CAMBRIDGE MATTERS #41

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City Council had both a Special Meeting and a Regular meeting on Monday. The Special Meeting was held starting at 4:30 p.m. and was called to address the budget questions that the Mayor and Commissioners had and to decide on when the proposed tax rate should have a public meeting in order to establish the Fiscal Year 2020 Budget. After much discussion about a variety of income and spending issues, the Commissioners left to the City Manager the responsibility under the City Charter to propose a budget and to provide notice to the public for May 9th at 5:00 p.m. for a hearing on the Proposed Real Property Tax Increase.

As of April 22nd, the anticipated real property tax increase would increase from the current $0.8179 per each $100 of assessed valuation of real property in the City to $0.9179 for each $100 of assessed valuation of real property in the City. There was no discussion of any increase in the Personal Property tax rate that will also be addressed at the hearing on May 9th. Once the real estate tax rate and the personal property tax rate are set, the plan is to introduce the Budget Ordinance at the May 13th City Council meeting.

One of the major issues for discussion at the meeting was the purchase of a new ladder truck for the fire department. The current ladder truck is over 25 years old and needs replacement. How to pay for the new truck was discussed with several suggestions being provided to the City Manager to consider as part of his proposed budget. Also discussed was how to plan for the cost of future fire and other equipment that will be needed

The Regular Session then began at 6:00 p.m. with a moment of silence and the Pledge of Allegiance. The Agenda was approved as presented. The update on Sailwinds West, Inc. that is running Governors Hall was removed from the Public Comment portion of the meeting. The Commissioners then heard from Gene Lauer, Chair of the Planning Commission, and Alan McRae, of Anchor Point, Inc., who had sought a change in the Zoning Ordinance. After hearing from both individuals, who were in agreement, the Commissioners voted 5-0 to adopt the Planning Commission’s recommendation that City Council not consider the proposed zoning text amendment that would have allowed a unique zoning ordinance for the City of Cambridge and one that the Planning Commission indicated was not in compliance with State Laws requiring orderly and well-planned development and did not adequately protect property owners.

Brandon Hesson then requested permission from City Council to allow the Cabin Fever Play Center to plant flowers in Cannery Way as part of their youth summer camp experience. The effort will be overseen by a Public Works staff member. This request was approved on a 5-0 vote.

Some members of the public were then able to address the Council on a variety of issues. Richard Lalka first spoke on the upcoming budget and City Tax Rate to indicate that he felt that the Tax Rate was already too high and suggested that we should consider selling some of the city properties that are unused in order to get them back on the tax rolls. Roger Creekmore then spoke about the concerns that he, his family, and his neighbors have regarding the drug dealing, motorcycles, and bad behavior of some in and near the park at Crosby Ave. He requested help from the police department and the city to see what might be done to improve conditions in that area and make it a more livable community. He received offers of assistance from the police chief, me, and others on City Council to meet and see what might be able to be done.

Rick Klepfer then spoke on the proposed ordinance from the Planning Commission that was receiving its first reading later in the meeting. He felt that the Mill Street School property should be developed under the current zoning and that making a special exception that would allow higher density development was not appropriate.

The one item on the Consent Calendar was approved. It was the request from the American Legion Post #91 to have a Memorial Day Service on the law around the fountain at Long Wharf on May 27th from 10:30 a.m.- 1:00 p.m. This request was approved on a vote of 5-0.

A series of Proposed Ordinances were given their first reading and were continued over to May 13th for 2nd reading, public hearings, and possible adoption. They included the following:

* Ordinances 1143 and 1144 that address the proposed neighborhood conservation 3 overlay district for the property where the Mill Street School sits on approximately 1.86 acres that Mr. Klepfer talked about earlier in the meeting
* Ordinances 1145 and 1146 that address the issue of zoning to allow Small Wireless Facilities and support structures in, upon, or over the sidewalks and streets of the City. These are being proposed to protect the city, to the extent possible, from possible efforts by telecommunications companies seeking to place new 5G capacity support structures within the city. If the city does not act to pass legislation, we may be forced to comply with FCC regulations that may not adequately protect the desires of the City to maintain an attractive city space.
* Ordinance 1147 that addresses the request by the owner of a property on High Street that historically had been a professional office but was zoned residential under the UDC. He and others who own similar property want to have the option to decide if the property would be a professional office or a residence. Professional offices could be allowed as a Special Exception with Conditions under the ordinance.

One Ordinance was then given its second reading and public hearing and was passed 5-0. This was Ordinance 1142 that extended the temporary suspension of the imposition and collection of all impact fees applicable to and collectible from properties located within the City from April 30, 2019 to June 30, 2020. Mr. Lalka spoke against this legislation as this could be money that the city could collect that it has not been collecting. The other view was that it encouraged people to build in the City, both residences and business property, that resulted in more highly assessed property and thus higher and longer lasting real estate taxes on those properties. The city plans to collect data to determine if this suspension of impact fees makes a difference in the decision by individuals to build houses and office buildings in the City.

City Council that scheduled a Public Hearing on May 9th at 5:00 p.m. at City Council Chambers for the purposes of increasing the Proposed Real Property Tax Rate to $0.9179 per $100 of assessed value of real estate in the City and to maintain the Personal Property Tax Rate at its current $1.69 per $100 of value.

Rev. Keith Cornish then made a short presentation on the proposed Maces Lane Community Center and provided a written Business Plan for the facility. The City has been providing support to this effort to create a community center at the old Maces Lane School Building, and it appears that progress is being made to bring together a funding stream to assist with its construction in phases.

Once the facility is completed, the plan is to make it open to the public at no cost to individuals using the facility and that funding would come from nonprofit resources, foundations, grants, and the City and County.

The final matter of note was provided by Herve Hamon, who worked with Commissioner Foster and her husband and some churches in the City to hold an Easter Egg hunt at Great Marsh Park. It was successful with Mr. Hamon performing as the Easter Bunny. He also reported on the ongoing effort to have students at DCTC begin building porches one at a time starting with one homeowner here in the City. This is a project that he hopes will turn into an apprentice program for students interested in the construction and building trades.