CAMBRIDGE MATTERS #23

 By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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The first meeting of City Council for 2020 went smoothly. A scheduled 5:00 p.m. closed session was cancelled, and the 6:00 p.m. regular meeting began on time.

Following the Mayor’s welcome to those attending, a moment of silence to help everyone focus on the meeting tasks and the Pledge of Allegiance led by Commissioner Hanson took place. The meeting agenda was adopted by unanimous vote on my motion and second by Commissioner Hanson.

No one came forward to speak during the public comment period. Sandra Tripp-Jones, the Executive Director of Cambridge Waterfront Development, Inc. (CWDI), then made her quarterly report to City Council and the public. As her presentation had not been set up on the viewing screen, she indicated that she would forward the Power Point presentation to us for sharing and posting on the city website. Much has been going on with CWDI that has been shared in other locations such as at a Christmas reception and a recent presentation to the Cambridge Rotary Club. I will forward the Power Point presentation when I receive it.

The next agenda item was a letter request from Dr. Theresa Stafford for $10,000 to help address her needs at New Beginnings Youth and Family Services here in Cambridge. Dr. Stafford was not present, but Commissioner Foster indicated that the request was for consideration by City Council in the upcoming FY 2021 budget. On Commissioner Foster’s motion and second by Commissioner Sydnor, the commissioners unanimously approved including this request for consideration when the budget process begins for next fiscal year.

The consent calendar was then approved 5-0 on my motion and second by Commissioner Hanson. It included the following:

* The December 9, 2019 meeting minutes
* The request of Cameron Torres, the Tour Manager for the Brown Box Theatre Project, to allow the group to perform William Shakespeare’s “Much Ado About Nothing” at Long Wharf Park on September 23, 2020 from 4:30 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. including set-up and show time. The performance will be between 7:30-9:30 p.m.
* The request of the Dorchester Chamber of Commerce to hang a banner on Race Street from 1/27- 2/7 for the 3rd Annual Harvesting Hope’s Youth Expo.

There was one new ordinance for first reading and scheduling for 2nd reading and public hearing on January 27, 2020. It is Ordinance 1161 that seeks to allow strings of light bulbs for outdoor dining at a restaurant or café or in a residential yard subject to certain conditions and to clarify that seasonal exterior lighting is permitted. If anyone has an interest in this proposed ordinance, please attend the City Council meeting on January 27th.

Next was the second reading, public hearing, and vote on Charter Resolution CR-2019-02 which proposed to amend the city charter about the holding of City Elections in 2020 and beyond. The City Attorney explained that while the primary issue was to change the date, there was also a need to clear up some of the outdated language in this section of the Charter. The main purpose, however, was the setting of the date for the election of the City Commissioners and Mayor on the 3rd Saturday in October and establishing the city manager as the supervisor of elections and in general terms detailing how the election process will occur.

On Commissioner Hanson’s motion and my second, the public meeting was opened for comment after the City Attorney read the summary of the proposed Charter Change. No one came forward to speak, and the public hearing was closed. On my motion with a second by both Commissioners Hanson and Cannon, the Charter Amendment Resolution Number CR-2019-02 was approved on a vote of 5-0.

Under Old Business, there were several matters. The first was for the commissioners to provide names of their representative on the Mayor and Council Compensation Advisory Committee. This committee was established to look at salary and benefits for the Mayor and Commissioners who will be elected in October 2020. It was created as the result of concerns raised by Commissioner Hanson and me regarding health care being provided to part time elected officials. Names from Wards 1,4, and 5 were submitted with the indication from the commissioners from wards 2 and 3 that they would provide the names of their representatives soon. Once the membership of the committee is finalized, the committee will have about 60 days to research the issue and return to city council to make recommendations.

The City Manager then requested that the city commit $250,000 to the Packing House Development Project by way of $78,000 in city sewer funds and $142,000 from future road paving monies that are normally used every year to pave a portion of the streets in the city. Some of Dorchester Avenue will need to be repaved and sidewalks and gutters installed at some point in the future for which these monies are being set aside. This city funding is also intended to support other grant funding requests that are being made by the developer to the State of Maryland and the U.S. Government.

In addition, the City Manager asked that we set aside $65,000 from city reserves in support of the planning and future work on the Maces Lane Community Center Project, which will be creating a center at the former Maces Lane school.

After some discussion and questions to ensure we understood what city reserves or future budgets the funds will come from, the commissioners unanimously voted in favor of Commissioner Sydnor’s motion that was seconded by Commissioner Cannon to expend those funds.

The final matter under Old Business was the request from the City Manager to appropriate $4,144.00 from unspent grant funding in the FY 2019 reserves and move them to the Municipal Properties budget to support the Cannery Park Trail being that is being developed. That request was approved on a 5-0 vote.

With New Business there were several matters to be taken up. The first item was the approval of the job description for the Assistant City Engineer position. The commissioners asked some questions regarding the experience level of the potential candidate, which was explained by the City Manager. On Commissioner Hanson’s motion and second by Commissioner Cannon, the job description was approved 5-0. Advertisement for that position will take place soon.

Next was a request by the police chief to authorize him to offer a hiring bonus of $5,000 to be paid over a two-year period to any police applicant that is currently a certified officer and not on the Cambridge Police force. This will help to hire experienced officers and reduce the need to send new untrained applicants to a formal and expensive training. After assuring that the funding for those bonuses would come from the existing police budget that has unused funds for salaries for other positions, on my motion and second by Commissioner Hanson, the request was approved on a vote of 4-0-1 with Commissioner Foster abstaining due to a conflict of interest.

Next was a request that the city move unused Façade Improvement grant funds from prior years in the amount of $140,504.17 into the current budget as those monies are now being spent on projects that were not completed during the years in which they were funded but are now being completed in this Fiscal Year. On my motion and second by Commissioner Hanson, the request was approved on a 5-0 vote.

Next was a request by the Rescue Fire Company to designate money that it had received from work it did outside of the city to a restricted line item on the City’s monthly cash report titled RFC Billings Received and post future RFC funds similarly received to this restricted account to be spent in the future upon request of the Fire Chief and approval of City Council. On Commissioner Sydnor’s motion with a second by Commissioner Foster, this request was approved 5-0.

The final matter on the approved docket was raised by the City Manager regarding the possible change of the current 3-foot building set back on lots in some parts of the city to 6 feet. This originally came before City Council in 2017, when the 3-foot set back was approved in certain parts of the city on a 5-0 vote of City Council. It came back to City Council in 2019 at a work session that was held by City Council with the Planning and Zoning Commission and Staff.

During that work session, the Planning and Zoning Commission explained in detail all the alternatives that might be available, and the detrimental consequences were the existing 3-foot setback to be changed. The Planning Commission was asked to discuss the matter further and come back with a recommendation, which they did.

Their recommendation was to change the set back from 3 feet to 3 ½ feet as the only possible reasonable alternative. That suggestion was brought to City Council in 2019 and removed from consideration by the commissioners on a vote of 5-0. Subsequent to those actions being taken, some concerns were again raised regarding the 3-foot set back.

After discussion at our meeting, the commissioners voted to deny the motion of Commission Foster that was seconded by Commissioner Sydnor to send the matter back to the Planning and Zoning Commission to consider 6-foot setbacks. The motion was defeated on a vote of 2 – 3 with Commissioners Foster and Sydnor voting in favor and Commissioners Cannon, Hanson, and me voting against.

The Mayor then announced that she had received a letter from the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) that Cambridge was awarded a grant of $510,000 for work to be performed at Cannery Park. She also announced that she would not be at our next meeting on January 27th, and that I would be Mayor Pro Tem that evening.

Commissioner Cannon raised the issue of how the city would be moving forward with the work of Habitat Choptank on High Street given the concerns raised earlier in the evening about the 3-foot set back requirement. As the law had not changed, houses where there is a 3-foot set back requirement can be built up to that line. Habitat Choptank representatives had explained to me separately that they would make every effort with any future building to see if building homes those properties with 3-foot setbacks could be done with more than the 3-foot minimum.

Commissioner Foster asked that one matter that had been brought to her attention go to the Traffic and Safety Committee. That was approved on a vote of 5-0. The Zeta Phi Beta Sorority is celebrating their 100 year on January 16th, and the Mayor was authorized to sign a city resolution celebrating that accomplishment. The city is working with the homeowner on High Street where the slave cabin is situated to ensure that it is safe and is being rehabilitated in a reasonable time. Finally, Commissioner Foster will work with Cambridge Main Street about placing banners on the poles on Pine Street.

None of the remaining commissioners or staff had any comments and the meeting was adjourned.

Thanks for reading.

Steve Rideout