CAMBRIDGE MATTERS #52

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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I will be numbering each Cambridge Matters City Council report in the future. The number will represent the remaining number of scheduled City Council meetings until a newly elected Council is installed in January 2021.

Our November 13th meeting had some interesting presentations and public comments and one proposed ordinance that was defeated.

After the opening time of silence and Pledge of Allegiance, the Mayor presented a Mayor’s Certificate to Calvin Stack honoring his 50 years of service with the Rescue Fire Company. Mr. Stack had his family at the presentation event and was given a standing ovation by the members of City Council and the public that attended the meeting for his many years of volunteering for the betterment of the community.

Following the adoption of the evening Agenda, Public Comment was then received from

1. Sharon Smith, who talked about the Pine Street Improvement process and her concern that Pine Street, while acknowledged as an Historic District, is not registered as such. She asked City Council to consider creating it as a Registered District or expanding the current Historic District to include the Pine Street Area. No action was taken on that request.
2. Barbara Collins spoke about the impact that the periodic closing of the 300 block of High Street has on her business at Newcomb and Collins Funeral Home. She was concerned about a recent closure of the street for a Beer Fest. While people were able to access the funeral home, the music outside was not appropriate when people are inside the funeral home recognizing and remembering the life of a loved one.
3. Portia Johnson Ennels spoke on behalf of the Pine Street Committee and the need for help in fixing up some of the Empowerment Center that the city owns and rents to the Pine Street Committee. She was asking that the city provide some staff to help with some of the repairs. The committee also wants to decorate the center and the adjacent Police Substation for the Holidays. She also wants to talk with someone about ongoing building issues. It was mentioned that CAN (The Cambridge Association of Neighborhoods) was interested in helping with the fix up of the center.
4. Chuck McFadden on behalf of CAN spoke in favor of proposed Ordinance 1135 including the controversial portion that requires that all future fences would have any structural side of the fence face inward to the property and the more attractive face of the fence face outward.

Next were two requests from the Public. The first was a presentation by Mike Krantz about the offer by Group Mission Trips to come to Cambridge in conjunction with the neighborhood revitalization project. The group comes to a community for one week equipped with several hundred volunteers that will perform basic home repairs for homeowners that qualify and request assistance. The City would have to make a financial commitment of approximately $20,000.00 for building materials. As the Council will begin its 2019/2020 budget process shortly, staff wanted Mr. Krantz to come to discuss the program with the Council to see if the city would want to participate in their program and have their mission volunteers come to Cambridge in the summer of 2020.

This is a project that had been brought to my attention several months ago by Bonnie Wagner that I referred on to the former city manager and staff. The city staff would need to work with the Mission Trip group on logistics, timing, and places for the students to stay as well as developing a list of homes to be repaired. Upon motion of Commissioner Sydnor properly seconded, the matter was referred to the city manager and staff for further discussion and consideration of where monies might come from as part of the budget process.

As part of his presentation, Mr. Krantz indicated that communities benefit not only from the work being done but also from monies flowing into the community from the group during their time here. This is the kind of project that I think can benefit a broader spectrum of the Cambridge Community with homes of low-income owners being repaired by teams of volunteers.

Next was a presentation by Mike Starling, founder of WHCP Radio, and Bill Christopher, of the Dorchester Chamber of Commerce, providing additional information on the “Dorchester Goes Purple” project in which the city and many businesses and people in the city participated.

The Consent Calendar was taken up with items 4 through 6 being approved. They were

1. The Meeting Minutes of October 22, 2018
2. The approval for the Mayor to sign the Proclamation for the Municipal Government Works Month
3. The request from Pleasant Day Medical Adult Day Care for permission to have a banner hung across Race Street from November 15th through December 6th.

Item 7 on the Consent Calendar was removed and taken up on motion of Commissioner Hanson that High Spot be given permission to hold their Crawfish Boil and Muskrat Stew Fest in Cannery Way on February 24, 2019 from 1:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. It was approved on a 5-0 vote. Their request for having it in the 300 Block of High Street was not approved because of the concerns raised by DPW Director Odie Wheeler regarding work that will be done on High Street during that time and because of the concerns raised by Barbara Collins earlier in the meeting.

The only Ordinance on for 2nd reading was Proposed Ordinance 1135 that had come before Planning and Zoning to help clarify issues about the height of fences at homes in the city and which side of a fence built in the future should face inward and which side should face outward.

Commissioner Sydnor opposed the language concerning which way the fence should face indicating that this should be the choice of the property owner building the fence. I had concerns about how the rear of the building was to be defined and believed that it had been resolved to the satisfaction of everyone. After several questions to the Planning Director and one by me to the Police Chief on a safety and crime prevention issue, Commissioner Foster moved to deny the proposed ordinance and Commissioner Sydnor seconded it. After further discussion the vote was taken, and the motion to deny the ordinance passed 3-2 with Commissioner Hanson and myself voting in opposition.

Moving on to New Business, the Commissioners heard a request to assign to WBOC the MTS Broadcasting Lease Agreement with the city. This agreement brings a small amount of revenue to the city for us allowing the lessee to anchor the radio tower next to Great Marsh Park on City Property. The current lease runs until December 31, 2023. Commissioner Sydnor sought clarification regarding the lease and the possibility of charging WBOC more for the ability to anchor the tower. After discussion the motion to approve the assigning of the lease passed 5-0.

The next matter on the Agenda was very important. City Council received a report from Code Enforcement regarding events starting in early September at the Bradford House on Race Street. While I will attach the report for more detail, the summary is that Commissioner Foster and city staff were alerted to unhealthy conditions at Bradford house including maggots, bed bugs, elevator malfunctions, lack of maintenance, failure of management to make repairs, and one resident that was a hoarder.

As the result of the concerted and coordinated efforts by city staff, City Code Enforcement, the Fire Chief, HUD, and Maryland DHCD some but not all of the problems have been taken care of and staff is prepared to be vigilant to ensure that all of the problems are fixed and the Bradford House remains a safe and livable place for elderly citizens to reside. I was pleased to learn about the work of Code Enforcement and suggested to the City Manager that a press release be issued to let the community know that the city was taking more aggressive steps regarding substandard housing.

Next under New Business was a request for the city to pay outstanding invoices for Jess Jr’s Body Shop, some of which had been outstanding for years. While there is a dispute as to whether invoices were previously provided to the city, there is no dispute after reviewing city records and records of Jess Jr’s that $63,002.84 is owed, $17,131.94 of which comes from prior insurance payments made to the city by LGIT (Local Government Insurance Trust). The remainder of $45,870.90 will come from the Drug Forfeiture Fund held by the police. After many questions by the Commissioners, the request for payment was approved on motion and by a 5-0 vote.

The final matter for decision involved the lease agreement that the City has with the American Legion to run Governors Hall at Sailwinds Park. The original lease will be up at the end of the year, and the American Legion was willing to continue to lease the property for another year but at no cost to them. In addition, there is kitchen and other equipment in Governors Hall that could remain there if the American Legion continued to rent the property.

If the lease is continued, however, the city would lose $8,000 it was entitled to receive for the equipment that it paid for in Governors Hall. If the lease was ended at the end of this year, the city would then be entitled to the refund of $8,000.

The City Manager indicated that there had been some confusion regarding the original lease agreement that created the problem with the continuation of the current lease. He also indicated that other organizations had expressed an interest in possibly leasing the Hall, but no set proposal had been made.

On motion of Commissioner Sydnor to issue an RFP for possible lease of Governor’s Hall to another tenant that was properly seconded, after discussion, it passed 3-1. Commissioner Hanson had recused himself from this discussion as he is a member of the American Legion. I voted against it as I thought it was a waste of time going through the RFP process.

During the discussion on the motion, I had suggested that the city manager should simply proceed to have conversations with the potential tenants as undertaking the RFP process would probably take us to the end of December and the end of the lease before we would receive any responses. In addition, because we would only be looking at a lease of a year, at most, the RFP process was not required. While the City Attorney agreed with what I had said, the vote for the RFP was passed.

The other issue, however, that was before us was whether we should agree with the proposed lease with the American Legion. As they would need time to close down any operations that they had and notify any potential renters of the lack of availability of Governor’s Hall, it was felt that we needed formally to end the current lease agreement as of December 31st and order the return of the equipment to the company that provided it so that the City could be reimbursed the $8,000 it would be owed under the terms of the lease. That motion passed 4-0.

The only remaining item other than comments by the Mayor, Commissioners, and Staff was the notice that on November 16th at 11:00 a.m. in City Council Chambers there will be a work session on the Cambridge Neighborhood Revitalization Program Consultant with an RFP Review and Presentation. The public can attend.

Thanks for reading.