CAMBRIDGE MATTERS #22

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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The Mayor was away for our second meeting of the year, so as Mayor Pro Tem, I ran the meeting that began at 6:00 p.m. From start to adjournment, the meeting lasted 43 minutes. After a moment of silence and the Pledge of Allegiance led by Commissioner Hanson, the agenda for the meeting was approved on a vote of 5-0 on motion of Commission Hanson and second by Commissioner Cannon.

The attendance at the meeting was sparse with only one resident, several members of city staff, and Mike Detmer, the new reporter for the Star Democrat newspaper. There were no public comments or requests from the public, so we took up the Consent Calendar. Commissioner Hanson asked if someone had taken over for Odie Wheeler to screen and calendar all the events that the Commissioners approve at our meetings and was told that several people oversee different aspects of that process.

On Commissioner Hanson’s motion and second by Commissioner Cannon, the following items on the Consent Calendar were approved on a vote of 5-0:

* The January 13, 2020 Meeting Minutes
* Two requests by Alan Nelson to allow boat races on the Choptank at Great Marsh Park, now the Gerry Boyle Park at Great Marsh. They are Thunder on the Choptank on July 25-26 from 11:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and the Cambridge Classic Power Boat Regatta on May 16-17 from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.
* The request from Blue Ruin to hold a Rocking Shamrock Party in the Alley on March 14, 2020 from noon to 10:00 p.m.

There were no Ordinances for first reading and only one for second reading and public hearing. Patrick Thomas, the assistant city attorney, read the summary of Ordinance 1161 which would amend the Unified Development Code of Cambridge to allow strings of light bulbs for outdoor dining at restaurants and cafes or in a residential yard subject to some limitations. It also clarifies that seasonal exterior lighting is permitted.

After the reading, the Commissioners opened the public hearing on a unanimous vote on the motion of Commissioner Cannon and second of Commissioner Hanson. No one came forward to speak, and so the public hearing was closed on motion of Commissioner Hanson and second of Commissioner Cannon. There was no discussion by the Commissioners, and the Ordinance passed on a unanimous vote.

Under Old Business, The city manager sought to have the City Council approve the establishment of a designated line item on the city’s monthly cash report entitled “Police Department Events” that would be used to document receipts and donations received for police department events.

That request generated a lengthy discussion about how to streamline the reporting of miscellaneous income to the various city agency accounts while complying with the requirements of the City Charter. After much discussion and no apparent consensus, the city manager withdrew his request and asked that we simply allocate $77.78 to the police event fund for monies received from the Pepsi machine at the Police Department. That was successfully passed on a unanimous vote on my motion with a second by Commissioner Hanson.

After the meeting I looked at the City Charter regarding the duties of the Commissioners and those of the City Manager and found no specific language that required that we approve individually each receipt of funds coming to the city. I believe we can provide a more effective and efficient way to comply with the requirements of the Charter regarding finances and have asked the City Manager and City Attorney to look at this issue in the context of all of the monies coming to the city and the obligations of the commissioners to approve budget matters under the Charter. It is my hope that we will be able to address this issue no more often than once a month and still follow our obligations under the City Charter.

Next on the Agenda was the appointment of the members of the Mayor and Council Compensation Advisory Committee. The following members of the public were proposed by the Commissioners and were approved on a 5-0 vote on motion of Commissioner Hanson and second by Commissioner Cannon:

* Ward 1 – Charles McFadden
* Ward 2 – Portia Johnson Ennels
* Ward 3 – Larry Chitlike
* Ward 4 – Sputty Cephas
* Ward 5 – Joe Brooks

I asked the City Manager to arrange to have a first meeting of the committee so that they might undertake their duties pursuant to the resolution that was passed by City Council.

Under New Business, Georg Breig was appointed to the City Planning Commission on a 5-0 vote on motion of Commissioner Hanson and second by Commissioner Cannon.

At the request of the Police Chief, on a 5-0 vote on motion of Commissioner Hanson and second of Commissioner Cannon, the Commissioners declared a 1995 Ford Ambulance surplus property in order that it could be sold.

With the conclusion of the formal agenda, the Commissioners were able to discuss and report on other matters. At the request of Commissioner Foster, Herve Hamon talked about the Pine Street Revitalization Committee and their coordination with the Maryland Historic Trust and Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). Commissioners Foster and Sydnor indicated that Commissioner Sydnor planned in the future to come to these meetings, which would require public notice as three Commissioners might be at any of these meeting.

As this was the same issue that was previously raised regarding the Finance Committee and their meetings, I agreed that proper notice to the public of these meetings needed to be provided in the future. While some felt that notice in the newspaper was required, I disagree. Notice can be provided on the city website and through email notices to residents who sign up at the city website to receive them.

Commissioner Foster moved that the city provide a certificate recognizing the 25 years of service to the community that the Refuge Temple has provided. With a second by Commissioner Cannon, this motion was approved on a vote of 5-0. I requested that Commissioner Foster have the Refuge Temple provide the language that they would like to see in the certificate or letter from the city in order that it could be prepared for the Mayor’s signature. She agreed to do that.

Commissioner Sydnor raised a concern about documents that are delivered to the Commissioners at the last moment prior to a meeting, as there is often not enough time to read them and properly prepare to consider the matters. The City Manager indicated that he would make every effort to provide them to the Mayor and Commissioners on the Friday prior to a meeting.

Under our rules of procedure, the mechanism for addressing this problem can be the delay in considering the matter until the next City Council meeting for any issue not included in the Agenda that is adopted. In those circumstances where the items are late in being delivered, the solution would be to remove that item from the agenda in order that it not be considered at that meeting.

Commissioner Foster and the Police Chief requested on behalf of the Traffic and Safety Committee to install streetlights at 707 Stiles Court and at Greenway and Maryland Avenue, which was approved on a vote of 5-0.

I advised the Commissioners that the Dorchester School System has agreed to an idea that I proposed a year ago to establish an intern program that allows students to do their volunteer service hours by working with interested City Commissioners to identify an issue of interest to them or about their neighborhood that meets the requirements of the school system, research it with the assistance of a City Commissioner, prepare a report on what they discovered along with possible solutions, and have the opportunity, with the approval of the City Council, to make an oral presentation for possible action on their idea. A few Commissioners have indicated a willingness to participate, and the school system is indicating that they will work with 10th grade students to implement the program.

Commissioner Foster advised everyone that students from Choptank Elementary School presented their student essays at the prayer breakfast commemorating Martin Luther King Day and invited everyone to attend next year’s event.

One final topic needs to be addressed and explained. During the council comment period, Commissioner Foster raised her concern that not enough homes have been built as part of the Pine Street Revitalization Project that is a collaboration with Maryland DHCD, The City of Cambridge, and Habitat Choptank. That is not just a concern of hers but is of me and many others.

What needs to be understood are the reasons for the delay. The first is that Yvette Robinson, who was hired in 2018 to lead the project as a Housing Specialist, did not have her one-year contract renewed for a second year. It was not because she did not do a good job, because she did. She helped collect the important baseline information upon which the project needed to be based. She held many public meetings to listen to what the impacted community as well as the rest of the city wanted to happen. She oversaw the work of a consultant that provided a detailed study on the current housing situation in Cambridge. All of these were needed to be sure that the project had buy in from the community and was headed in the right direction. Her contract was not renewed on a vote of 3-2 with Commissioner Hanson and I wanting her to continue.

This is how our democratic process works, and we must own our decisions. It has now been almost 8 months since Ms. Robinson completed her services, and we still do not have a Housing Specialist. In the meantime, city staff has had to take on these responsibilities along with their regular workload.

During the Spring and Summer of 2019, concerns were raised by Commissioners Sydnor and Foster about an ordinance that we passed on 2017 that established three-foot setbacks that included the Pine Street Area of the city where new building could take place no closer than three feet from the property line that separates one property from another. That means that in those affected areas, two houses can be built as close as six feet from one another.

Much of this zoning exists throughout the city as many homes here were built before the city had an effective Unified Development Code (UDC). As a result of the concerns of those commissioners, Odie Wheeler was directed by them to issue a stop work order on a property that Habitat Choptank was working on on High Street. He refused to do that, as the property was being built as permitted under the law that we passed in 2017.

The City Council and the Planning and Zoning Commission and staff had a work session where a full explanation was provided that any other zoning would have taken property rights away from the owners of the property impacted by the Ordinance. City Council asked the Planning Commission to look at other possibilities, which it did. Their alternative proposal was to increase the setback to 3 ½ feet, but the Commissioners decided on a 5-0 vote to decline to consider that option.

During this time of delay, the reason for the delay was that Habitat Choptank wanted to be a good partner with the city and decided that it needed to wait until any policy decisions regarding setbacks were final before moving forward. It was only earlier this month that City Council voted 2-3 to defeat the motion of Commissioner Foster and second by Commissioner Sydnor to send the matter back to the Planning and Zoning Commission to establish six-foot setbacks.

As a result of this vote, Habitat Choptank was now able to implement its plans to continue to work on the houses included in the Pine Street Revitalization Project. While the delay did occur for several months, the cause was efforts to undo policy decisions that had been unanimously adopted by City Council in 2017 and 2019.

Thanks for reading.

Steve Rideout