CAMBRIDGE MATTERS # 30.25

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October 4, 2019

Today was a joint work session for the City Council and the County Council that focused on an update from DHCD Secretary Ken Holt on what projects are being worked on and planned for Cambridge and Dorchester County. In addition to staff members, citizens, and representatives of the Edgecombe Group, Inc. from Hyattsville, MD, The City council was represented by the Mayor and Commissioners Sydnor, Cannon, Hanson, and myself and the County was represented by Council Members Travers and Pfeffer along with the County Administrator.

Secretary Holt addressed 6 projects that are in some form of development that his office is working on or is watching here in Cambridge. Each is at a different level of progress and each has a different level of engagement by Mr. Holt’s Office.

He began his discussion talking about the DHCD office that is here in Cambridge. It is on Race Street and has 14 employees. This staff works on the Voucher Housing Program here and has outgrown its current space.

The program serves over 2600 families on the Eastern Shore 270 of which are in a Housing Self-Sufficiency Program that helps them save for eventual home ownership through a HUD program. The intent is to help more people reduce or eliminate their need for housing vouchers.

The first project that was discussed was the Maces Lane School that has been closed for at least the last 10 or more years. It is in disrepair, and the goal of the project is to create a community center and a museum there. We were told that the Cal Ripken Foundation is interested in considering a project here. The foundation builds baseball fields and has also built 4 gyms.

Representatives of the Foundation were brought here to see Maces Lane, and the plan is to show them the architectural plans for the building in hopes that they might be the means to access some state funding to help move that project forward. DHCD plans to announce some agreement before the end of the year that will provide some funding for this project in 2020.

The issues for consideration will be the scale of the project and the level of involvement that the City, County, and State will have in the project. The DHCD vision is that this will be one of the projects to revitalize one area of the City that needs some outside support.

The next project that Secretary Holt mentioned was a proposed storefront and residential facility of about 4,600 square feet at the intersection of Wells and Pine Street. Mr. Beasley has been working on this idea for a few years, and he, representatives of DHCD, the architect, and contractor have all met to discuss the plans.

DHCD is looking at the different possible funding streams that might be available to help with this project. Some have challenges that might prevent them being used here, but the Neighborhood Business Works Program appears to be the most likely funder with some of the money coming through the city with some direct funding to Mr. Beasley in the way of a low interest loan.

This project is moving forward with the plans going before the Planning and Zoning Commission for approval and before City Council later this month or next.

The next topic was the Hearn Building and the 2 neighboring properties on Race Street owned by Historic Cambridge, Inc. The funder of the Hearn Building project NCALL has taken it over with the plan being to put a roof on the building before winter with the aid of some DHCD funding. A MOU will be developed that will allow NCALL to take ownership of the three neighboring buildings and seek a developer for them through a regular RFP process over which DHCD and the City will be able to have a voice in determining the successful bidder.

The hope is that the successful bid will be able to repay the debt and liens on the buildings. The plans would be for residential, office, and retail being included in the project that would significantly enhance and improve the 500 block of Race Street.

The next project discussed was the Packing House Project that will have a ribbon cutting and open house later this month. Included in that project is the rehabilitation of the tall smokestacks that has been going on the past several weeks along with enhancements and improvements to Cannery Park that is adjacent to the Packing House.

The cost of fixing the smokestacks was estimated to be at or over $650,000, and the cost of the entire project for the rehabilitation of the building was going to be in the $23 million area. The work on Cannery Park will make the stream cleaner. There will be bike and walking trails along the property, and improving the park will help in finding prospective tenants for the Packing House.

It and the park take up about 10 acres of land. The Eastern Shore Land Conservancy and Cross Street Partners have been working on the concepts for this property for years that now appear to be closer than ever to taking place. Cross Street Partners has done major projects in Baltimore that have helped to address and reduce blight and degraded areas of the city.

The expectation of these different projects is that they will bring significant positive change to the City of Cambridge and Dorchester County with each project attracting other developers who will undertake other projects to the betterment of the community. The Packing House construction is expected to begin in 2020.

With the Cambridge Waterfront at Sailwinds and the Shore Regional Health property, there are about 35 acres plus the Richardson Museum property. Cambridge Waterfront Development, Inc. (CWDI) has been laying the groundwork for this development and has been meeting with possible developers for the different project areas.

It is also working with Shore Regional Health to agree on a price for the purchase of the hospital property based on professional appraisals being done both by Shore Regional Health and CWDI. It is anticipated that an agreement can be reached in the next 3-6 months on the price for the property. It needs to be reasonable in the context of what a developer might then pay for it in order to develop one or more projects of that property.

4-5 developers have already looked at the property. It is expected that the cost of development of this part of the City would be at or over $200 million including residential, commercial, retail, public areas including boardwalks, and boat ingress and egress so it might become a working waterfront like Mystic Seaport.

As a tourist area, Cambridge and Dorchester County have 10-12 million people passing through every year. There is the Harriet Tubman Visitor Center and the Blackwater Wildlife Refuge that attract people as well as the many people going to and from the Ocean Beaches.

The Harriet Tubman Visitor Center is reported to have had over 100,000 visitors this past year. In addition, many of the areas being considered are part of the Opportunity Zones that have been established by Federal Tax Law that allow for investment that will not tax any capital appreciation if the property is held for 10 year. This could bring institutional and private capital to invest here.

The last matter discussed was the Pine Street Area. There is a major developer interested in the possibilities here, and this is an area of primary focus for DHCD. The plan here is to have the city and county aggregate properties owned by the city or county for taxes owed as well as other properties that may be abandoned or falling down and make them available to a developer for it to invest in building on vacant property, fixing dilapidated property, or tearing down and building new homes that would be available for rent to own after a 15 year period.

The city and county were challenged by Secretary Holt to commit by October 19th that they will work together to plan and implement actions that will make the potential development of old and new homes a reality here in Cambridge in the coming years.

I know that I have missed some of the nuances that Secretary Holt provided to everyone and may have misstated some of what is planned or in progress. In any event the potential benefits for the community over the coming years appear bright if we can pull together and make the right decisions for the city, the county, and the people of this community.

Thanks for reading.