CAMBRIDGE MATTERS #48

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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I will address two meetings that have taken place recently. The first is the Public Meeting of the Planning and Zoning Commission (P and Z) last week that addressed and allowed the public to talk about the Mill Street School property, and the other is last night’s meeting of City Council.

The P and Z meeting was a public meeting facilitated by Sharon Smith. There had been a prior public meeting about the Mill Street School property that did not run smoothly that did not involve P and Z. The P and Z Commissioners felt that holding another meeting might help the community have a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by the property.

The meeting went well. As this property has been vacant for years and is deteriorating, the P and Z Commission thought that establishing zoning that might attract developers should be considered in order to help preserve the school building itself, which has been determined to be historic.

The purpose of the meeting was to provide a history of the property, prior proposals, and what language in an ordinance might protect this part of the city and attract a developer who would save the school building, if given an opportunity to make money on the project. The number of other buildings to be built, the amount of open space and its definition, the mass of any of the buildings, and technicalities of the planning commission process and development process were discussed and are part of ongoing discussions.

There were a lot of questions from the citizens who attended as well as suggestions for some of the language that might be considered in any proposed ordinance. There will be ongoing meetings about this issue before the P and Z Commission and City Council. To be sure that you receive notice of these meetings, be sure to sign up on the City Website to receive notices of future meetings.

The public will continue to have input as P and Z makes its recommendations to city council for a final ordinance. The City Council will hold a public hearing prior to deciding on any proposal as will the P and Z Commission and the Historical Preservation Commission (HPC) when/if a developer comes forward. The aim is to have something that is flexible for a developer and meets HPC requirements but has controls that protect the development of the school and the character of the neighborhood. None of this process, if a developer comes forward, will be easy or in all likelihood popular with everyone.

The City Council meeting on the 14th began at 5:00 p.m. to provide an opportunity for the public to talk about night fishing on the Dorchester side of the Bill Burton Fishing Pier. The neighbors of the pier sent several letters and emails to the Mayor and City Commissioners about their concerns with the behavior of some people who were using the pier and the neighborhood during the late evening and nighttime hours. In addition, they provided at this meeting a petition signed by 77 neighbors seeking to allow the pier to be open only during daytime hours.

Most of those who wrote letters or emails attended the meeting as did other members of the community. They expressed their concern about the challenges that the neighborhood had when nighttime fishing was allowed and how much better the situation has been since the State of Maryland has closed the pier to nighttime use because of work being done on the pier.

The neighbors all support daytime fishing and proper and appropriate use of the pier and the neighboring parking lot but had complaints about parking problems due to the abundance of users of the pier in the evenings. One resident explained that Rockfish are more likely to be caught during the evening and night hours, but that Maryland law prohibits nighttime fishing.

Upon completion of public comment, the matter of what City Council could do was placed on the New Business part of the Agenda for the regular meeting of City Council that started at 6:00 p.m. The meeting then adjourned until the 6:00 p.m. regular session.

After the opening moment of silence and Pledge or Allegiance, Commissioner Hanson moved that the issue of the Bill Burton Fishing Pier be added to the agenda as new business. That was done without objection, and the agenda as amended was adopted.

Three people came forward during the Public Comment time. Sharon Smith first asked about when the city would be hiring an additional person to work on Code Enforcement. The city had included in its FY 2019 budget a position to start in the New Year.

She also spoke to the difficulty that she has had in obtaining and reviewing the documents that are supposed to be posted on the city website for the upcoming City Council meetings. At times all of them are not available or some are modified after original posting without the amended documents then being posted, and a notice of that being sent out to the public. She also asked that explanatory memos and PowerPoint presentations that are used to support a matter for decision be made available to the public as well as the Mayor and Commissioners.

Amanda Bramble then spoke on a matter coming before City Council at this meeting that involves the display of lights in the downtown business area along Poplar and portions of Race Street. She indicated that she has advocated for these lights for years and that she was hopeful that the proposed ordinance and MOU would be adopted. She closed by asserting that the restaurant businesses in the downtown area have grown significantly over the years and that they are needed to help support jobs for people who live in Cambridge.

Robert Aaron then spoke regarding the Cambridge Mainstreet program and the funding that the city provides to it from the taxpayers in the city. He feels that their meetings should be open to the public if they are receiving money from city taxpayers by way of a city funding for one or more projects. He also offered that there was too much drinking of alcoholic beverages downtown and on Second Saturdays and the need to refocus the Cambridge Mainstreet goals. Later in the meeting Katie Clendaniel spoke to advise Mr. Aaron and City Council that all meetings of the Cambridge Mainstreet were open to the public for observation, but that the public would not be permitted to speak or during the meeting.

The Consent Calendar saw the unanimous approval of the following:

* The Meeting Minutes from the December 10th and 17th meetings
* The Request from Mid-Shore Fishing Club to hold their Kid’s Fishing Derby at Long Wharf Park on Saturday August 3, 2019 between 7:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. and to set up a small pop-up tent.

One Ordinance was introduced for a first reading and continuation to the January 28th meeting of City Council for 2nd reading, public hearing, and possible adoption. Ordinance 1138 addresses the issue of allowing Bingo as a permitted use with conditions in the General Commercial Zoning District and amending the UDC to define terms associated with that use. Upon reading it was continued over to January 28th for next steps.

Two proposed Ordinances were then taken up for 2nd reading, public hearing, and possible adoption. Ordinance 1131 address the issue of allowing for overhead decorative lighting on Poplar Street and the 400 and 500 Blocks of Race Street. I asked that agenda item 11, the MOU between the City and Cambridge Mainstreet, be included with the discussion of the proposed Ordinance as it addressed how the overhead decorative lighting would be undertaken if the Ordinance passed. After reading and the opportunity for public comment, the Ordinance and the MOU were approved on a 5-0 vote.

The next Ordinance was 1136 which would create a Mixed-Use Overlay District and establish some allowed uses and some prohibited uses in this district. The purpose of the Ordinance was to provide to potential developers of the Sailwinds property and Hospital property some guidance of what types of building could take place if they chose to develop a project under the conditions of an Overlay District. Three citizens spoke on this matter. Two sought a continuance of the proposed ordinance as they felt that enough information had not been provided nor had there been enough opportunity for public engagement in any discussion about it.

Marshall Rickert, a member of the Planning and Zoning Commission, provided some background regarding the proposed Ordinance and the fact that the Ordinance had been brought forward in October and returned to P and Z for further public hearing. That hearing was held where 3 members of City Council attended and listened to pubic concerns, and as a result of that meeting some improvements to the proposed language were made. After the completion of the public comment, on motion properly seconded, the Ordinance was adopted on a 5-0 vote.

All the matters taken up under New Business were adopted on 5-0 votes of City Council. They included the following:

* City Council appropriated a $13,550 Federal BJAG Equipment Grant to the Police Department budget and increased its FY 2019 budget by that amount for the purpose of purchasing Police K-9 equipment for two police vehicles.
* Cambridge Mainstreet’s request for permission to install and complete a mosaic mural at the City parking lot was approved but without the requested funding until such time as Cambridge Mainstreet provides City Council with its proposed budget for the monies for them that were included in the FY 2019 budget.
* The job description for the staff Executive Secretary Position, with an addition of the requirement of confidentiality as part of the position.

The last item on the agenda was the matter of the Bill Burton Fishing Pier and a possible letter of support from the city regarding the concerns raised at the Public Hearing held earlier in the evening. Commission Hanson asked that City Council approve having the Mayor send a letter of support to the Governor, our local state legislators, and leadership of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Maryland Park Authority, and the Natural Resources Police (NRP) along with the letters and emails sent by the community along with the community petition. The letter would ask that the Fishing Pier be open only from 7:30 a.m. until Sunset and that DNR and NRP resources be available 7 days a week to enforce closure requirements established by the State for this park. This motion passed on a 5-0 vote.

After a comment period where the Mayor, City Commissioners, and staff were offered the opportunity to raise or mention matters, a public comment period was allowed for any additional matters. Regarding staff matters, Odie Wheeler recounted much of the work that staff did under difficult circumstances this past weekend during the snowstorm. Some of the equipment was damaged and unable to be used so only 3 trucks were available. The crews worked hard and put in long hours. The police chief noted that they were able to do 3 shop with the cops over the holiday and that 375 children received presents through that program. The Chief provided the best news of the evening with more details to come, which is that Part 1 and Part 2 crimes were down in Cambridge 29% in 2018.

Katie Clendaniel from Cambridge Mainstreet then spoke to the issue of the public being allowed to attend their meetings that are held monthly. Mr. Foxwell asked questions about the Hearn Building and why is it taking so long for it to be completed. He also talked about the fact that the Canvasback ducks have returned to the waterfront at Oakley Street.

Following the public meeting, City Council then went into closed session to discuss personnel matters. No final decisions were made for the issues raise but suggestions were made for consideration.

Thanks for reading.

Steve