CAMBRIDGE MATTERS #42

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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Most City Council meetings have a routine to them that repeats itself much of the time. Occasionally, the unexpected occurs that causes a break in that routine. That was the case at the end of our April 8th meeting.

The Pledge of Allegiance took place after a moment of silence led by the Mayor, who acknowledged the passing of Gerry Boyle, a Cambridge fixture who was the race chair for the Eagle Man ½ Triathlon and the IronMan Triathlon that have taken place here in Cambridge for years. He will be missed by the many people who knew him. The Mayor also acknowledged the passing of the Maryland House of Delegates Speaker, Michael E. Busch, who died on Sunday.

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by members of 3 Girl Scout Troops associated with Waugh Chapel UMC and the young son of Yvette Robinson, the City Housing Specialist. The agenda was modified by the removal of two items – the request from Awaken Hearts to hold a “Praise” Concert on July 13th and the request from Cambridge Main Street to hold a Downtown Beer Festival. The agenda was then approved.

Five members of the public came forward to make comments. Robert Aaron spoke about the need for a skate park here in Cambridge and provided information about one that has been developed over a period of time in Salisbury. He encouraged the city to consider developing one near the public swimming pool off Cedar Street. He indicated that he would return periodically to see what the city is doing to make this project happen. Commissioner Hanson thanked Mr. Aaron and urged him to develop a committee of community members to develop more ideas and plans in support of this idea.

Sharon Smith then spoke on the budget that the Mayor, Commissioners, and staff are working to develop. She urged that we consider hiring more code enforcement staff as doing so is an investment in the city and its residences. She indicated that if more code enforcement staff were able to help increase the value of city housing by only 1% that increase would result in tax revenue that would pay for the salaries of the additional staff. She indicated that much work is done in the city over weekends when staff is not working and suggested that the police be authorized as part of their patrol responsibilities to check on work being done and inquire about work permits that would be necessary. She also indicated that we needed to hire a director of economic development. We have an assistant but having a director would help with the economic growth of the community and would be a good use of taxpayer monies.

Chuck McFadden, the President of CAN, then spoke on additional budget issues and asked that we approve the increase in the proposed salaries of police officers due to the low pay that they currently receive that causes them to stay for a short time with Cambridge and then move on to a higher paying job with another police force. He indicated that the current process of hiring new officers, training them, and then seeing them move on to other police departments was not an effective use of taxpayer funds.

Denise Dvorak, President of the Dorchester Library, then spoke about Kindermusik, a program for children 0-3 years of age and their parents that helps the infants and toddlers develop and engages their parents in bonding with them and supporting their early growth. The Library has several Kindermusik sets that are on loan in the community just as with a book. She indicated that she was sharing the program with day care providers and nonprofits working with children.

This is a program that I am urging the city to support in the current budget process by helping the Library to purchase the Kindermusik kits for lending to organizations that work with the youngest children here in the City. From recent data, only 25% of children entering kindergarten in city schools are ready for kindergarten. That percentage needs to improve dramatically if we are going to improve the quality of the Dorchester County Public Schools.

Katie Clendaniel, the Executive Director of Cambridge Main Street, then spoke on the upcoming lighting of overhead lights on Poplar Street on Saturday the 13th and urged the Mayor, Commissioners, and the Public to come and see what has been done. Hill Kimmel, the construction company, has helped Cambridge Main Street install the lights at no cost.

The Consent Calendar was then taken up with the following being approved on a vote of 5-0:

1. The March 25th Meeting Minutes of City Council
2. The request from the Friends of Blackwater to hold the Wild Goose Chase Bike Ride for Women on September 7th from Noon to 6:00 p.m. and on September 8th from 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
3. The request from Sean Reincke of Cambridge-South Dorchester School for a noise variance for Prom Night, May 4th.
4. The request of the Maryland Department of Health to place a banner across Race Street for National Mental Health Month prior to their May 18th event

Ordinance 1142 was then given its first reading with it being continued to April 22nd for 2nd reading, public hearing, and possible adoption. The Ordinance proposes to modify Ordinances1035 and 1038 by extending the temporary suspension of the imposition and collection of all impact fees in the city from April 30, 2019 to June 30, 2020.

With Old Business, the March/April Housing Report from Yvette Robinson, City Housing Specialist was then provided. As there is so much going on with this project, I am attaching her report for you to read rather than discussing it here. Ms. Robinson, Habitat Choptank, and City Staff are doing a great job in developing a framework for the future work to be undertaken in the Pine Street Area as well as other parts of the City of Cambridge.

With New Business, several matters were undertaken and approved on 5-0 votes. They included the following:

* A request by Brent Jett on behalf of city staff to submit a grant application in the amount of $1.5 Million to the FY 2020 Maryland Department of Natural Resources Chesapeake and Coastal Grants Gateway Program to support additional work being done on the Cannery Stream restoration project including culverts under Cedar Street.
* A request by Brandon Hesson on behalf of the city staff to submit a grant request seeking funding for the Façade Improvement Program through a Community Legacy Grant.
* A request by Brandon Hesson on behalf of city staff to seek funding for a Wayfinding Implementation Plan that will held reduce and clear up the multiple and sometimes confusing signage within the city to help visitors and residents to find places within the city.
* A request by Brandon Hesson to seek funding for the update of the citywide Housing Quality Survey that was done in 2017. Having this survey updated will help city leadership and residents understand the value of the work being done in the city.
* The reappointment of William Clyde to the Board of Appeals for a term starting April 30, 2019 and ending April 30, 2022.

In the Public Comment at the end of the meeting, Herve Hamon from city staff reported that the pilot project that he is working on with the school system is moving forward with students from the Tech Center in cooperation with volunteers from Habitat Choptank rebuilding a porch for an elderly homeowner. There is hope that this project could develop into an apprentice program in the future. Mr. Hamon indicated that he has pictures of the current condition of the porch and that he will provide a report along with pictures to City Council after it is completed.

Mr. Sydnor moved that City Council hold a special meeting on April 15th at 5:00 p.m. for further work on the budget. That motion was adopted, and the meeting was scheduled with notice to the public to follow.

The surprise of the meeting then took place with a request from Commissioner Foster that the City Charter be changed to allow for the city commissioners to take over all personnel matters regarding city staff that is now the responsibility of the City Manager. I raised an objection that the motion was not appropriate without there being proper notice to the public and the ability of the public to be heard on the matter.

After advice by the city attorney, it was clear that this motion, in order to be completed legally had to go through a notice and public hearing process before the possibility of being enacted. The Mayor proceeded with a vote that the city attorney considered to be a direction to begin the process to consider a change to the Charter. The motions regarding this proposal passed on a vote of 3-2 with Commissioners Foster, Sydnor, and Cannon voting in favor and Commissioner Hanson and myself voting against.

I then moved that the city manager and staff research city records over the past 3 years to provide information about what staff positions were filled without following proper procedures where commissioners were not aware of hirings, what purchases were made outside of those permitted that violated existing policies, and what salaries were improperly increased. That motion passed on a vote of 5-0.

Rather than me trying to explain all the details of what happened during this portion of the meeting, I would encourage you to go on the internet to [www.townhallstreams.com](http://www.townhallstreams.com) and sign on to the Cambridge, MD page and the April 8th meeting. You can then look at what took place by moving the video to the last 15-20 minutes of the meeting.

As this process moves forward, I will provide you with more information about the issue and why I think it is a bad idea. Thanks for reading.