CAMBRIDGE MATTERS # 21

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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Our meeting agenda was a short one, and I thought that we might finish more quickly than our last meeting. That was not to be case. With the Mayor and all Commissioners present we started the meeting on time.

After the Moment of Silence and Pledge of Allegiance, the meeting got under way with the unanimous approval of the Agenda on my motion and second of Commissioner Hanson.

Three members of public came forward to address City Council. Gary Hickman, the RFC Train Garden Committee Chair, provided the Mayor with a letter of thanks on behalf of the Fire Company for allowing them to hold the train garden once again. He estimated that over 5,000 people come each year from within and outside of the city to participate in this event during the month of December.

Michael Wheatley, a member of the young professionals, also expressed his thanks as a follow up to what Mr. Hickman said and also asked that the city suggest to him any areas in the city where there was a need for volunteers such as for cleaning up the city. Dave Ferguson then spoke on the issue of trash and littering and the importance of keeping our city clean. He also asked about city plans to enforce existing laws regarding the responsibility of our businesses and citizens to keep their parts of the city clean. He mentioned that it impacts how people from elsewhere view the city and how we see ourselves.

Angie Hengst, the IronMan Director, then presented a recap of the 2019 Eagleman and IronMan events as well as an update on plans for those events in 2020. For Eagleman 2019, there were 2,929 athletes registered and 2,350 who raced. They represented 26 counties and 45 states. For IronMan Maryland, there were 2,197 registered athletes and 1,850 who participated. They represented 42 countries and 49 states.

She reported that each athlete averages 2-3 travelling companions, which means that we had between 8,500 and 12,600 visitors, including the athletes, visit Cambridge between those two events. IronMan Foundation gave a total of $42,500 in grants to local nonprofits including some of the volunteer fire departments, teams and clubs in the Dorchester County schools, and the YMCA.

IronMan Maryland also participated in the Foundation’s Bikes for Kids initiative that resulted in volunteers assembling 100 bikes that were donated to local elementary schools and the Cambridge Police Department for distribution throughout the year.

The outlook for 2020 is bright with 1,700 athletes registered for Eagleman on June 14th and 1,250 athletes registered for IronMan Maryland. Eagleman will also host the NA TriClub Championships-East this year and more bike assembling will take place during the IronMan Maryland race scheduled for September 19th.

City Council also heard from Rhodana Fields who provided an update on the Cambridge Neighborhood Revitalization Work Group and all that has been taking place in the Pine Street Area and elsewhere in the city and county by Habitat Choptank. This was a lengthy report with many pages of data that is too detailed to include here. If anyone would like a copy of that report, please email me at swrideout@aol.com, and I will be happy to send it along to you.

A quick summary is that this project is an excellent collaborative among the State of Maryland, the City of Cambridge, and Habitat Choptank each of which has put in play significant resources to help improve housing through repairs of homes, replacements of deteriorated housing, and new housing all of which will help to improve our community and increase the value of property in the city. Thank you Habitat Choptank and all your volunteers and staff for the great work that you are doing.

The Consent Calendar was then approved on a 5-0 vote on the motion of Commissioner Hanson and second of Commissioner Cannon. It included the Meeting Minutes of January 27th and the request of the Dorchester Community Wellness Coalition to have the Dorchester Community Wellness Expo on May 2, 2020 from 9 am to 3 pm on the corner of Race and Cedar Streets.

There were no ordinances for consideration and no old business to address. The one matter of New Business raised some disagreement among the commissioners that probably needs some explanation.

The City Manager had requested that the Commissioners establish Chesapeake College’s Cambridge Center on Race Street as the City Election Polling Site for the city election on the 3rd Saturday of October 2020 and, if a run-off is needed, on the 1st Tuesday in December. The college had offered the space for those dates at no cost to the city, and the City Manager had reported that he had met at the location with a representative of the county election office, a prospective election vendor and three citizens experienced with city elections. They were Portia Johnson-Ennels, Jerry Burroughs, and Michael Wheatley.

Everyone who had participated in the process was positive about the use of the space as there were many amenities such as handicap accessibility, parking, restrooms, on-site security, and ease of access to the building. The other location that had been used in the past was Governor’s Hall at Sailwinds, which would have charged at least $6,000 for each day of usage.

Commissioners Sydnor and Foster advocated for Governor’s Hall. As I felt that the Cambridge Center was the better choice for many reasons, I moved that we approve the request. Commissioner Hanson seconded my motion, and it passed on a vote of 3-2 with Commission Cannon joining Commissioner Hanson and me to approve the proposal and Commissioners Foster and Sydnor voting against.

What needs to be considered from what took place is that actions we take as Commissioners have or can have consequences that we may or may not have considered when making them. In this case, we must go back to December of 2018 when on a 2-1 vote, City Council approved the rental of Governors Hall for $11,000 a year. Commission Hanson had recused himself from the vote as he had a conflict of interest, and I had left the meeting early as my wife and I were in the process of moving to our new home and had set the moving date prior to the December City Council meeting being set. Commissioners Sydnor and Foster had voted in favor of the winning applicant and Commissioner Cannon had voted against it.

The specifics of the contract were not set at that time, just who the lessee would be. Unbeknownst to me and probably other Commissioners, a lease agreement was developed and signed without approval of City Council. That lease did not address any consideration for what use the City of Cambridge might have for public events such as elections or what those costs might be. When the lease was modified about a year later to extend the lease term for another year, no consideration was given for use of the facility by the City and at what cost.

So when the City Manager approached the tenants of Sailwinds about the use of Governors’ Hall for the city election in 2020, the tenants sought to rent the property to the city for a certain $6,000 for one day’s use and another $6,000 for a probable second day’s use during the 2020 city election. This arrangement would have allowed them to in effect rent the property back to the city for $1,000 more for 2 days of use than they paid the city for the entire year of the lease so that the city could use the property for 2 days for city elections.

I believe that the City Manager’s recommendation was appropriate as was the vote to use the Cambridge Center of Chesapeake College for the 2020 City elections.

With the business of meeting concluded, the following information was provided:

The meeting of the Mayor and Commissioner Compensation Committee was going to be on February 11th at 5:00 p.m. at City Council Chambers

The meeting of the Cambridge Neighborhood Revitalization Committee was being held at 10 a.m. on February 11th with the Department of Housing and Community Development. At that meeting, hopefully, the Committee will come to a conclusion on when they will meet moving forward and what kind of public notice might be required for meetings to which at least 3 of the city commissioners might attend.

The Committee for Bridging the Gaps between the Police and city residents want to continue to work on building relationships. Some members went to the police citizens academy, and the group would like to hold a joint event in 4-5 months and include other city agencies.

The Mayor announced that on February 1st a group of her youth advisory committee went to Annapolis and met with the Legislative Black Caucus. She also indicated that on February 16th at 9:00 a.m. there will be a community clean up at Pine Street and North Drive here in the city and anyone and everyone is invited to come and help.

Finally, the Police Chief announced that several members of the Cambridge PAL Program will be going to a National PAL Conference on February 22nd.

That concluded the meeting which was then adjourned on my motion.

Thanks for reading.

Steve Rideout