CAMBRIDGE MATTERS #36

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

[swrideout@aol.com](mailto:swrideout@aol.com)

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Thank you to everyone who came to this meeting of City Council and who let the Mayor and Commissioners know their views regarding the proposed Charter Change Resolution. This is how democracy should work with the people learning about and having their voices heard on the issues that are important to a community. Know that this is a continuing obligation if we are to make Cambridge even better in the months and years to come.

Reporting on a 3-hour meeting will be a challenge, so please forgive me for not including some of the details of what took place. We first met at 5:00 p.m. in open session in order to go into a closed meeting on matters related to real estate transactions, possible litigation, advice of counsel, and personnel issues. The results were the deferral of the personnel issues to the finance committee and a direction to the City Attorney to discuss with the state officials ways to protect the city regarding the real estate issues that were raised.

With the opening of the regular City Council meeting at 6:00 p.m. after the opening moment of silence and the pledge of Allegiance, Commissioner Cannon asked the Mayor for a personal privilege to speak on a pending matter, which was the proposed Charter Amendment regarding personnel issues. After indicating that he no longer favored the proposal, he moved to remove the matter from the agenda.

With that request there was a flurry of activity and objection by two of the Commissioners, advice from the City Attorney, and the ultimate removal of the matter from the agenda. One other matter was removed from the agenda by the City Manager, after which the Agenda as amended was approved on a vote of 3-2.

During the Public Comment portion of the meeting several residents came forward most speaking about the proposed Charter Resolution that had just been withdrawn. Speakers included Mike Starling, Cheryl Hannan, Greg Boss (who suggested that any changes to the Charter by Council require a 4-1 vote), Jim Culver, Marianne Benson, Alan Shinn, and Greg Meekins. All opposed the proposed Charter change. Gene Lauer spoke in favor of the memo that I had drafted regarding the Citizens Compensation Committee.

Sando Grande from Delmarva Community Services discussed his request for a reduction in the first of several building permit fees that will be part of the building of the Harry and Jeannette Weinberg Intergenerational Center at Chesapeake Grove. After discussion and a motion that was made and properly seconded, the first permit fee of approximately $50,000 was cut in half conditioned on the construction project providing additional jobs in the community over the next five years. The City Manager will oversee working with Mr. Grande to properly account for those job placements and ensure compliance with the conditions of this fee reduction. The other matter on for discussion was brought by Pastor Milton Walls, who did not appear, so that matter was put to the end of the meeting in anticipation that he would be able to attend. He did not.

The Consent Calendar saw the meeting minutes of May 28th and June 10th removed for a separate vote. They were approved on votes of 3-2. The following items were approved on votes of 5-0:

* The request of Alvin Hutton to use Cosby Park on August 24th for a community event
* The request of CAN to have a banner hung announcing the Jam Picnic and Music Fest at Long Wharf Park on August 25th
* The Dorchester Center for the Arts (DCA) request for a street closure of High Street and noise variance for September 22nd from noon-6:00 p.m.
* The DCA request to use Long Wharf Park on July 13th and 14th from 10:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. for painters to set up easels
* The MOU between the City and Dorchester County regarding the Maintenance of Cannery Park
* The request of Shore Rivers to hold a “Saturday in the Park” event in Cornish Park on July 13th from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.
* The request of the Hyatt for a special exception to allow a skeet shooting event on July 29th on the Hyatt grounds condition on their providing the required public notice of the event

The only matter for First Reading had been the proposed Charter Resolution that had been removed from the Agenda. The next matter to be considered was the Second Reading, Public Hearing, and Possible Adoption of Ordinance 1154 that dealt with the amending of Section 1-16 of the City Code to clarify and restate the amounts of impact fees to be charged by the City. After holding the Public Hearing at which no one sought to speak, this Ordinance was passed on my motion and seconded by Commissioner Hanson on a vote of 5-0.

There were numerous matters to be considered under Old Business. The Consultants from LSA provided an excellent report for the attending residents and the City Council on the Neighborhood Revitalization Plan. The Plan can be found on the city website. I also have a copy that I can forward to anyone interested. The plan was put over to the next City Council meeting to give the community and City Council the opportunity to review it and, hopefully, obtain final approval from the Commissioners of Cambridge at our next meeting so that staff may continue with its implementation strategies.

The next item was a staff request that the Commissioners approve a grant that had already been made to improve the area where the Harriett Tubman Mural by Michael Rosato is located. The Mural has received national and international attention to the point that many visitors to Cambridge come with the primary intention of seeing it. After discussion, proper motion and second, it was approved on a vote of 5-0.

The Housing Specialist Job Description was approved on my motion with a second by Commissioner Hanson on a vote of 5-0. The DWDD Neighborhood Sub-District Setbacks remained the same as they had been previously established on my motion properly seconded on a vote of 5-0.

I then spoke on my proposal that City Council establish a Council Benefits Committee that would investigate the compensation and benefits that the Mayor and Commissioners receive and make recommendations to City Council for possible action and implementation with the election of the next City Council in November 2020. The City Attorney suggested that if this were to be approved, the committee needed to report back prior to the election season in order to have it not be an issue in the election. On motion of Commissioner Hanson and seconded by me with a report back by April 1st, 2020, the committee was established. The Mayor read into the record the duties and goals of the committee based on my memo that is included with this report. That motion passed on a vote of 3-2.

I then also moved that City Council seek an opinion from the Office of the Maryland Attorney General on the issue of current members of City Council receiving health benefits. This issue had been raised by a citizen and an earlier vote by the Commissioners was found by the City Attorney to be in violation of the law that prevents the reduction of compensation of an elected official during his or her term of office. As I believe that the evidence supports that the ability to receive health insurance benefits was never properly established under the requirements of the City Charter and City Code, I felt an additional legal opinion would be in order.

Commissioner Hanson seconded my motion, and the matter was approved on a vote of 2 in favor and 3 abstentions. There was an assertion by those who abstained that the matter failed as there were not enough votes in favor. The City Attorney’s opinion was that the vote was a proper one under the law and should stand. A letter with the facts of the matter along with the opinion of the City Attorney will be sent along to the Office of the Attorney General with a request for the opinion. Those elected officials receiving health insurance will continue to do so.

Herve Hamon then reported on the matter of the historic nature of the Mill Street School. The Historic Preservation Commission held a meeting on the issue, received written and oral opinions from experts as well as members of the community and found that it was an historic building. As a result, the matter of the zoning of the property to enhance the development of the Mill Street School will return to the Planning and Zoning Commission for action and return to City Council.

With New Business the proposed Public Local Law Referendum Form and the Public Charter Amendment Petition Form developed by the state will be considered at the next City Council meeting so that the City Attorney can confirm that the County Board of Elections will accept those forms in the future. The budget of the Police Department was revised and increased by $1000 based on a grant that it received from the Cambridge Lions Club that will be put in the Police Event Fund for future expenses. The request of the fire department for a revision of its budget by $9,110 for truck repair to the Pierce Rescue Fire Truck was sent to the Finance Committee for further study and report back at the July 22nd meeting. Based on the representations of Mr. Wheeler, the truck was damaged in an accident for which a claim should have been made against the driver of the vehicle that ran into the fire truck. The claim was not made, and the Statute of Limitations has expired which now prevents the claim. At the same time the repairs to the truck have not been made.

The next item was a request by staff to apply to the Maryland Department of Environment (MDE) for $455,000 for a Comprehensive Flood Management Grant to construct a new seawall replacement on Choptank Ave., West End Ave., and Oakley Street. There is no cash match by the City if the grant is awarded. If additional monies are needed, staff will return to City Council to update and make any requests they feel are appropriate. The final item on the agenda was the request to have the lot at 809 Fairmont Avenue declared as surplus property. On motion properly made and seconded, the Commissioners voted 5-0 to refer the matter to staff for a report and recommendation.

During the comment time by the Mayor and Commissioners I reported on the increased number of concerns about dogs in the community that are not on leashes and owners of dogs who are not picking up after them. I also raised the ongoing concern that residents are leaving food out all day for feral cats and that now raccoons are starting to claim that food and are coming onto porches and are less afraid of humans. People who are feeding feral cats need to leave the food out for a limited period and then take it inside to limit its access to other animals. I asked that the city manager investigate this matter further and report back to city council on possible solutions. I also reported on what has been happening with the city-county youth committee and indicated that I would provide a written report at the next meeting.

During the public comment period at the end of the meeting, Wendell Foxwell spoke about the need for the city to have people cut their grass especially on Cedar Street and by the city at Long Wharf. He also raised his ongoing concern about the Hearn Building and the lack of progress. Robert Aaron spoke about the Skate Park Committee that he has formed and asked that someone from City Council work with them. I volunteered to meet with his group.

Jermaine Anderson spoke about all the activities that are going on at Cornish Park. Some benches have been built but then were damaged. People need to see the positive things that are happening there. That may help reduce the number of negative and destructive things going on there as well.

Finally, Dr. Theresa Stafford spoke on continuing challenges on Greenwood Avenue. She thanked the police for being more helpful. She indicated that she had been able to take 24 of the children in her program over to the YMCA for a swim. There continue be problems with young men and teens in the area that she continues to seek help to address.

Commissioner Sydnor commented on the meeting that he and I attended at the Bay Country Apartments on Greenwood Avenue with the Police Chief and other members of the department. I mentioned my outreach to staff at the apartments regarding early childhood programs that I thought would work well with staff support and some volunteers from the community. I anticipate having ongoing meetings to find ways to address some of the concerns raised by Dr. Stafford.

Thanks for reading.