CAMBRIDGE MATTERS

City-County Work Session – May 6th

City Council Tax Rate Session – May 9th

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The Dorchester County Council and the Cambridge City Council met on May 6th in an open working meeting to discuss matters of interest that impact the community. The agenda was pulled together by the County Manager and City Manager, and I added an issue that I felt was important that I will discuss later. A few members of the public attended.

The Mayor and the City Commissioners, except Commissioner Foster, were present along with the city manager and Odie Wheeler, Director of DPW. The County Commissioners, except for Council Member Pfeffer, were present along with the new County Manager.

The Maces Lane School was the first item of discussion. Commissioner Sydnor brought the County Council members up to date on what the Maces Lane Alumni Group has been doing toward achieving the goal of making a portion of the school a community center. Later this month the County Council will be holding a closed session regarding the property. One of the issues that they will need to address is how the property can be transferred to an entity that would be able to receive the grants that have been approved toward the construction and rehabilitation of the building.

It is anticipated that the cost of establishing the community center will be over $1 million. The plan is to make the building and its resources available to community members at no cost so that the funding for staffing, utilities, and upkeep of the building will need to come from other resources such as the county, the city, foundations, and grants.

Next up for discussion was the Rails to Trails program. Both the city and the county have portions of the railway property that will be converted from the currently unused railroad bed. It is a work in progress due to a variety of factors. The county has had to change some of the potential trail because of the intended lengthening of the airport runway.

There is a portion of the rail bed that goes from Dorchester County into Caroline County and then back into Dorchester County that needs to be resolved between the counties. There is also an old bridge coming into the city that is not in good shape and is one of the major reasons that the state decided to close the rail line. Who will pay for its repair for a new use such as Rails to Trails? Another issue is the interest of some to use the rail line in and around Hurlock for a scenic railroad. There are several difficult issues including funding that will need to be resolved moving forward.

Regarding the next item on the agenda, which was the situation regarding a possible move of the health department, the only information provided was that it is a work in progress, and it is still possible.

The next item was the Solar Farm that is proposed on Egypt Road. This has been stalled for quite some time over what Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) the city and county would receive if the project was approved. The company proposing the project and representatives of the city and county have not met in some time, so the county manager and the city manager were directed to reach out to counsel for the solar company to see where they stand with regard to an appropriate level of compensation to the city and county for the PILOT.

The next item on the agenda was the possibility of what was called the “Woods Road Trade to the State for the Visitor Center”. I had not heard about this possibility so may not have fully understood the discussion at our meeting. Apparently, the state would like to be relieved of the responsibility of maintaining the County and City Visitor Center at the end of the Malkus Bridge. What is under discussion is the possible undertaking of that responsibility by the City and County in exchange for the state fixing Woods Road including paving, drainage, sidewalks, and infrastructure. We were advised that the estimated cost of the work on Woods Road is $5-7 million. It appears that there is no agreement on any action at this time and if agreement is possible.

The Sailwinds Waterfront Development and the hospital property were the next items for discussion. The city and county are working together on this project and have representatives of both on the board of the nonprofit corporation Cambridge Waterfront Development, Inc. (CWDI) that was created for this purpose. The discussion was more along the lines of what is possible here rather than what is taking place or has taken place. There were questions about whether the property would be sold to one or more developers or leased to them in order to have an ongoing stream of income for the city and county. Should the development be done by one developer or with several developers? No answers were provided, but there was the understanding that the city property and the hospital property need to be put together in order to make the project viable and that funding will be needed to purchase the property and to bring down and clean up the hospital property in order that it be developable. It is hoped that some of this funding will come from the state of Maryland.

We then talked about the expansion of the airport. For the runway to be lengthened, plans for the movement of roads and railroad lines (see Rails to Trails above) need to be completed along with the funding for the project. In addition, plans need to be made to reduce the height of some trees on private property at the end of the runway. The county has been working with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to have the federal government provide funding for the project which would include the cost of the removal of the rail line and the tracks that are on the airport property. That funding request is reportedly pending with the FAA.

I then raise the issue of Early Childhood Education and student behavior in the Dorchester County Schools and in the community. I provided the attached report that I developed late last year and a paper by Stephen Heyneman, PhD that is included with this report. He speaks about the need in American Public Schools to address increasingly troublesome behavioral issues.

The reason that I raised the issue is that in the approximately 10 years that we have lived here I have seen behavior problems in the school system get worse. I have also seen the data in my attached report that shows that too many children in Dorchester County and particularly the City of Cambridge are not ready for Kindergarten.

I proposed that the County Council and the City Council establish a small workgroup along with other community leadership in the county to look at these issues and help lead our community in addressing them considering the views of the community, the parents and caretakers of children, our churches, nonprofits, neighborhood associations, and volunteers. If we are successful, the school system will have more children who are both ready to learn and are prepared to behave themselves in the school setting as well as the community.

These challenges are solvable. We just need to come together, listen to ideas that may be new, and start finding solutions that are out there in our community.

Other than a report from Odie Wheeler about the work on the 300 block of High Street about which I have reported in earlier Cambridge Matters reports, no other items of interest were taken up.

Later in the week, on May 9th, the City Council met to have a public hearing about the proposed increase in the tax rate and to have the first reading of the proposed ordinance. The 2nd reading and public hearing and vote of city council will be on Monday May 13th. I urge you to attend that meeting and provide your input on our budget. We will also be having the first reading of the proposed budget ordinance for continuation over to May 28th for 2nd reading, public hearing, and vote by City Council. Your attendance there is also important.

The May 9th meeting brought out many citizens and police officers who expressed their views on the proposed tax increase and what decisions the City Council should make for the betterment of the city and its residents.

Thanks for reading.