CAMBRIDGE MATTERS #38

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

swrideout@aol.com

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The City Council meeting had everything for those who attended or want to watch it on Townhallstreams.com. We met for a closed meeting at 5:00 p.m. where two matters relating to personnel were discussed and voted on. After all the discussion one person’s contract unfortunately was not extended on a vote of 2-3 with Commissioner Hanson and I voting to extend the contract and Commissioners Cannon, Sydnor, and Foster voting against extending it. The other matter was the proposed renewal of the contract for the city attorney, after that discussion, Commissioners Sydnor and Foster left the meeting and Commissioners Hanson, Cannon, and I voted to extend the contract for a year.

We then waited for the Regular meeting to begin at 6:00 p.m. with all commissioners present. After an opening moment of silence for the children of our community who would be finishing the school year on Tuesday, the Pledge of Allegiance followed.

During the Public Comment portion of the meeting Rev. Linda Walker spoke about there being no porta potties at Great Marsh Park, now the Gerry Boyle Park at Great Marsh. We learned from staff that vandalism has been a problem there and that possibly they were taken by mistake after the hydroplane races that were held there the weekend before. City staff was directed to be sure that portable toilets were in place at the park as soon as possible.

Buddy Stevens then spoke of his effort to rent the lighthouse for an event he wanted to hold and was told by someone that it was not permitted. City staff was directed to investigate this matter as well since the Lighthouse is available for rent. They are to provide Mr. Stevens with the contact information for whom he should speak with about the possible rental.

Alvin Hutton then began to speak regarding the Cosby Avenue Day that he hoped to hold on August 24th rather than the original date of August 31st. He had not contacted neighbors in the area to ensure that they were aware and did not object. The matter was removed from the consent calendar for him to make further enquiries and file a new request with the city manager.

Sandra Tripp-Jones noted to the Commissioners that she was present to discuss Resolution 19-005 that was on the agenda later in the meeting. Reverend Cornish then spoke about the Maces Lane project that was item #13 on the agenda. As it appears that the city had budgeted and set aside for FY 2020 the $100,000 that he was asking to be distributed after July 1st, his request was approved on a vote of 5-0.

With the Consent Calendar, the Meeting minutes of May 28th were removed for discussion later and items 4 and 5 were approved on a vote of 5-0. They were the request from Blue Ruin to have a “Nightmare on Poplar” event in the alleyway behind the restaurant on July 27th from 5-10 p.m. and the approval of the proposed lease agreement with Cambridge Shipyard Facility, Inc. to lease .6 acres of land for a two (2) year period.

With the May 28th Meeting Minutes, Commissioner Foster made some comments regarding them after which my motion to approve them was seconded by Commissioner Hanson and defeated on a vote of 2-3 with Commissioner Hanson and I voting in favor of them and Commissioners Cannon, Foster, and Sydnor voting against the motion.

An Ordinance for First Reading was Ordinance 1154 which deals with clarifying and restating the amounts of impact fees to be charged by the City. After its reading, the matter was continued over to the July 8th meeting for second reading, public hearing, and possible adoption.

There were three Ordinances up for Second Reading, Public Hearing, and possible adoption. No one from the public asked to speak about any of them.

* Ordinance 1151 – On motion of Commissioner Hanson and seconded by me, the city’s UDC was modified to reduce the minimum setback for all nontidal wetlands from 50 feet to 25 feet and to expand them to 50 feet for large-scale development containing over 10 acres. This passed 5-0.
* Ordinance 1152 – On my motion seconded by Commissioner Hanson, the city’s property maintenance code was modified to clarify the intent of the commissioners to have the annual registration fee for non-owner-occupied residential units be established by resolution. This passed on a vote of 3-2 with Commissioners Hanson, Cannon, and me voting in favor and Commissioners Sydnor and Foster opposing.
* Ordinance 1153 – On my motion seconded by Commissioner Hanson the city code was amended to increase the annual rental rate for fire hydrants from $12.50 to $75.00. This passed on a vote of 5-0.

There was no Old Business. Much of the New Business was address quickly. All the motions that follow were approved on votes of 5-0 except Resolution 19-003, which is explained below. The list included the following:

* On my motion and second by Commissioner Foster the selection of Mary Elliott Bell to continue to serve on the Housing Authority Board until June 30, 2024.
* On my motion and second by Commissioner Hanson, after discussion regarding the need in the future to segregate general employees from police officers in order to allow Commissioner Foster to vote, Resolution 19-003 to amend the positions and salary controls and schedules of salary grades and steps for city general employees and sworn police officers was adopted on a vote of 4-0 with Commissioner Foster abstaining.
* On my motion and second by Commissioner Hanson, the approval of Resolution 19-004 for an application for state funding for the Maces Lane project for $500,000.
* On my motion and second by Commissioner Hanson, approval of Resolution 19-005, for an application for state funding for the Sailwinds project for $560,000.
* On Commissioner Sydnor’s motion seconded by Commissioner Foster for approval of Resolution 19-006 for state funding for the redevelopment of the Packing House and the adjacent Cannery Park.
* On my motion seconded by Commissioner Hanson for approval of Resolution 19-007 for state funding for the Façade Improvement Program, the Wayfinding Program, and a Housing Quality Study.
* On my motion seconded by Commissioner Hanson approval of Resolution 19-008 to strongly object to the recent decision of the U. S. Secretary of the Treasury to defer placing the picture of Harriet Tubman on the twenty-dollar bill until 2028.
* On Commissioner Sydnor’s motion seconded by Commissioner Hanson, the appropriation of $11,575 for the FY 2019 Federal BJAG grant for the purchase of a palm scanner for fingerprints.

The next item was a vote on the City’s Grant Priority list for state funding requests. As I heard each commissioner state his or her preferences, it appeared that there were enough votes for each to establish the list as follows:

1. Maces Lane Community Project
2. Cambridge Waterfront Development Project
3. City Grants for Façade Improvement, Wayfinding, and Housing Quality
4. ESCL Packing House Project

On motion properly made and seconded the above priority list was approved on a vote of 5-0.

The final scheduled matter for discussion and vote was about health insurance being provided by the city for two elected officials. It was somewhat complicated but is important for you to know about for you to understand how your city has been run in the past and should be run.

I had asked that the matter be place on the agenda because the FY 2020 budget that was passed had approximately $21,000 set aside to pay for the city self-insured health plan for two of our elected officials. Some taxpayers brought that matter to my attention, and my research revealed that there had never been city council action that approved the providing of health insurance to elected officials, as required by the city charter. In addition, my research showed that as we are also part time employees, the personnel policies of the city indicate that part time employees are not entitled to protection under the personnel policies and only full time and permanent part time employees are eligible for health insurance.

While providing health care for elected officials has apparently gone on for years in Cambridge without proper approvals being obtained through any city ordinance, I felt that at the very least the elected officials who choose to have health insurance coverage through the city self-insured plan should at least pay 100% of the cost of that insurance coverage as they could benefit many thousands of dollars by claims made under the city health policy that is self-insured. That means it is funded mostly by the city taxpayers with contributions by the employees based on the level of their salary and the number of family members covered in their plan. My motion was that “any elected official who seeks on their own behalf health insurance provided by the City of Cambridge starting July 1, 2019 for the FY 2020 until the end of his or her current term of office shall pay 100% of the cost for that health insurance, and that the city manager notify the administrator of the City’s Self-Insured Health Plan of the decision of the Commissioners of Cambridge”. That motion passed on a vote of 2-1 with the two elected officials currently having the coverage abstaining from the vote due to their having a conflict of interest that required them to abstain.

As the current Ordinance regarding our compensation limits it to $12,000 for the Mayor and $10,000 for each Commissioner, I felt that insurance coverage should not be provided. I received an opinion from the city attorney that limited what I felt I could do to address the issue, which was as noted above. While this requires the payment by the elected official if s/he so chooses, the amount of compensation will be above what is allowed by ordinance if claims for payment of medical bills are made by any elected official who has the city insurance.

With the passage of that motion, Commissioner Foster then moved that starting after the next election those persons elected shall be entitled to obtain health insurance through the city’s self-insurance policy with their payment being based on the level of their compensation. If you agree with that you need to let us know by coming to the city council meeting when that ordinance will be considered or by sending a letter or email to the Mayor, City Manager, or me. If you object, please do the same.

I objected to that motion as I wanted the health insurance matter as well as other compensation issues to be addressed by a citizens’ committee appointed by the mayor with the approval of the Commissioners. My plan is that the committee would then make a recommendation to city council for compensation for officials elected in November 2020. Over my objection and that of Commissioner Hanson, Commissioner Foster’s motion passed on a vote of 3-2.

The reason for my objection is that I felt we needed to get some information from the administrator of our health insurance policy as to what the different options might be and what their cost might be. For instance if the elected officials are insured by the city, the taxpayers will pay through taxes the other portion of the cost of the policy as well as for any health care benefits paid out, and the elected official will have the lowest cost of any city employee full or part time because the elected officials are paid very little and the personal cost for the insurance in the past was based on income levels.

While I hope it does not happen to anyone, we have had city employees or family members that have had many thousands of dollars of medical bills that were paid by the city. While I think that our full-time employees and their families should benefit from such coverage, I do not think that part time elected officials should equally benefit at taxpayer cost.

A current example of this situation is that a city elected official who has a spouse has paid about $175 a month for their city health insurance while one full time employee of the city pays almost $400 a month for the same policy. In addition, under the city personnel policies no part time employee except permanent part time employees are entitled to health insurance coverage. We are only part time and are not permanent part time.

Also, an elected official who has a spouse who works for the city could, presumably, obtain the family insurance based on the salary of the commissioner rather than the spouse who is an employee who earns more. The cost would be lower as it was based on the elected official’s low salary alone rather than the salary of both, which then could benefit that family by lower cost for the health insurance, higher take home pay for the spouse of the elected official as they are not having health insurance taken from their salary, and full coverage of the family for benefits to be paid by the taxpayers.

My view is that by this motion three elected officials, at least two of whom plan to run for reelection, are looking out for themselves first without considering the city taxpayers and without looking at what the potential cost might be to the citizens both for the city contribution each month to the self-insurance plan but also for the potential payouts for health insurance benefits. Under the motion that passed, the elected official could choose to make the city policy the primary coverage rather than a secondary coverage even though they might already have other health insurance. That could also lower the cost of other insurance, if the city coverage were the primary coverage.

The motion that passed did not place any limitations on how the elected officials might be limited in the coverage that they would be eligible to obtain. Currently for each penny per $100 value of real estate in the city generates about $75,000 in tax income to the city. If a future mayor and all commissioners chose to obtain health insurance through the city, that would have the potential of increasing the city tax rate at least one (1) cent per $100 value of city real estate or 20% of the five (5) cent increase that we just had to make for this current year. I think that we can do better than what was proposed. In order to have this proposal become the law, we will have to pass an ordinance after due notice to the public. I will let you know when it will be considered.

After the close of business and during public comment, the issue of having the bathroom open at Long Wharf was raised again due to its early closing and only being available to boaters after hours. Substandard housing was also an issue raised. There was a request by Commissioner Cannon that we have a work session on the proposal that the city council be involved in the personnel issues of the city. It has been set for June 17th at 2:00 p.m. I am not sure of the location. You need to be there to hear what is being considered.

The repair of the 300 block of High Street is almost completed. Commissioner Sydnor asked the police chief to investigate the possibility of using drones to help the city officers in their work. Chief Lewis indicate that the Eagleman ½ Triathlon was this past weekend and was very successful and that the police department had raised over $9,300 separately for Special Olympics.

There being no further matters the meeting was adjourned.

The other June meeting of City Council will not take place as the Maryland Municipal League Conference will occur that Monday. In place of my regular report, I will be providing my summary of accomplishments and other important things that have taken place this past Fiscal Year. July 2018 to June 30, 2019. Thanks for Reading.