 was the presentation of the Draft of the Historic District Design Guidelines. George Vojtech and Sharon Smith, chair and vice chair of the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) along with Herve Hamon, staff to the commission, and Richard Wagner, consultant to the commission made the presentation. The proposed guidelines are an update and reworking of the current guidelines with the focus on improving the clarity of the guidelines, simplification of them to aid those using them, and increasing the ability of staff to address issues administratively so as to avoid property owners having to come before the commission on a certain level or matters.

The HPC held a number of public work sessions as these Guidelines were being developed as well as opportunities for public comment by email response and a personal appearance at one of the HPC meetings. HPC members and staff did a great job on these Guidelines and were thanked by the members of the City Council for their hard work. City Council unanimously approved the draft of the Guidelines to be submitted to the Maryland Historic Trust for review and approval before being returned to the city for final adoption.

City Council then returned to the regular order of business and held a hearing on the Constant Yield for the purposes of establishing the level of anticipated income from taxes for FY 2019. An earlier hearing had been held on this issue in late March, but city staff noticed an error in the public notice for that hearing; and so out of an abundance of caution in order to be sure that there was compliance with the law, this hearing was held.

No one asked to speak at the public hearing; and so the issue of whether to approve the tax rate of $.8179 for each $100 of assessed value of real property in the city and $1.69 for each $100 of all assessable personal property was then made. This approval kept the tax rate at the same rate as last year for city taxes; and as a result of additional building in the city, the amount of taxes raised increased.

City tax payers will pay the same rate and amount for city taxes as they did for FY 2018. The tax rate for County taxes is currently being considered with a proposal to raise the rate.

Next on the Agenda was the first reading of Ordinances 1124 and 1125 and continuation of them over to May 29th for 2nd reading, public hearing, and possible adoption. Ordinance 1124 proposes the approval of the Levy for Real Property Taxes and Personal Property Taxes mentioned earlier for the 2019 Fiscal Year beginning July 1, 2018. Ordinance 1125 seeks to adopt and approve the Budget for Fiscal Year 2019 which appropriates the necessary funds for the operation of the Government and Administration of the City of Cambridge for the period July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019. For those interested in the staff report regarding the budget, I am happy to provide that detail to you upon request.

Following the reading of the two ordinances, Ginger Jenkins, City Financial Director, then provided her report on the city’s finances through the 3rd quarter of the current fiscal year. I will attempt to include her PowerPoint presentation with this report. You will see from her report that we continue to be in good shape financially with an anticipated budget surplus by the end of the fiscal year.

Item 15 on the agenda was a request by staff to be authorized to submit grant applications and letters of support on a variety of funding matters for FY 2019. What follows will be brief, to the extent possible, summaries of each of those requests:

* Community Legacy for Community Green space and park located at the corner of Muir and High Street - $100,000 – This was a grant that the state suggested. The Eastern Shore Network for Change was going to use the funding to acquire a home in the Pine Street Area for historic interpretative purposes and build a neighborhood pocket park. Commissioners Sydnor and Foster raised questions about this request indicating that there are other areas of the city that need help with substandard conditions of housing. The City Manager indicated that the state had specifically asked that this application be made and also advised that there would be no funding available for additional home rehabilitation. I moved to approve the request and also direct staff to look into the housing concerns raised by Commissioner Sydnor so that the city would be prepared to seek funding in the future for these properties when funding became available. This motion was defeated on a 2-3 vote with Commissioner Hanson and me voting in favor and Commissioners Foster, Sydnor, and Cannon voting against.
* Pine Street Streetscape and Sidewalk Improvement- $116,000. Once again concerns were raised about this proposed project that would improve some of the Pine Street sidewalks, provide parking bump outs, historic markers, and some places to plant trees. Commissioner Foster inquired if city staff had sought any community involvement in the ideas that were being proposed. While some community outreach had been done on this project, it had not been focused on the specific ideas provided. Commissioner Foster moved to approve the grant request once city staff had sought community input on the project. As the grant request was due on Wednesday, I felt that was not a reasonable requirement given time constraints and so upon Commissioner Foster’s motion, I voted against it as did Commissioner Hanson. The vote was not against the project but against the requirement for community input before the grant could be submitted given the limited time before the grant application was due. Commissioners Foster, Sydnor, and Cannon voted in favor.

At the close of the meeting we returned to this issue with Commissioner Foster moving to direct the city manager to provide a written public notice on this project by Tuesday the 15th giving the community until noon on Wednesday the 16th to make any comments. As those of you on my group email list are aware, I sent the notice out seeking your support for this project. Thank you to the many people who responded.

* Cannery Park Improvements - $830,000 from the Department of Natural Resources and/or Department of Environment – This grant would focus on infrastructure improvements necessary for the eventual development of Cannery Park such as water, electricity, sewer, and potentially some basic paths throughout the park. This was approved on a vote of 5-0.
* Great Marsh Park Restrooms - $225,000 – Department of Natural Resources – This project is one that is high on the list of city council goals. Currently the only facilities in the park are portable facilities during the summer months and when certain events are held there. Having public restrooms generally available as well as for important community events such as Ironman, Eagleman, and powerboat racing is supported by the Commissioners. This was approved on a 4-1 vote.
* Annual Marina Maintenance Program - $5,000 – Department of Natural Resources – This grant is routinely provided to the city to assist in the Maintenance of the City Marina. This was approved on a 4-1 vote with Commissioner Foster voting “no”.
* Leonard Lane Sidewalks - $350,000 – Safe Routes to Schools – There are significant portions of Leonard Lane that have no sidewalks. Children must walk in the road in some places when going to school or catching a bus. This has been a significant problem for a number of years, and it is hoped that staff has found the best opportunity for funding this needed project. If awarded the city will need to provide a 20% match. This was approved on a 5-0 vote.
* Sailwinds Redevelopment Assessment - $25,000 – DHCD Technical Assistant Grant – This grant would support the predevelopment assessment of the Sailwinds Park property by identifying infrastructure needs for any proposed development of the property. This was approved on a 5-0 vote.
* Downtown Parking and Event Space - $250,000 – DHCD Strategic Demolition Fund – With a number of new businesses opening this year, staff is looking for potential parking solutions in the downtown area that would also allow for events to take place there as well. This funding would help in the acquisition of property that might be available. This was approved 5-0.
* Marina Lighting Upgrade - $55,000 – Department of Natural Resources – This project would allow for LED lights in the Marina that would help reduce electric costs for the city. This was a funded grant last year, but the approved monies were moved with the approval of DNR to another project at the marina that had to be done. This was approved 4-1 with Commissioner Foster voting “no”.
* Gateway Park Improvements - $150,000 – Community Legacy – This grant would support the installation of plantings and screening for the Gateway Park at Rt. 50 and Maryland Ave. to help make this entrance to the city more attractive to the many people driving past the city on Rt. 50. This vote was a tie with Commissioner Hanson and me voting in favor; Commissioner Foster and Sydnor voting against; and Commissioner Cannon abstaining. With a tie vote, the Mayor is then permitted to vote. She voted in favor so this matter passed 3-2.

City Council then began voting on whether to approve letters of support for projects in the city that are being undertaken by groups or entities other than the city. The following matters were voted on as follows:

* A letter supporting a grant request by the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy for $400,000 for the Phillips Packing Company, Factory F to fund roof repairs and stabilize the building to repurpose it for an active, mixed-use development for food and farming-related innovation. This was approved 5-0.
* A letter supporting the request of the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy for a $200,000 demolition grant for properties located at 505-507 Race Street. The vote to approve was 5-0.
* A letter supporting the Dorchester County application for $220,700 to construct a Rails to Trails path from Cedar to Washington Street in the city as part of the Cannery Park. The vote to approve was 5-0.
* A letter supporting the Maces Lane Community Center. The vote to approve was 5-0.
* A letter supporting the Downtown Cambridge Main Street application to the Strategic Demolition Fund to support the predevelopment of 444-448 Race Street in the amount of $218,000 for architectural and engineering costs. The vote to approve was 5-0.
* A letter supporting the Downtown Cambridge Main Street application for a Community Legacy grant to support building improvements for 421 Race Street, 440 and 442 Race Street, 444 Race Street, and 446-448 Race Street and administrative support all in different amounts. The vote to approve was 4-1 with Commissioner Foster against.
* The Community Legacy Funding Application Priorities – The staff requested that the priorities be the Pine Street sidewalk and street scape application followed by the Gateway Park improvement, and the remaining applications from community partners and stakeholders. The vote to approve these priorities was 5-0.

Under Old Business, the City Council adopted Resolution 18-006 that amended a prior resolution that adopted positions and salary controls and schedules for salary grades and steps for general employees and sworn police officers for FY 2018 in order to add a new position regarding code enforcement so as to begin the implementation of staffing recommendations approved by City Council contained in the proposed budget. This was done in order to try to find someone to fill the Code Enforcement supervisor position that is being established. If a person is located prior to July 1st, DPW has funds available for salary until FY 2019 begins. This was approved 5-0.

The next matter for discussion and approval was the creation of the proposed Cambridge Waterfront Development nonprofit corporation and other steps related to this initiative. The details of all of the matters addressed would take too long to describe here, so I am attaching the staff memo with the details of what staff was seeking. After a full discussion, the requests made regarding this important project were all approved 5-0 by the commissioners.

Two New Matters were quickly addressed. The City Council approved on a 5-0 vote the request by the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development for a letter supporting its application to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for an Envision Center in Cambridge. If approved and funded, the center would be placed at Factory F in the Phillips Packing House development. Similarly a 5-0 vote City Council approved a request by Patti Willis of Shore Regional Health for a letter of support to maintain priority partners health services here in Cambridge for low income people.

The Mayor then announced a Close Executive Session for Monday May 21st at 12:30 p.m. for City Council to meet regarding a personnel matter. The next regular session of City Council will be on Tuesday May 29th due to the Memorial Day Holiday on the 28th. There will be no City Council meeting on June 11th due to the Mayor and members of City Council attending the meeting of the Maryland Municipal League that day.

So much going on and so much to report. Thanks for reading.