CAMBRIDGE MATTERS

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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When I saw the agenda for the August 27th meeting, it looked as if it would be a meeting that would go smoothly and have few issues that would be controversial. Boy was I wrong.

After the uncontroversial moment of silence, Pledge of Allegiance, and approval of the agenda with one minor modification, the Public Comment started what were a number of interesting and sometimes contentious issues.

Mr. Chitlick, owner of the building where Sun Trust Bank used to be and the Dorchester Democratic Central Committee (DDCC) now has space, spoke about the notice that he received from the city directing him to remove the political signs from his property. He objected to the request and asked City Council to take action. While the details of the requests by the city zoning officer and by Mr. Chitlick have complicating details, the dispute boiled down to whether the city would have code enforcement staff address the many political signs posted at the DDCC and elsewhere in the city in addition to all of their other code enforcement work on a claimed violation of the UDC or whether a city employee is not permitted under section 13-2 of the city code to attempt to “control or modify the political action of any other person”.

After multiple statements and questions by members of city council along with a legal opinion of the city attorney that limitations can be placed on political signs, the commissioners voted 5-0 to continue the matter for decision at a meeting after the upcoming November election and allow all political signs to remain pending a report and recommendation from the city attorney on ways to address this issue after the elections.

Mr. Chitlick then raised his concern that he had received a separate notice from the city zoning official to take down a small sign that is attached to the building sign for this same property. He indicated that he had spoken with the zoning staff director and had been told he could appeal her decision and/or appear before the Planning and Zoning Commission with a request to change the UDC as it relates to his sign and possibly others in the zoning district where his property is located. His assertion was that the removal of the sign, which indicated that the DDCC was located there, would harm the efforts of the DDCC in the upcoming election.

After much additional discussion on this issue by Mr. Chitlick and members of city council, staff, and the city attorney, on a 3-2 vote of City Council he was allowed to keep the sign there pending either his appeal of the zoning official’s decision and/or his request of the Planning and Zoning Commission to change the UDC regarding signs. Commissioner Hanson and I voted against the request. My reasoning was that the law, in this situation, was established and clear and not in any controversy. Mr. Chitlick had the sign made and did not seek approval through the proper process that existed and has existed for 3 or more years. In addition, I felt that the sign could be placed in the building itself where it could clearly show that the building was the home of the DDCC so that removing it would not prejudice the DDCC or the voting public in knowing where its headquarters were located. In addition, since there were so many political signs there already, it would not be difficult to know that the building was the location of the DDCC.

For those of you keeping time, the above discussion and decisions took about an hour.

Next on the agenda was a presentation by two representatives of the Maryland Police Athletic League (MDPAL) about the proposed program for Cambridge and the funding that had been provided as a grant by the Governor’s Office. Last week I had attended a community parents meeting where Officers Foster and Washington from the Cambridge Police Department had made a presentation on the plans for the Cambridge PAL. It sounds like a great program that needs volunteers from the community in order to allow enough of the children in Cambridge from 6-18 years of age to participate. Later in the meeting, the commissioners took up the issue of funding this project for this year.

The other request from the public came from Suzanne Sullivan of the Shore Rivers nonprofit. They are seeking a Technical Service Provider Grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to provide the city with a 5-Year Urban Tree Management Plan. Their request for a letter of support from the city was approved 5-0. The city will not be required to provide any funding but city staff will need to work with Shore Rivers to provide data and other support for the project.

The Consent Calendar had two items on it that were approved 5-0. They were the Meeting Minutes with some minor edits of the August 13th meeting and the request from the National Multiple Sclerosis Society to hold their Chesapeake Challenge Walk through Cambridge on October 27th from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

The next item on the agenda was the 2nd reading and public hearing on Ordinance 1130 that established the new Historic District Design Guidelines that the Historic Preservation Commission, its consultant, and city staff have worked on this past year. No persons spoke at the public hearing, although Tom Puglisi did comment during the Public Comment time asking the city council pass the ordinance. The City Council passed the ordinance adopting the Guidelines on a 5-0 vote. These should make it easier for home improvements to occur to historic properties in the Historic District.

Under New Business, Yvette Robinson, the City Housing Specialist, made a presentation regarding a grant application that the staff wanted to make to the Chesapeake Bay Trust for an Outreach and Restoration Grant in the amount of $75,000. The objective of the grant “will be to conduct community engagement events geared towards increasing public knowledge and implement projects aimed toward improving the environment and neighborhood values by repurposing vacant and abandoned lots in targeted areas” within the entire City of Cambridge. The Trust has done similar projects in Baltimore, Charles County, Gaithersburg, Harford County, and Howard County.

In addition to the grant application package that explained the project in detail, Ms. Robinson also supplied the Commissioners with a December Council Report and Meeting Minutes that provided a detailed background of the prior decisions that City Council had made to approve the Pine Street Area rehabilitation project and future goals.

After the presentation and questions from members of City Council, two things were clear. The first is that the Commissioners wanted to be kept up to date on all of the work being done in the Pine Street Area under the state grant that Ms. Robinson was overseeing. The second was that the grant she was proposing would help the city in its revitalization efforts throughout the city and would engage residents from all parts of the city in helping to decide how vacant and abandoned lots could be used best to benefit the community.

I then moved to have Ms. Robinson and/or the City Manager report to City Council every month on the progress of the Pine Street Area Project to keep us up to date. That motion passed 5-0. The request to permit the grant application was approved on a 3-2 vote with Commissioners Sydnor and Foster opposing the request. Based on the information provided, the City would not be required to match any grant funding that was awarded.

The University of Maryland Shore Regional Health Organization requested a letter of support for their Certificate of Need Letter of Intent that they were sending to the Maryland Health Care Commissioner for the new hospital in Easton. As has been reported before in a number of places, including in Cambridge Matters, the plan by Shore Regional Health is to close the Dorchester Hospital and have patients that would have gone there go to a new hospital in Easton that will be built and be larger and have the capacity to take the Dorchester Hospital cases. At the same time an Emergency Room and Medical Facility will be built in Cambridge to provide medical services that do not require overnight hospitalization and will have beds for short term hospitalization. This request was approved 5-0.

The appropriation of funds for the Police Athletic League (PAL) grant in the amount of $20,500 which was discussed earlier in the meeting was then brought up for consideration. Upon a motion that was properly made and seconded, the Commissioners voted 4-0 with Commissioner Foster abstaining to accept the grant and increase the Police Department budget by that amount for operation, supplies, and overtime.

The final topic in New Business was the Host Venue Agreement for Ironman Eagleman and Ironman Maryland and the request that City Council authorize the Mayor to sign the new Host Venue Agreements for both for FY 2019 through FY 2023. This was approved, after a few questions, upon a 5-0 vote.

The Traffic and Safety Committees recommendations regarding city streets were then taken up and voted on by the Commissioners. The results, all on 5-0 votes were based on information provided by staff and the police department regarding concerns of speed in various parts of the city.

1. The city will begin a public process to consider changing Vue De Leau Street to a one-way street or permit parking on one side only. The issue here was the narrowness and the street and the difficulty that emergency vehicles might have getting to a home if parked vehicles blocked their movement.
2. “No Commercial Vehicle” signs will be posted in the 200 block of Rambler Road to prevent large buses from using the street.
3. A stop sign will be placed on Choptank Avenue where it intersects with Church Street to create a 3 way stop that will reduce excessive speed on Choptank and also reduce the possibilities of accidents at that intersection.
4. The request to reduce the speed limit in the 100-200 blocks of High Street was denied due to the police report on speeds in that area that showed they averaged close to only 16 miles per hour.
5. Street lights at 502 Burton and around the corner will be installed to help increase the lighting in this area which the committee found was not adequately lighted.
6. With regard to parking near the American Legion in the evenings, this matter was removed from the agenda in order to look at other possible solutions. It will be returned at a later date.
7. The request for “Children at Play” signs at Willis and Park Lane was deferred after the Commissioners provided some possible alternatives for the Traffic and Safety Committee to consider.

Commissioner Sydnor asked the committee to look into a safety matter of concern to him, and I asked that they consider installing a “Yield to Pedestrians” sign at High Street and Poplar next to Katie Mae’s and also to consider removing the traffic lights at High Street and Church Street and replacing them with stop signs for both streets. My reasoning for the “Yield” sign is that cars turning right off of High Street on to Poplar are permitted to do that without stopping and most do it without regard to the pedestrians standing there waiting to cross the street with the light. My reasoning for stop signs on every corner is that the traffic volume most of the time at Church Street and High Street is not that heavy so that vehicles wind up waiting for the light to change when there are no other cars in the area. Having a 4 way stop will allow vehicles to move more easily and quickly through that intersection without having to wait for traffic lights to change.

During the Mayor and Council comments, a letter of appreciation from the city was approved on a 5-0 vote to go to the Grove City volunteers who put together that very successful event on Pine Street recently.

On a 4-1 vote, the City Council approved Commissioner Foster’s request to have the City Attorney let her know when any agenda item he saw addressed a police salary issue in light of her need to recuse herself regarding those matters. I was the sole commissioner that opposed that request as I believe that it is our responsibility to consider what items on the agenda might provide us with the possibility of a conflict; and, where we are uncertain, we can ask the Ethics Commission for an opinion.

I hope that this has been helpful.