CAMBRIDGE MATTERS # 37

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

swrideout@aol.com

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CAMBRIDGE ACCOMPLISHMENTS 2018-2019

Much of what has been accomplished during FY 2019 has been done with little fanfare and a lot of hard work behind the scenes. Cambridge Marketplace continues to grow and look better as work is done to tear down old buildings and prepare for the new emergency room and medical building. Sailwinds under the leadership of the Cambridge Waterfront Development, Inc. its board, and Sandra Tripp-Jones, its volunteer Executive Director, has laid the groundwork for the future development of the site. The Dorchester Chamber of Commerce, The Dorchester Center for the Arts, Main Street, and many other nonprofits have continued their efforts on behalf of the community to improve Cambridge in many ways.

The City Planning and Zoning Commission has worked with staff to ensure that properties are ready for future development by hard work and sound decision making over the past 12 months. The City Historic Preservation Commissioner (HPC) and its staff have made the process of fixing and rehabilitating historic properties in the Historic District of Cambridge smoother and more user friendly while ensuring compliance with the requirements and guidelines for historic preservation.

The ESLC continues to work to pull together the Phillips Factory F Project.

I just received an email from Odie Wheeler about something new that is happening there. He says **Katie Parks from Eastern Shore Land Conservancy called me in regard to the smokestacks at Factory “F” on Dorchester Ave.  Per Katie, the contractor has mobilized and begun work sooner than anticipated on the restoration of the two smoke stacks at Factory “F”.  They will be removing several feet of the top portions of the stacks as they are in the worse condition and could not be renovated in place.”**

The City, Habitat Choptank, and the State of Maryland continue to work hard in the Pine Street Area to develop a vision for next steps in turning around decaying and deteriorating buildings while Habitat Choptank has been hard at work building new homes and fixing up others for new homeowners in the City.

In late June of 2018, Sandra Tripp Jones retired as city manager, and Odie Wheeler, the Director of DPW took on that additional task as City Council looked for a new City Manager. Later in the summer, Ginger Heatwole Jenkins our finance director left the city, and the search began to replace her. Patrick Comiskey became our City Manager and started August 1st with Chrystal Slakes, our new finance director, not coming on board until late in 2018.

July brought Yvette Robinson from Detroit, Michigan to lead the Pine Street Housing Project that is funded in large part by the state and which involves Habitat Choptank. She came with excellent credentials and hoped to move here. Susan Webb was hired to lead code enforcement efforts in the City. Both did great jobs for the City, and Susan continues to do excellent work in her area of expertise.

The first mention of food trucks came during the public comment portion of the first July meeting when Henry Van Dyke, who runs a food truck, expressed his interest in having the city approve their use in the city. As the City Council had not had any experience with food trucks, we wanted to be sure, to the extent we could, that the ordinance that we passed benefitted the residents of Cambridge. Over the following months, the food truck ordinance continued to be an issue as public support for them continued to grow.

Funding of Human Services Grants was approved in July for a variety of programming to benefit organizations providing services to the community. Oasis Marinas began its management of the City Marina. Alan McRae of Anchor Point, Inc. nonprofit sought to use of the Metro building at Dorchester Square for bingo. This became an ongoing issue between Mr. McRae and the city until legislation passed later in the year that allowed bingo at the Metro Building.

In August City Council approved the 5-year contract for the Ironman Triathlon to remain here in Cambridge. Mike Starling spoke to City Council regarding “Dorchester Goes Purple” to take place in September to support awareness and acknowledgement of the opioid crisis that faces our community and the nation.

The Food Truck Ordinances passed with a review to take place in a year to see what, if any, concerns have been raised about their use in the city. I have heard no concerns or complaints but anticipate a report sometime in August to either confirm that its implementation went well or what, if any, problems might have occurred. The City purchased 1.8 acres near DPW building just off Washington Street for future use for a well and pumping station in that part of the City.

Mr. Chitlick, Chair of the Dorchester Democratic Party, came to City Council to respond to a notice from the City directing him to remove the political signs from his property. After much discussion, City Council allowed the signs to remain there pending a report and recommendation from the City Attorney as to how to address this in the future. No report or recommendations have been received to date on this matter.

The Cambridge Police Athletic League (PAL) was established with Officer John Foster as one of its leaders, and the City accepted a $20,000 grant for the project.

The Historic District Guidelines that had been worked on during the prior year were adopted in August. The City Commissioners also asked that Ms. Robinson or the City Manager provide us with a report every month on the progress of the Pine Street Area Project.

September brought the beginning of the preparation for the repair and replacement of the roadway and infrastructure in the 300 block of High Street with city council granting permission to purchase the bricks.

That month the City street resurfacing contract in the amount of $480,000 was granted to Russell Paving. This is separate and apart from the work done in the 300 block of High Street. We have seen the work on both being completed during the spring of 2019.

The adequacy of police salaries was raised in October by Commissioner Sydnor. The matter reappeared during the budget discussions and decisions in the spring of 2019. Cambridge was losing too many officers to other jurisdictions because we were not keeping pace with them regarding compensation. Line officers received the largest raises starting early in FY 2020, and other police leadership from Corporals on up received raises as well. Other city staff also received raises.

Mike Krantz appeared and proposed a mission trip to Cambridge in 2020 to help rehabilitate several dilapidated properties in the city. Unfortunately, the proposal could not be accomplished as the county school system and the community did not have enough available space and bath facilities to house all the youth workers that would be coming for the mission trip.

Due to the good work of Susan Webb and her code enforcement staff, Bradford House on Race Street was found not to be following housing code requirements. City staff and the fire department worked with the owners and management of the property to ensure that the building meets code requirements.

In November the City ADA committee had its rules, regulations, and membership updated. It is officially known as the City of Cambridge Citizens Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities. One of their projects is to develop a measuring stick to help business owners know how much space needs to be available in front of their stores.

In January 2019, a public meeting was held regarding the Mill Street School property and the proposed rezoning of the property by the Planning and Zoning Commission. This issue continued to be an important part of the concerns of neighbors to the school through the remainder of the year. That month the 300 Block of High Street was about to begin being rehabilitated.

Finally, in February. The Bingo ordinance passed that allowed it as a permitted use in Commercial Districts in the City. Mr. McRae was able to continue his bingo fund raising program at the Metro Building. The Main Street nonprofit funding of $20,000 was approved for FY 2019.

City Council and City residents also heard from the Police Chief who Reported on police activities during calendar year 2018.

* Crime reduced in 2018 by 29%
* Robberies were down 11.1%
* Aggravated Assaults were down 25.8%
* Burglaries were down 22.1%
* Thefts were down 30.4%
* Motor Vehicle thefts were down 69%
* Officers responded to over 48,000 calls for service during the year

In the three police districts within the city, part 1 crime (major crimes) was down 62% in District 1 (West Side of the city bounded by High Street and Hudson Road), down 55% in District 2 (South of Washington Street from Teal Lane to Woods Road), and down 21% in District 3 (High Street across Ocean Gateway to Bucktown Road).

City Council also continued to receive ongoing reports from Yvette Robinson regarding the housing work that was being done in the city.

The City leadership was also called upon to consider some major funding issues for FY 2020 including – police raises, a significant increase in the cost of workman’s compensation insurance, and the need for new hires for code enforcement.

Concerns were also raised regarding the condition of sidewalks, ADA compliance, and possible City liability for injuries. City staff was to undertake identifying problem areas and making recommendations for improvements. As part of that process, city sidewalks and their condition were to be surveyed to help ensure city residents maintained the sidewalks adjacent to their properties.

The City Auditor made a presentation regarding his audit of the city books that raised several questions by the Mayor and Commissioners that were resolved by the auditor as part of an additional presentation on the audit. The City was given a clean audit with some recommendations for the finance department to undertake to ensure easy and clear document access is available in the future.

In March, the City Ethics Code was amended to meet new state requirements. Twelve (12) homes from the Dorchester County Sanitation District were approved to be joined to the City sewer system so long as it is at no cost to the city.

Police Chief Lewis indicated that in the first two months of the year, Part 1 crime in the city was down another 32% below the decline that the city experienced in 2018.

In April, the unfortunate passing of Gerry Boyle was formally acknowledged. Gerry had previously been given a key to the city in recognition of all the great work that he had done in and for the citizens of the city and for the city itself. He had been a great goodwill ambassador for the City of Cambridge and Dorchester County.

A request to change the charter was made by Commissioner Foster to allow for the City Council to be involved in the city personnel matters. That was referred to the City Attorney for drafting. City Staff was to do research to determine what if any problems with hiring or personnel had taken place since the City Manager position had been created. While none of any significant was found, the issue of City Council involvement in the hiring of all employees will be coming forward for a vote in July.

Prior to June, more City Council meetings took place to help iron out some of the significant challenges that the city was facing regarding its FY 2020 budget. After everything was considered, the tax rate was increased by five (5) cents per $100 of real estate value on property owned in the city. The personal property tax remained the same. Both are too high and, hopefully, will be able to be reduced next Fiscal Year.

One challenge was the fire department seeking a new ladder truck at the cost of over $1 million for which the city had saved no money. Details of what the fire department was seeking were requested for City Council to make an appropriate decision on how or if to fund the request. We are still waiting for that information.

The Mill Street School Overlay district was brought up in May and was referred to the Historic Preservation Commission for a finding to ensure that the property was still considered historic. At a hearing held in June 2019 the historic nature of the building was confirmed by the HPC and all who testified at the hearing.

Throughout the year City Council has been receiving updates on the proposed community center being planned for the old Maces Lane School Building and has approved funding to support the efforts to get the project off the ground. Once the facility is completed, the hope is to make it open to the public at no cost to individuals using the facility with funding coming from nonprofit resources, foundations, grants, and the City and County budgets.

The week prior to the Eagleman ½ triathlon the name of Great Marsh Park was changed by City Council to the Gerry Boyle Park at Great Marsh in honor of Gerry and his contributions to the City of Cambridge.

Commissioner Hanson and I were appointed to an ad hoc committee of the City and County Councils to address issues relating to children in the city and county including programs for children 0-3 years of age, parental engagement, and youth behavior in the community and school system.

On May 6th the City and County Councils met to discuss matters of concern and importance to both the city and county. One issue was the tax differential that allows for the county to lower the county tax rate for city residents due to the resources that the city provides that would otherwise be the responsibility of the county to provide – police, planning and zoning, etc. As the City representatives were not prepared to have a complete discussion of this issue, the county kept the tax differential at the same level. The City representatives will have a discussion with the county finance director to see if any improvement in the tax differential rate next year can be afforded to the city residents.

The budget was adopted as were the real estate and personal property tax rates for FY 2020. As FY 2019 was drawing to a close, the issue of health insurance for commissioners came before City Council due to what appears to have been a failure of past councils to adopt an ordinance or resolution approving that benefit while assessing the cost to the city taxpayers without legal notice to them. The city attorney has provided an opinion that any change in this compensation cannot occur during the current term of those commissioners who are receiving the benefit. I disagree with that opinion and am looking for alternative ways to address that issue.

While many other things of importance have happened here in Cambridge than I have explained above, I have gone on much too long. What I consider as the bottom line, however, is that the City of Cambridge continues to make progress and good decisions to improve the lives of city residents and the strength of the City.

Thanks for reading.