CAMBRIDGE MATTERS #44

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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The City Council had three separate meetings on the 11th. The first was a work session open to the public to allow the Mayor and Commissioners to talk about initiatives that were of interest to them and would need funding in the coming fiscal year.

The major issue that the city faces is the loss of members of our police force to other state and local law enforcement agencies due to the difference in the levels of compensation. The Cambridge Police force is below its scheduled level of strength; and as reported in my last Cambridge Matters, we lost 9 officers in the last year to retirement or to another police force. Given the level of proposed salary increases for the police force and the other members of the city staff, I raised the question of whether we can afford to have a police force separate from the County Sheriff given this proposed salary increase and the increased costs for our workman’s compensation insurance.

Another matter for consideration is that our Workman’s Compensation costs are going to increase significantly. Our cost of coverage for workman’s compensation insurance is based on a three-year rolling average of claims, and the past three years have seen significant increases in job related injuries. City Administration is looking to see if other coverage might be found at a lower cost.

The Mayor and I along with the City Manager, Herve Hamon, and Odie Wheeler attended a meeting with the Dorchester Historical Society Board leadership and Anne Phillips, their executive director. The purpose was to help us understand all that the Historical Society does to research, maintain records, and report on the history and many stories of individuals and families that are important to our community. They run their operation on a very lean budget and with the help of a small staff and volunteers but continue to have to reach into their reserves to maintain the work that they are doing. As a result, even with contributions from the general public, they were asking for financial assistance from the City.

I raised three ideas that I thought we should consider. The first was to use the funding that we have used the past few years for social service programs to instead fund a Kindermusik program for city infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Only about 25% of the children entering kindergarten in the elementary schools in the city are ready for kindergarten based on the most recent reports available from the school system. I reported on this in an earlier Cambridge Matters report.

I attended a presentation on the Kindermusik program and learned a great deal about it. My thought is that using some city funds and seeking grants from local foundations and the public might allow the community to help our youngest learners to prepare for school while also helping to engage their parents, who are their first teachers, in becoming more involved in their education.

The next item that I raised was how to more effectively achieve an improved appearance in the city by instituting some rules for the residents and businesses regarding trash collection and placement of trash cans between days of collection. This would be a code enforcement issue that probably would require additional staff to help notify citizens of what is expected of them.

The final item dealt with the city sidewalks and their condition. As will be discussed later, some of our sidewalks are not in good shape and need to be repaired or replaced. Under current law that is the obligation of the owner of the property that fronts on the sidewalk. I had developed a list of a dozen reasons that I felt showed why the city should take over some or all of the obligation regarding sidewalks due to too many of them falling into significant and dangerous disrepair. There is potential liability of the city for anyone injured due to a significant defect in a sidewalk that was apparent and about which the city had not taken any action. This is something about which more research and study is needed, which will be taking place through the work of the ADA committee that I will mention later in this report.

During our morning meeting it became clear that the members of city council had several questions about the upcoming Audit presentation that was scheduled for the regular meeting that started at 6:00 p.m. As a result, we posted a notice on the city website for and held a public informational meeting at 4:00 p.m. with the Auditor. That helped us to more fully understand the issues that he raised that are important to both the elected leaders and the citizens of Cambridge.

Both at this meeting and during the presentation at the evening meeting, the Auditor emphasized the importance of two Government Accounting Standard Board Statements – 75 and 73 – their impact on the Audit and the future obligations of the city for pensions and related assets (#75) and Postemployment Benefits other than Pensions (#73). These two GASB Statements were adopted in 2018 by the City as part of its new accounting guidance.

With our prior finance director leaving shortly after the fiscal year ended, there was a gap between her departure and the hiring of our current finance director that resulted in some issues with internal controls that were found by the Auditor and are being addressed by the city manager and the new finance director.

In all respects, however, the draft Audit report that was provided to the Mayor and Commissioners indicated that the city saw increased revenues and that expenditures by the police department were within budget. The expenditures by public works were in line with the budget. The only oddity occurred with expenditures on the Wharf at Sailwinds Park that occurred in FY 2018 and were reported in the Audit. They were fully paid by the bond through the Local Government Infrastructure Financing Program of the Administration for $1,880,000 that was approved by City Council on April 23, 2018 by Ordinance 1118 but not finalized until FY 2019. The bond replaced the line of Credit taken out by the City with 1880 Bank that had to be repaid in a short period of time and allowed for a longer payout period for the financing of that project. It is hoped that when Sailwinds is developed that this bond can be paid off early as part of monies coming out of that project. The net Capital assets of the city also increased by almost $4 million.

At 5:30 p.m. City Council then opened a meeting to go into a closed meeting about an employee matter. During the public meeting that started at 6:00 p.m., the Mayor reported on the outcome of that meeting.

With the opening of the regular meeting at 6:00 p.m., the Council approved the agenda as amended. The one amendment was to move the ADA presentation forward to the Public Comment portion of the meeting. Herve Hamon and Jerry Burroughs were the major presenters on what the ADA committee was planning and doing. The committee wants to bring awareness to the community about the ADA and its requirements and provide information to business owners and others on how they can help in complying with the law. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990 to ensure that disabled people had the same rights of access to public and business spaces as did everyone else.

The aim was to allow them to participate in community life fully. The ADA Committee plan is to undertake a new project to do a survey of all the sidewalks in the city and their condition. They have also had the help of carpentry students at DCTC who made measuring sticks that are 4 feet long to help measure safe passage places for the disabled.

This project of surveying all the sidewalks in the city and their condition will be an important first step in helping the City Council to make some decisions in the future regarding the issue I mentioned earlier in this report regarding the condition of our city sidewalks and how to effectively address fixing or replacing them.

Under the Consent Calendar there were 4 items that were approved on votes of 5-0

* The Meeting Minutes of the February 25th meeting, with a minor correction
* The request from the YMCA to hold the Heart of the Chesapeake Bike Tour on July 20th from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. starting and ending at the YMCA
* The request from Cambridge Main Street for a five (5) year “Seasonal Variance” to use the Long Wharf parking lot for the Cambridge Farmer’s Market and waiver of the annual $200 fee
* The request from the Dorchester Chamber of Commerce to hand banners across the 400 Block of Race Street for “Wellness in the Storm” from April 1-14 and for the Chamber Challenge Boat Docking from May 15-30, 2019.

Two ordinances were then provided their second reading and public hearing. Ordinance 1139 addresses the height of fences forward of the Primary Rear Building Façade and Ordinance 1140 addresses the replacement of existing nonconforming multifamily structures within the residential district that are damaged or destroyed by accidental means or natural causes beyond the owner’s control. Ordinance 1139 passed on a vote of 5-0 and Ordinance 1140 passed on a vote of 3-2.

The remaining Grant Application matter was removed from the agenda as no one from city staff came forward to make a presentation on it. This was a request for permission to submit a grant application to the Maryland State Arts Council for promotional materials specific to the Cambridge Arts and Entertainment District.

The final presentation of the evening was the discussion of the Audit mentioned above by a representative of the TGM Group, LLC. There being no further business or comments by the public, the meeting concluded.